

Women in Sport and Recreation
A Submission to the Senate Inquiry, June 2006
Lynn Embrey PhD

Introduction

The media release announcing the establishment of this inquiry into women in sport and recreation in Australia states that the inquiry aims to update the analysis on women's sport. Use of the term 'update' immediately implies that comparisons will be made against some previous data. The four Terms of Reference are sufficiently broad yet focused to elicit a wealth of statistical data especially from the National Sports Organisations (NSOs). It can also be expected that there will be considerable anecdotal material submitted documenting women's personal experiences. Together these differing forms of evidence should bring forth "constructive strategies for improving women's sport in the 21st century" (Womensport and Recreation Victoria, 2006).

The purpose of this submission is to present a brief historical and international overview of the women's sport movement to ensure that due process is paid to previous endeavours and that the "constructive strategies" resulting from the current inquiry are seen as part of the "updating", a challenge which is not sport's alone but impacts on many parts of our society.

1980s and 1990s

During the last two decades of the 20th century there was an intensity of efforts by a diverse range of people and organizations to improve the participation of women in sport and recreation in Australia. Each year brought forth new initiatives. The intent was to change entrenched attitudes towards women in Australian sport with minimal recourse to punitive legislation and thereby increase participation and all its benefits. Among the initiatives were:

- Conferences organized by national and international professional associations and government agencies, for example, *Fit to play* (1980) sponsored by the NSW Women's Advisory Council, *Sportswomen step forward* (1991) conducted by the Australian Sports Commission
- Strategic plans drawn up by State and federal government agencies, for example, *National Policy and Plan for Women in Sport* (1987), *National Agenda for Women*

(1988) developed by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and the Office of the Status of Women

- Projects focusing on physical education, for example, *Girls' Achievement and Self-Esteem: The contribution of physical education and sport* (1985-87) conducted by the Commonwealth Schools Commission
- A succession of reports describing the poor media coverage of women's sport, for example, *Women, Sport and the Media* (1985) and *An Illusory Image: A report on the media coverage and portrayal of women's sport in Australia* (1996)
- Appointment in federal and State government sport agencies of women's sport advisers
- Development of a network of federal and State government and non-government agencies (but with limited representation from the NSOs)
- Publicity campaigns with posters, stickers, guest speakers, etc. especially in sports organizations and schools

Each year there were one or more events to keep attention focused and to take the movement forward towards implementing the numerous recommendations that flowed out of inquiries, research, conferences and publications. Underpinning these (and many more initiatives) was federal and State legislation addressing sex discrimination and affirmative action with which sport and physical education grappled because of the special clauses related to young children and voluntary organizations. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission saw a need in 1992 to publish *Women, sport and sex discrimination: Guidelines on the provisions of the Sex Discrimination Act 1984*.

Support from the Department of the Prime Minister, Office of the Status of Women (OSW), Australian parliament and State/Territory equivalents highlighted the seriousness with which the issues were treated.

As with the *Fit to Play* Conference in 1980 leadership was often taken by groups outside sport such as the NSW Women's Advisory Council. Exceptionally committed women such as Libby Darlison, Wendy Ey, Henny Oldenhove, Margaret Pewtress and Senator Rosemary Crowley were key personnel in driving initiatives. Interestingly, the first four had strong backgrounds in physical education and Senator Crowley was a medical practitioner prior to entering parliament.

After the first decade there was frustration that change was far slower and more costly than needed. Wendy Ey (1991) expressed her frustration in her paper to the *Equity for Women in Sport* Seminar hosted by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs and recommended government intervention. She rejected legislation as a complex and slow process preferring instead to advocate for “an approved Government policy that is accompanied by an implementation plan, a team of staff to guarantee the implementation and adequate sanctions to ensure its success” (p. 14). Much of the frustration can, in retrospect, be seen to have been compounded by the fact that two major components – sport and the status of women - of Australian society were undergoing change at the same time.

