

## **Behind the veil: exploring the recreation needs of Muslim women**

### *Abstract*

The recreation needs of minority groups are often subjugated or marginalised when facilities and/or programs are designed to cater for exigencies of the general population. This situation is further exacerbated when these recreation services, by the nature of their provision, informally exclude the participation of certain groups of people. This paper details a research project exploring the recreation needs of one such minority group, Muslim women living in Australia, a predominantly Christian country. The study reported in this paper utilised in-depth interviews with Muslim women, representatives of Muslim womens' groups and recreation service providers, in the collection of primary data on recreation needs and provision. The narratives, which emerged from these interviews, suggest that many Muslim women experience considerable difficulties accessing programs and services that meet their religious requirements, and consequently feel systemically constrained in their recreation participation.

*Muslim women, Minority groups, recreation and ethnicity*

## **Behind the veil: exploring the recreation needs of Muslim women**

Muslim women living in non-Muslim countries have experienced restricted access to, and participation in, many mainstream community activities such as education, politics and employment, due to exclusionary institutional practices. While a substantive body of research concerning issues of power and identity for minority groups from political, economic, social welfare and educational perspectives has been undertaken - our knowledge about the recreation dimension of exclusion is still embryonic.

Critical engagement with issues of equity and access as they relate to recreation opportunities is a key component in exploring the ways in which dominant groups interfuse society, legitimate particular cultural structures which serve to meet their needs, and in the process, disadvantage or marginalise other groups. Creating a better understanding of the systemic institutionalisation which perpetuates this disadvantage affords us the opportunity to challenge current structural biases and provide environments that minimise inequities and, as a consequence, result in more inclusive recreation provision.

The research reported in this paper aims to broaden our awareness about the place of recreation within the lives of Muslim women living in a non-Muslim country. In previous research Taylor & Toohey (1998) reported that systemic constraints in sport and recreation provision significantly restrict the level and type of involvement of women from ethnic minority backgrounds. Their research also highlighted the fact that many Muslim women in Australia would like to use recreation services but felt that the services provided were not able to meet their requirements. Furthermore, recreation providers had a minimal understanding of, and held many misconceptions about, the recreation needs of this population.

This study follows on from these investigations by exploring the issues in greater detail through in-depth interviews with twenty Muslim women about their attitudes towards, experiences of, and perspectives on recreation. In complement, twelve interviews with recreation service providers were undertaken to gauge their level of understanding about the requirements of Muslim women, and explore providers' experiences in meeting the recreation needs of this population.

The collection of narratives and responses gathered from these interviews is reviewed and an analytical appraisal of the social construction and practice of recreation is presented. The aim of this research is to ultimately create a better understanding about the recreation needs and requirements of Muslim women. Additionally the study findings have been used to highlight inclusive participation strategies and opportunities for women to freely engage in activities that are also concordant with their Islamic identity to improve their health and well-being.

### *Background*

For a significant number of the world's population Islam is more than just a religion, it is an entire way of life. The majority of practising Muslims, approximately one billion, live in Middle Eastern countries. Numbers of Muslims in other countries such as Australia, where it has been claimed to be the nation's fastest growing religion, are rapidly increasing (see table 1). However, the precise number of Muslims in Australia is difficult to ascertain, as the nomination of religion in the country's census is optional. Due to this voluntary indication system, it is probable that the official census figure underestimates the number of Muslims in the country, and thus the data presented in table 1 must be viewed as merely an approximation of the Muslim population. Indeed, the *Sydney Morning Herald* (17 July

1996:18) has recently estimated that there are well over 35,000 Muslim women living in the New South Wales capital city of Sydney alone.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

The data presented in Table 1 indicate that both the absolute number and the proportionate figures of Muslims in Australia have increased substantially in the past two decades. The growth in numbers from 1991 to 1996 was a substantial 36.2 per cent to over 200,000 Muslims.

While the majority (ie over 50 per cent) of Muslims in Australia have arrived from one of two countries, Lebanon or Turkey, overall they represent of a wide range of countries. This overall diversity of origin is essential to recognise, as Islamic communities vary greatly in their cultural customs and beliefs. As the data in Table 2 indicate, there is significant diversity within the Muslim community in Australia and thus the population cannot be treated as homogenous in custom and values. Additionally, socio-economic differences result in variations in religious and cultural practices even within the same community (Beck, 1980).

Despite the considerable cultural variations in religious practice amongst Muslim women, Muslim women are often conceptualised as "a vision of heavily veiled, secluded wives, whose lives consist of little more than their homes, their children and the other women in the ... immediate kinship circle" (Fawzi eh-Sahl and Mabro, 1994:4). This stereotyping of Muslim women into a single image is indicative of the lack of knowledge and understanding about the tenets of Islam, and contributes to many of the problems Muslim women face in adequately accessing recreation opportunities.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Furthermore, Muslim women often are conspicuous because of the clothing they choose to wear. As an increasing number of women adopt the hijab, which literally means curtain or veil in Arabic, or the chador, full-length black dress and veil, (Fawzi el-Solh &

Mabro, 1994) their garments signal to others that they are different. While this attire is often viewed by westerners as restrictive and conservative, however, many Muslim women believe that by concealing their physicality attention is placed on their intelligence rather than their physical or sexual persona.

