

The Secretary
Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts
References Committee
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

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Dear Sir,

Re: Senate Inquiry into Women in Sport and Recreation in Australia

WA Netball (Inc) submits the following comments in response to the Senate Inquiry into Women in Sport and Recreation in Australia and the published terms of reference for this Inquiry. WA Netball is the governing body for the sport of netball in Western Australia.

a) the health benefits of women participating in sport and recreation activities;

There would be little argument that the health benefits of women participating in sport and recreation activities are significant – physically, psychologically and socially.

In addition to the benefits to their own health, women as primary caregivers to children provide a behavioural example to subsequent generations. Similarly, as a majority of teachers, particularly at primary school level, are also female it is imperative to the development and health of future generations that sport and recreation is encouraged as a core activity in their lives.

The culture of actively partaking in sport and recreation that is so traditionally Australian is rapidly becoming a culture of watching. This not only impacts on the health of those no longer taking an active role in playing sport, but strongly affects the volunteer community that so ably supports the opportunity to do so. The downturn in volunteer involvement sport is further affecting the social interconnectedness of our communities, thus contributing to the downturn in participation.

The confidence that involvement in sport as a participant and/or a volunteer may give an individual, or the benefit it may provide women seeking work – either for the first time or in returning to the workforce after raising children – and compiling a résumé, cannot be underestimated.

b) the accessibility for women of all ages to participate in organised sport, fitness and recreation activities, with additional reference to state and federal programs, including;

i) the number of women actively participating in organised sport, fitness and recreation activities;

Statistics indicate a gradual decrease in the active participation rates of women in netball. Although not a significant drop each year, the pattern is becoming concerning. Further feedback from all levels of the netball network indicates that volunteers are becoming increasingly difficult to recruit and retain.

ii) characteristics of women not participating in organised sport, fitness and recreation activities (including, for example, socio-economic strata, age, women with a disability, Indigenous or Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) women);

WA Netball is not in a position to comment on specifics in this area, however we are anecdotally aware of the cultural barriers that are faced by women from Indigenous backgrounds, particularly in regional areas, despite the instigation of programs specifically focused on increasing the involvement of Indigenous females. These cultural issues tend to be exacerbated by socio-economic issues, particularly in remote regional areas, and particularly in relation to travel and other commitments required to participate.

The general philosophy of WA Netball is to encourage long-term integration of various cultural groups into the netball community, rather than programs designed to result in culturally specific teams and/or competitions.

- iii) *constraints, including strategies to overcome the constraints that may prevent these women from participating;*

The benefits and enjoyment of participating in sport must be introduced to children as part of their education. The removal of compulsory physical education from the school curriculum, both primary and secondary, has had a noticeable impact on the likelihood of children becoming involved in sport and, therefore, undertaking a healthy work/life balance in their long term lifestyle development.

- iv) *the effectiveness of current state and federal grant programs that encourage women to participate;*

We are not in a position to comment specifically in this area, as we are not fully aware of the range of programs involved. Our comment regarding grant programs would be that any program needs to be cognisant of the particular issues facing women in terms of work/life balance. For example, child care issues are critical to the involvement of mothers with young children.

There also needs to be an acknowledgement that self-esteem issues often impact on a woman's decision to apply for individual funding. She must feel confident that the application process is clear enough that she believes she has a reasonable chance of success. Simple access to constructive advice on the application process – as opposed to general website 'FAQ' sections may well encourage more women and women's groups to access available grants, particularly individual grants.

- v) *the retention and attrition trends of grass roots participation, including comparisons with male athletes at a similar level;*

Anecdotally, retention and attrition trends of grass roots participation in women's sports are similar to those in male sports, however female participants tend to drop out of organised sport at a younger age, for reasons including peer pressure and societal impacts such as the increased number of alternative recreational activities available to teenagers and young adults.

The role model status attached to successful male athletes in sports, such as the various football codes, does not translate when looking at successful female athletes. One might suspect that this is due to the exposure and financial rewards attached to these codes in comparison to women's sports, however research would be required in this area to reach any firm determination.

- vi) *the remuneration, recruitment, retention and attrition of elite female athletes, including comparisons with elite male athletes;*

The question of remuneration, recruitment, retention and attrition can be reduced to motivation. Traditionally, elite female athletes, particularly in team sports, have participated for the sake of their talent and enjoyment of the sport, with no real regard to the financial rewards from participating. Fortunately, this has been the case, since there is no comparison with the remuneration generally earned by male athletes at a similar level.

However, netball has learned from recent experience that elite female athletes will not necessarily continue to hold the same view, with elite netball players recently involving a union organisation in an attempt to secure improved remuneration for their services. Unfortunately, whilst there is no argument regarding the entitlement of these athletes to be rewarded for their contribution and efforts, this may well spell the end of amateur and semi-professional national league competitions.

Similarly, if the motivation for participation at this level changes, then the recruitment, retention and attrition patterns of the past may well change in response.

- vii) *retention of athletes competing in senior and open age state and national sporting competitions, with possible strategies to retain female competitors in elite and sub-elite competition;*

See v), above. Additionally, the perceived importance of a senior state or national sporting competition within a given sport will indicate the involvement of senior and open age athletes on an ongoing basis. If the competition is perceived as irrelevant, then these athletes will choose to spend their time in other areas or on other pursuits.

