

Senate Committee: Inquiry into women in sport and recreation in Australia

Submission from Heather Reid

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Introduction

I have 28 years experience in sport as a participant, coach, professional administrator and volunteer. In 1978 I helped establish the ACT Women's Soccer Association and was instrumental in establishing the ACT Association for Women in Sport and Recreation in 1992. Over the years I have worked in a professional capacity for national non-government women's and sport organisations as well as government agencies such as the Australian Sports Commission, and been a lecturer in sport management at the University of Canberra. In 2004, I was the first female to be appointed as CEO of a State Football (soccer) Federation and I'm currently undertaking my master's degree in sport management whilst working full-time.

I have initiated and implemented several participation programs for women and girls as well as facilitated research projects on media coverage of women's sport¹ and written leadership programs, such as Mentor As Anything! to assist women realise their potential and goals in sport. My contribution to the advancement and promotion of women in sport has been recognised in many ways and I believe my comments to the Senate Committee will be useful.

I expect other submissions to the Senate Committee will deal with research that shows that women and girls who participate in sport and physical activity are generally more healthy, confident and socially adept than those who don't. Other submissions will outline the statistical facts that demonstrate that there are significantly fewer women in decision-making and leadership roles in sport and that the quantitative and qualitative coverage of women in sport is dismal compared to that given to men's sport. With this in mind, I would like to provide an overview of the cultural, social and political economic factors that impact on women's access to participation and leadership positions and conclude with a few recommendations for the Senate Committee's consideration.

Accessibility and leadership issues

There is little doubt that sport is both a key cultural institution and a major industry in Australia. Sport is also a reflection of society. In many respects we live in a male-dominated society where women's participation in competitive sports or traditional male athletic pursuits is still seen as symbolic of their stereotyped relationships with men in everyday life. As such, women have to challenge prevailing prejudices that encompass their participation in some sports (particularly competitive team sports) and in leadership roles within organisations.

¹ Janine Mikosza and Heather Reid, *Inching Forward*, Canberra 1997

The management of sporting organisations is dominated by masculine ideologies and government sport policies are based on neoliberal philosophies that heavily influence governance practices and strategic planning. In this context, women are grossly under-represented in every area of sport participation² – especially as leaders, coaches and referees, and they have limited access and input to decision-making. Furthermore, the value and status given to women, especially as viewed by the ‘news worthiness’ of women’s events and achievements, is insignificant compared to that given to men. It’s worth noting that apart from during international events such as the Olympic or Commonwealth Games when the media attention is focused on nationalism and the ‘Australian’, the coverage of women’s sport is dismal and women are often portrayed in ways that sexualise, titivate or trivialise the subject of the story.

Many people, including sport leaders, bureaucrats and academics have attempted to effect change within the sport industry and they have become frustrated and discouraged at the slow degree of progress for women and girls. Since the 1970s, sport has moved from a predominant amateur non-profit activity to a new predominant domain of male professional team sports that are heavily influenced and commercially supported by a few media owners in Australia. The decision makers within media corporations and many sporting organisations protect traditional sport practices by developing *men’s* sport into highly commodified leagues and individual stars without any commensurate support for women’s teams or stars. This is particularly evident in sports like cricket and the football codes (including soccer) where men’s and women’s participation is under the same governance umbrella.

Australian government policies on women in sport have come and gone over the past twenty-five years ago. So too has the amount of resources and funding provided for women’s sport units at state and federal levels. This has led to the demise of many successful participation programs³, leadership programs⁴, coaching and referee programs⁵ that addressed barriers and provided specific measures to increase women’s involvement and participation in these areas.

For example, in 1991 the Australian Sports Commission produced guidelines to assist sporting organisations to “work towards gender equity”.⁶ Unfortunately there is little evidence to show that much has improved as a result of these guidelines because the federal government, like many state governments that had similar guidelines, adopted a bystander role rather than a transformational one. I suggest that the situation may be different if the government had legislated for the implementation of gender equity policies as a condition of funding as it has done with anti-doping policies. Therefore, the federal government has been largely ineffective in dealing with gender inequities and discrimination against women in sport. Most initiatives have not been sustained and governments have failed to implement measures to ensure a commitment by organisations to improve the status and representation of women in those sports.