Stewart, Nicholson, Smith and Westerbeek, (2003, p. 194) in retrospect explained that “Australian sport itself has gone through a major metamorphosis over the past 30 years. It has jettisoned amateur values, attached itself to the corporate world, and professionalised its management structures and systems.” In the 1980s sport was grappling with its own new and already rapidly changing status and unwilling and unable to cope with what it perceived at that point in time to be a threat from women. The Australian Sports Commission (ASC) was only established in 1984 and continued the patriarchy traditions of Australian sport by appointing far more males than females to its staff and advisory Commission rather than fully embracing the climate of social change which gave rise to the Sex Discrimination and Affirmative Action legislation passed in 1984 and 1986 respectively. As Lake (1999) observed, “In the 1970s and 1980s ... the institutionalisation of feminism reached its apotheosis, with whole programs and complex administrative machinery established by governments – federal and State – to promote the status of women, equal opportunity, non-discrimination and finally, affirmative action. In this period we see the emergence of what we might call ‘state feminism’” (p. 253). It took a special inquiry, *Women, Sport and the Media* (co-sponsored by the OSW and the ASC) to establish the Women’s Sport Promotion Unit within the ASC in 1987. The non-government organization, Womensport Australia, was formalised in 1991 and then with support from the OSW.

International

Even though Womensport Australia was in its infancy, eminent Canadian sport feminist scholar, M. Ann Hall, saw fit to include it in her comparative study of feminist activism in sport (1995). Indeed, Australian women have been prominent in what British sociologist Jennifer Hargreaves (1999) termed the 'Women's International Sport Movement'.

Australian women have been members of the International Association for Physical Education and Sport for Girls and Women (IAPESGW) since its inception in 1949 and with only two exceptions from 1997 to 2001 and currently, have held office. The IAPESGW's XIIth Congress was held in Melbourne in 1993 and despite the lack of current office bearers the IAPESGW saw fit to hold its annual Executive Meeting in Melbourne in March 2006.

Initially in the 1980s emphasis was on obtaining information from other countries via international speakers at conferences, for example, in 1980, 1984 and 1991. By the 1990s Australia was seen as a key player in the Women's International Sport Movement. The formation of Womensport International (WSI) was advanced at the IAPESGW Congress in 1993 (Brackenbridge, 2001, p. 1276).

Under the auspices of the British Sports Council and the International Olympic Committee a world conference was held in Brighton, England, in 1994 which gave rise to the Brighton Declaration, "a widely accepted statement of principles about women and sport which related to world-wide human and women's rights agendas" (White, 2001, p. 183). Sue Baker-Finch from the Australian Sports Commission was a member of the team which drafted the Declaration. Australia is a signatory to the Declaration.

Another international body, the International Working Group on Women and Sport (generally referred to as the IWG) has been particularly active in implanting the Brighton Declaration and the its follow-up the 1998 Windhoek Call for Action (Christensen, Guttman & Pfister, 2001, p. 582). The IWG conducts conferences every four years with the next one scheduled for Sydney in 2010. (In view of the fact that Australia is to host such a prestigious conference, it behooves Australia to have world's best practice occurring in its own backyard.)

Backlash

In 1989 Jo Tiddy, Commissioner for Equal Opportunity in South Australia, had cautioned that “Periods of granting equal rights, which are seen as the making of concessions are followed by periods of backlash, when the claim is ‘they’re going too far’. Then what has been gained so slowly and painfully is consolidated or dissipated depending on the ability of following generations to exercise their power” (p. 46). One of the shortfalls of the endeavours in the 1980s and 1990s was the failure to fully engage with the NSOs. In closing the 1991 *Sportswomen step forward* conference, ASC Commissioner and WSPU Chairperson, Margaret Pewtress noted that only 30 out of 120 NSOs had delegates at the conference organized by the ASC (Pewtress, 1992, p. 142). The NSOs and their State affiliates slowly took notice and then action although the pace of change continued to be far slower than desired.

By the mid-1990s ‘state feminism’ was in serious decline when funding was cut to both the OSW and women’s sports agencies including the WSPUS of the ASC and Womensport Australia. By 2003 the situation had changed: women were no longer a threat (or at least far less feared) and indeed the ASC saw fit to entitle its conference *Sport needs more women* although input had to concur with the Commission’s agenda.

However, as was stated in the media release for this inquiry, while the results from 2006 Commonwealth Games demonstrated that elite Australian sportswomen have benefited doubts still remain about the flow-on effects to women and girls participating at the grassroots level. Indeed, the high levels of overweight and obesity, suggest that the flow-on is probably only a trickle.

Going forward

What is required in 2006 is to recognise that change is complex and takes time in our society. For women in sport and recreation to advance there needs to be government and non-government agencies which can sustain endeavours over the next two decades. Wendy Ey’s 1991 call for government intervention is still relevant. Agencies need to be drawn together from sport, health, education, media and women’s interests. The ASC is in the ideal position to show leadership and bring the agencies together to engage in meaningful dialogue to determine what it is the each can do best. Recruitment of the NSOs must be a priority. The Australian Womensport and Recreation Association (AWRA) is emerging as

the most credible non-government organization. With a membership base of organizations and individuals it has the capacity to allow community to be heard and to raise a volunteer workforce. Again it should be noted that funding for the AWRA is from both the Office for Women and the ASC. The Australian Council for Health, Physical Education and Recreation (ACHPER) has expertise in the provision of quality of physical activity programs in schools. Sports Medicine Australia (SMA) has an extensive membership of health professionals. In the light of Jo Tiddy's 1989 comments agencies ought to be encouraged to nominate and support members "of following generations", that is, empower women in the 20 to 40-age bracket.