- viii) *opportunities and barriers for national team members and competitors in international competition;*

For athletes based in Western Australia, participation in national teams is disadvantaged by the eastern seaboard basis of national programs. For example, an athlete participating in a national camp in Canberra at the AIS faces at least an extra day in travel to arrive in time for the camp (meaning an extra day off from paid employment, should they be fortunate enough to have an understanding employer), not to mention the infrequency of flights to the west on return. This is exacerbated in cases where public holidays between the east and the west vary.

Although the time and travel scenarios apply equally to male athletes, athletes competing in women's sports are far less likely to be paid to be full-time athletes and therefore are in a situation of making choices as to their participation, based on work and family commitments.

The opportunity to train in an environment of excellence is present, with first-rate facilities being accessible through the state Institutes/Academies of Sport. However, as a non-professional sport, access to those facilities is required in peak times (ie outside of working hours) and athletes must 'stand in line' to achieve access.

- ix) *the financial status, success and viability of women's national league competitions, including strategies to improve these factors;*

Ultimately, the financial success and viability of any sport is reliant on revenue streams from outside of the sport. The most successful sports receive funding 'top down', as a result of external revenue streams, including broadcast rights.

While sports, including women's sports, are so strongly encouraged by the Australian Sports Commission that the sport should significantly fund itself from within through capitation fees at grass roots level, there will always be inequities. Firstly, as a result of no revenue flowing downwards, and secondly, as a result of needing to inflate grass roots participation fees to fund a national organisation.

- c) *the portrayal of women's sport in the media, including:*

- i) *the role of the government to regulate and review the coverage of women's sport in the media (print, radio and electronic);*

It is not the role of government to regulate the coverage of women's sport in the media. Any review or comparison of coverage of men's versus women's sports, whilst interesting, would simply reflect the interest of the media's audience in women's sport.

More important is the education of media, by individual women's sports, with the support of Government in this area. Ultimately, paid advertising and television coverage begets editorial by virtue of this additional exposure.

Women's sports lack the funding to support advertising to any substantial level, therefore public awareness of women's sports suffers as a result and no interest can be generated within the various television networks – a 'chicken and egg' scenario. Despite fairly good ratings on ABC-TV, netball has been unable to interest either the commercial free-to-air or pay television networks in the sport.

Women's sports constantly compete with male sports for space in the press – any given winter week will see Friday's newspaper with at least six pages of AFL and NRL covering both the local and

interstate teams, while perhaps one article will appear about only the local team in the national netball league.

It is apparent that unless a women's sport receives assistance from a major financial benefactor, which has historically occurred with at least men's cricket and football (soccer), there is little hope of the balance of media coverage being redressed.

ii) the influence of pay television on the coverage of women in sport;

The advent of pay television has certainly increased the total amount of air time available to sport overall, however the perception is that this has resulted in a reduction in the regular coverage on free-to-air stations of sport outside of the non-mainstream sports, particularly the football codes. It has not had any appreciable influence in increasing the level of coverage of women in sport.

Once again, women's sports lack the funding to gain a foothold in pay television.

iii) the promotion and publicity of women's National League competitions;

iv) the financial status and success of women's national leagues;

The financial status and success of any national league is dependent upon the ability of the league to promote and publicise itself, and vice versa. As outlined above, this ability is contingent upon significant revenue injections being available from outside of the sport itself.

The sponsorship market continues to shrink dramatically, and sponsorship that is available is rapidly tied up where the exposure is available – the more financial and successful sports. In all reality, the 'rich' sports will continue to become richer and the rest will struggle by without the ability to generate similar success and therefore have a significant impact on increasing their grass roots participation.

v) strategies to improve the amount and quality of media coverage for women's sport;

As above, without seed funding to start this cycle, this is very difficult beyond developing relationships with individual journalists. Even then, it is the sports editors who dictate content, and they will have their own imperatives when formulating these decisions.

In terms of the portrayal of women's sport in the media in Western Australia, there has been a pleasing move in recent times away from the traditional "pretty shots" of athletes in short skirts towards action shots not unlike those published of male sports – this change of approach should be recognised and encouraged.

d) women in leadership roles in sport, including;

i) the number and proportion of women in coaching, administrative and officiating roles;

ii) the issues associated with women in leadership roles in both elite and grass-roots activities;

iii) trends and issues for women in organisational leadership roles; and

iv) strategies to improve the numbers of women in coaching, administration and technical roles.

The number and proportion of women in these roles is dependent on the sport itself. In a women's sport, the numbers are high, however women involved in a sport that is not traditionally female will have less presence.

This is not an issue in netball. The major issue is the small proportion of women in key decision-making roles in sport overall, at both elite and grass roots levels. In a group meeting of major participation sports, very few females will be present.

This is no different to, and reflective of, issues relating to equity in any environment, including the corporate world. Women need to be encouraged and educated in how to make an impact in a 'man's world' be it in a professional or recreational capacity. Women involved in netball do this very well, as it is a unique situation where women are in the majority, and behaviors are measured and evaluated in a different way.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into this Senate Inquiry. WA Netball looks forward to the release of the findings and recommendations resulting from the Inquiry and the development of strategies to assist in redressing the many inequities that exist between opportunities in men's and women's sports at all levels.

Please do not hesitate to contact the undersigned should further information be required.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Lisa Bradock', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Lisa Bradock
Chief Executive Officer

15 June 2006