² Based on previous statistics released by the Australian Sports Commission.

³ Such as the Active Girls Campaign.

⁴ For example, the Focus on Marketing and Media Seminars, and Mentor As Anything!.

⁵ For example, targeted programs through the Coaching and Officiating programs.

⁶ Towards Gender Equity in Sport, Australian Sports Commission 1991

It seems that the government has rarely challenged the traditional views held by some sport leaders on the involvement of women and men in sport and within organisations. Over the years, gender equity initiatives have been trivialised and placed within a context of “women’s business” (and hence not serious “sport business”). Regulators of Australian sport have not gone far enough to change the gender order of sport because intervention of this nature could threaten the superiority of men over women in the majority of sports. I have seen and heard men (and some women) either discredit gender equity policies in order to maintain the status quo or they have highlighted individual success stories of women as testimony to their own ‘commitment’ to change. With these kinds of attitudes, and the insidious obsession with sexuality and sexual orientation of female athletes, issues relating to gender are now framed within a context of “ethics” issues. This new approach attempts to address the problems associated with discriminatory practices that impact on participation and performance by women and girls in sport through a broader social justice agenda. This includes policies on homophobia and sexuality discrimination, transgender participation, child-protection and anti-harassment, as well as sexism and violence against women.

The ability to effect change should not rest with just a few women’s sport agencies or individual activists. The authority to increase women’s participation and status in sport rests largely with the people who control the national and state organisations as well as the clubs. As previously stated, men dominate management and executive positions and the traditional constraints that cause women and other minority groups to be marginalised in sport are part and parcel of the historical development of sporting culture. These ‘leaders’ determine the agenda, the budget, allocation of resources and the prioritising of program initiatives. Different attitudes to gender relations must be developed in order to challenge and shift the traditional views that have caused discrimination against women in sport.

Where there have been autonomous women’s organisations⁷, the government has flexed its muscle by forcing these organisations to integrate with the [men’s] sporting organisation as a condition of continued funding and economic rationalism. People from the previously independent women’s organisations are now in organisations that emulate the hierarchical aspects of bureaucratic organisations and in many cases, the male-model of sports management prevails. In some cases like in football (soccer), women specific programs have been mainstreamed or cut altogether. Similarly, as mentioned earlier the once useful government women’s sport units have either been dismantled or restrained - leading to cut-backs in effectiveness and productivity.

Government decisions have also led to the demise of many non-government women’s sport organisations. For example, the former peak non-government organisation for women in sport was Womensport Australia. Importantly, this organisation was established as a *women’s* organisation with a focus on sport. It aimed to inform, influence and educate other non-government women’s organisations about the relevance of physical activity and recreation in our lives, and the role that women can play in shifting attitudes about the place of sport within Australian culture.

⁷ As was the case some years ago in sports like football, cricket, hockey and lawn bowls when separate women’s organisations ran the sports.

Womensport Australia received funding under the national women's grants program through the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, however, in 1996 the Federal Coalition determined that funding to non-government women's organisations would be 'mainstreamed'. This meant that organisation needed to obtain funding from the Australian Sports Commission. Whilst some funding was guaranteed to Womensport Australia the organisation was unable to maintain its impetus and was disbanded in the late 1990s. A new national organisation, the Australian Women's Sport and Recreation Association has recently been established with seed funding from the federal government and it's expected that it will play a key role in providing leadership and advocacy for women and girls in sport and recreation. Ongoing government funding will be vital to sustain the work of the Association.