What is especially important is that the government must be cognizant of women's lesser financial status and be prepared to provide funding of regular meetings and research even when findings may be critical of government. Marilyn Lake (1999) noted, "Australian feminists have always looked to the state to effect a redistribution of resources between men and women and to provide the security and protection in which women and girls might live in freedom" (p. 253). Internationally, the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women in Sport (CAAWS) has been able to effect change by challenging prevailing attitudes with funding from government (Hall, 1999, p. 223).

Among the tasks that ought to be addressed are:

- Review past inquiries, conference reports, the Brighton Declaration and the Windhoek Call for Action which have substantial lists of recommendations to determine
 - What has been accomplished
 - What is no longer relevant
 - What issues persist
 - How Australia is fulfilling its international commitments
- Develop, monitor and evaluate a Strategic Plan giving priority to the persistent issues and taking account of the changes that may impact upon women's participation in sport and recreation as a result of changes now being implemented in the workforce as the new Industrial Relations take effect.
- Design data gathering and processing systems that provide regular information rather than being reliant on responses to irregular government inquiries.

- Conduct regular seminars for a to keep the issue to the fore and to facilitate the sharing of best practices.
- Establish a media task force to
 - Annually assess the media's portrayal of women in sport and recreation
 - Liaise with the media to increase coverage of women's participation
 - Recognize via an award scheme media making genuine contributions
 - Consider other forms of media such as books and films with the possibility of awards/scholarships for writers
- Establish a research panel to oversee research initiatives emanating from the Strategic Plan
- Create an awards scheme to recognise best practices in categories such as
 - Clubs
 - Schools
 - NGOs
 - Child care at sports centres and events
 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities
 - Ethnic and culturally diverse communities
 - Events promoting equal and/or mixed participation
- Support Womensport and Recreation NSW in their endeavours to host the 2010 International Working Group for Women and Sport Conference.

References

- Brackenbridge, C. (2001). Womensport International. In K. Christensen, A. Guttman & G. Pfister (Eds.), *International encyclopedia of women and sport*. New York, NY: Macmillan Reference. Volume 3, pp. 1276-1279.
- Christensen, K., Guttman, A. & Pfister, G. (Eds.), (2001). *International encyclopedia of women and sport*. New York, NY: Macmillan Reference. Volume 2, p. 582.
- Ey, W. (1991). Current status of women in sport. *Equity for Women in Sport*. A joint Seminar – held by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs and the Australian Sports Commission. Canberra, ACT: Official Hansard Report.
- Hall, M A (1995). Feminist activism in sport: A comparative study of women's sport advocacy organizations. In Alan Tomlinson (Ed.), *Gender, sport and Leisure*:

- Continuities and challenges*. Chelsea School Research Centre Edition, Volume 3, pp. 217-250.
- Hargreaves, J. (1999). The 'Women's International Sports Movement': Local-global strategies and empowerment. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 22 (5), pp. 461-471.
- Lake, M. (1999). *Getting equal: The history of Australian feminism*. St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- Pewtress, M. (1992). Plenary. *Sportswomen step forward. Conference Proceedings*. Canberra, ACT: Australian Sports Commission. pp. 142-143.
- Stewart, B., Nicholson, M., Smith, A. & Westerbeek, H. (2003). *Australian sport: Better by design?* London, UK: Routledge.
- Tiddy, J. (1989). The laws: Lead us or leave us alone. In Ken Dyer (Ed.), *Sportswomen towards 2000: A Celebration*. Proceedings of a Conference held during Women's Week in Adelaide, March, 1988. (pp. 39-46). Adelaide, SA: University of South Australia.
- White, A. (2001). Brighton Declaration. In K. Christensen, A. Guttman & G. Pfister (Eds.), *International encyclopedia of women and sport*. New York, NY: Macmillan Reference. Volume 1, pp. 183-187.
- Womensport and Recreation Victoria. (2006, 10 April). Media release: Labor succeeds in establishing an inquiry into Women in Sport. Womensport.com.au.