Media coverage

Various reports, and particularly two that were commissioned by the Australian Sports Commission in the 1990s⁸ have confirmed that both the quantitative and qualitative media coverage of women's sport is significantly lower than coverage given to men's sport. In addressing the imbalances, the federal government and national sport organisations need to consider the role the sport/media complex plays in determining what sport products are broadcast on television or radio and printed in newspapers or magazines. The two or three key owners of media interests in Australia have demonstrated that they are prepared to pay hundreds of millions of dollars for the television rights to professional men's sport leagues. On the other hand, netball and basketball leagues have often been required to pay television networks to cover their fixtures. Through the intricate vertical and horizontal integration of various forms of media within these few corporate structures, ie. Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation and Packer's Australian Consolidated Press/Channel Nine, male dominated professional sports will continue to have a stranglehold on the public's attention. As such, the media owners perpetuate 'circuits of promotion' that help to protect as well as generate further interest and ideological control over a select number of sports. It is not coincidental that these sports are the traditionally masculine and power-related sports that provide little diversity or choice for sport entertainment.

The federal government can intervene to restrain the increasing concentration of media ownership on a few sports. Without such intervention, the media coverage of other sports and particularly women's leagues and fixtures will continue to be stereotyped and biased in favour of male professional sport. The general public will miss out on a broad range of experiences and excitement that other sports offer and female participants will struggle to gain recognition and star status. This has a knock-on effect in terms of the levels of sponsorship that participants and the leagues can secure and limits the capacity of sports to profile role-models who then provide inspiration for others.

The recent television coverage of the Australian men's national football team (the Socceroos) on its road to Germany for the FIFA World Cup in 2006 and the absence of any equitable coverage given to the national women's football team (the Matildas) and its road to China for the World Championships in 2007 highlights the

⁸ Brian Stoddard, "Invisible Games", Australian Sports Commission, Canberra 1994, and Murray Phillips, "An Illusory Image", Australian Sports Commission, Canberra 1996.

discrepancies and lack of media interest for women's sport. The Socceroos are justifiably enjoying national and worldwide media attention at the moment. SBS television has featured live broadcasts of the world cup qualification and friendly games and we are currently seeing live broadcasts and highlight packages from the World Cup. The Matildas, however, have recently played three friendly games in Australia (with one match held as a curtain-raiser to a men's international game) against Mexico in the lead-up to the first Asian Football Confederation Qualification Tournament to be played in Australia in July. Apart from news items there was no television coverage of the women's games and there was no major newspaper coverage.

The AFC tournament will feature Asia's top eight nations including DPR Korea, China, Japan, and Republic of Korea (with respective rankings of 7th, 8th, 13th and 23rd in the world). The Matildas are ranked 15th in the world and if they qualify then they will be the second Australian team to make it to a world championship through the new AFC route. The other team is the Young Matildas who qualified earlier this year by beating Japan to qualify for the World U20 Championships in Russia later this year. There is no indication as to whether there will be any respectable television coverage of the AFC qualification finals in July and there has been minimal acknowledgement of the success so far of the Young Matildas.

Whilst on the subject of football, it's also worth noting that millions of dollars have been spent on resurrecting a national league for men in Australia. The success of the inaugural Hyundai A-League is reasonably well-known, however, since Football Federation Australia assumed control of the women's component of the sport there has been no national league for women, as there was in previous years under the former national women's association. In addition, there's little evidence that indicates we will see a new national league implemented later this year. This is despite an extensive research report commissioned by FFA that highlighted the significance of a national league for the future of the women's game and for the ongoing elite development of our national players. In fairness, in late 2005 FFA held a national women's tournament, along the lines of previous national championships, as a substitute for the national league but many players had to pay for the privilege to compete in that event and FFA provided minimal resources to promote and stage the event in an appropriate manner given the calibre of the competitors – all incumbent and aspiring national team players competed in the former national league.

It has been ten years since the Australian Sports Commission's media research and a Womensport Australia report⁹ on media coverage was released. It's now time to gather fresh empirical evidence on media coverage of women's sport and provide new recommendations that address the barriers to improving the situation and challenges of the sport/media complex. The federal government must commit to funding a follow-up study that replicates the earlier research in order to determine what actual, rather than perceived, change has occurred over the past decade. With statistics and facts, individuals and organisations can work together on implementing effective and sustainable change.

⁹ Mikosza and Reid, "Inching Forward", Canberra 1997. to the 1994, 1996 and 1997 research conducted by Brian Stoddart, Murray Phillips and Janine Mikosza respectively.

Other comments

The situation for women in sport will not improve unless we introduce programs that overhaul the intricate social and cultural features of sports that are dominated by people who are resistant to change and who are apprehensive about the rights and roles of women in sport. The Australian Government (through the Australian Sports Commission) must review its commitment to international instruments such as CEDAW¹⁰, the 1994 Brighton Declaration¹¹, the 1998 Windhoek Call for Action¹² and the Montreal Toolkit¹³. There is no need to reinvent the wheel because these instruments serve as vital and informative tools for facilitating change. They play important roles in identifying the obstacles (which I suggest have changed very little over the past twenty years) that women face by their involvement and participation in sports activities and they highlight strategies for women's full participation at all levels and in all roles in sport.

In addition, the government must make a commitment to:

- Promote awareness that there are many issues around women's participation in sport and physical activity;
- Build motivation through critical mass support to create change
- Educate sport leaders on how to plan for creating a culture of respect in order to meet the needs of women and girls;
- Conduct annual reviews of sport equity action plans and particularly examine whether national sporting organisations are complying with International Olympic Committee quotas on the number of women in leadership roles;
- Regulate for the implementation of equity policies as a criterion for funding¹⁴;
- Implement sanctions against organisations that fail to take a strategic approach to increasing the imbalances of women as players, leaders, coaches and referees; and
- Maintain the momentum through sustained action and accountability.

Without such intervention, the gender order of sport will not change and sport will continue to be dominated by increasing forms of masculinity and neoliberal policies.

Just because the gendered culture of sport is insidious in many ways, it doesn't mean that women should continue to be marginalised or neglected. Change will occur through economic, political and social influences. Effective and informed programs of action can help to transform the systems, attitudes and culture within sport. This will enable the power imbalances to be redressed and for sport to become more gender-equitable. When this happens the role and representation of women will be greater and more valued.

¹⁰ The United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women.

¹¹ International Working Group conference outcomes, Brighton England 1994.

¹² International Working Group conference outcomes, Windhoek Namibia 1998.

¹³ International Working Group conference outcomes, Montreal, Canada 2002.

¹⁴ As outlined in 'Towards Gender Equity in Sport, Australian Sports Commission 1991.

Support for the IWG Conference in Sydney, 2010

In 2010, Sydney will host the 5th International Working Group on Women and Sport (IWG) Conference. The IWG has the over-arching objectives of promoting and facilitating the development of opportunities for girls and women in sport and physical activity throughout the world. More than 700 delegates attended the recent 4th IWG Conference in Kumamoto, Japan where the focus was on 'participating in change'. The significance of the IWG conferences cannot be overlooked and I urge the Australian Government and the Australian Olympic Committee to ensure the success of the 2010 conference by providing practical and financial support.

Summary of recommendations

1. Federal and state governments must work with sporting organisations to educate sport leaders on how to plan for creating a culture of respect and shift the traditional views that have caused discrimination against women in sport.
2. The federal government, in collaboration with national sporting organisations, examines the role the sport/media complex plays in determining what sport products are broadcast on television or radio and printed in newspapers or magazines.
3. The federal government determines and implements interventionist strategies to restrain the increasing concentration of media ownership on a few male professional sports.
4. The federal government commits to funding a follow-up study on the qualitative and quantitative media coverage of women's sport and the portrayal of female athletes in the media.
5. The federal government (through the Australian Sports Commission) re-examines its commitment to international instruments such as CEDAW, the 1994 Brighton Declaration, the 1998 Windhoek Call for Action and the Montreal Toolkit.
6. The federal government and the Australian Olympic Committee, along with other relevant agencies, provides practical and financial support to the staging of the 5th International Working Group Conference on Women and Girls in Sport in 2010.

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