The often isolating dimension of cultural difference is further exacerbated within Australia, a predominantly Christian country, as Muslims form a religious minority, "an insulated group within society, rather than part of society" (Muslim Women's Association, 1994:15). Many Islamic practices are very different and therefore alien in countries where the population is primarily Christian:

The problem of integration into mainstream western societies is further exacerbated by overt and subtle manifestations of racism, as well as the tendency to view Islam as an intrusion into western culture ... Muslims tend to be described and interpreted by the west as 'other', 'non-us' or 'them' with Islam held up as an alien religion against an idealised, historical, Judeo-Christian mirror. Fawzi el-Solh & Mabro, 1994:3

A Muslim way of life involves complying with physical, social and emotional requirements that are necessary to live with dignity and satisfaction (Beck, 1980). To this end the engagement in recreational activities is important to facilitating a Muslim lifestyle. With respect to recreation participation, Zaman (1997) points out that Islam requires physical exercise. Activities which are particularly recommended include horse riding, swimming, archery, wrestling, running and mountaineering. Islamic practice emphasises the good usage of leisure time for physical, mental and social well being for both individuals and society (El-Sayed, 1997). Yet despite this religious requirement, many Muslim women do not participate in recreation activities due to the dearth of opportunities that meet their needs:

Muslim dress codes and preference for women only programs and space screened from public viewing does not lessen the need, nor the desire for participation in sporting activities. And yet, these factors, which may be easily accommodated in existing facilities and programs, continue to create

structural and systemic barriers to the participation of Muslim women and girls in sporting and recreational activities. *Bridging the Gap*, 1994:17

In examining the recreation needs of Muslims it is essential to understand that Islam should be seen as more than just a religion. It is the dominant identifying factor that provides the basis upon which an individual's social environment is built. Recreation is generally not a core contributor to a Muslim woman's identity; her religious identity shapes her recreation choices. Therefore, religious requirements *must* be met in order for participation to be possible.

An illustration of this point is Benn's (1996) study of Muslim women and physical education experiences in the United Kingdom, which found that students encountered many institutional practices that compromised their participation. This ranged from physical education teachers excluding girls from classes for wearing track suits instead of a sports uniform, to teachers allowing males to impinge on their space thus affecting their ability to actively participate. Benn concluded that "Many Muslim women suffer in silence" (1996:12), subsequently allowing systemic constraints to go largely unchallenged and unchanged.

#### *Statement of the Research Question*

An overview of contemporary literature on recreation for ethnic and religious minority groups reveals a degree of ambiguity. While many researchers and practitioners acknowledge the lack of material in this area, and the need to broaden the scope of future recreation research, few works have been forthcoming. As Henderson (1998:159) observed, "research throughout the 1990s has not decentred many of the white, heterosexual, affluent, non-disabled standards." Feminist research has often not incorporated important dimensions such as cultural background and religious affiliation. In discussing constraints to physical

activity in leisure, Leith and Shaw (1997) identify that women are specifically affected by age, employment, marital and family status. This list also needs to acknowledge the influence that a woman's cultural background and religion have on participation or non-participation, especially if they are members of a minority group.

In practice, contemporary rhetoric of ensuring inclusivity in research appears to have been applied selectively, if at all. Floyd (1998:18) deplores the lack of research that incorporates diversity, "The opportunity to harness this potential and bring its synergistic effects to bear on race/ethnicity issues is unprecedented. Despite this opportunity, the paucity of active researchers addressing such concerns may limit this potential."

The purpose of this study is to redress this gap, and to acknowledge and legitimise the recreation experiences of Muslim women by inviting Muslim women and recreation providers to share information regarding their recreation experiences, knowledge, attitudes and practices. The underlying principle of this research with Muslim women can be captured by Henderson's (1998:169) observation that "people who have been underresearched generally want their story told in a way that avoids stereotypes and gives them dignity."

### *Method Rationale*

Research should provide information, insights and theories about human behaviour that can then be translated into improved quality of life for the researched population. The choice of methodology for this research was determined through careful consideration of a number of issues raised in both feminist and ethnicity literature focussing on sport and recreation. While the literature provided material on the social, environmental and systemic conditions that affect woman's involvement in sport little has been written specifically on women from Muslim backgrounds. Previous research has mainly centred on the experiences of women who are white, heterosexual and able-bodied.

The selection of methodology for this research was primarily informed by feminist theoretical concerns with how power is exercised through everyday social and institutional practices, and how these are manifest in sport and recreation participation. Consequently formal recreation activity is presented as a cultural institution where practices are historically produced and socially constructed by pre-existing and pre-determined power structures to produce and maintain hegemony. As such, the methodology chosen had to have the capacity to explore these issues in depth and without restraint.

Qualitative methodology was chosen to explore individual construction of meanings about recreation in the lives of Muslim women. As experiences are bound by context and subtleties, qualitative research is best employed to be able to tease out meanings, implications and perceptions. Qualitative methods can overcome the implicit problems of context stripping, exclusion of meaning and purpose, inapplicability of general data to individual cases, the theory ladenness of facts, and the exclusion of the discovery dimension of inquiry often found in quantitative studies (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Costa and Guthrie (1994:250) comment, “when qualitative approaches that respect the diversity of human experience are more generally accepted and employed by the dominant groups in sport research, we will likely gain a better understanding of sporting women and. a celebration of difference may also result”.

It was important to ensure that research participants were made aware that they would not be judged by culturally inappropriate Anglo-Celtic feminists standards thus avoiding what Martin (1991) terms hegemonic feminist ethnocentrism. This is where “the analytical and political preoccupations of an ethnically dominant group are falsely universalised and normalised with respect to women from minority and colonised groups” (Martin 1991:125). In addition, using stereotypes can led to assumptions that sex roles are an inevitable part of a static culture. This only serves to freeze these or at least give them credibility and thereby



encourage people to blame the more oppressive, inhumane aspects of cultural relations, such as inequality of women, on the culture. Therefore it is acknowledged that this research will offer insights into the nexus of Muslim women and recreation but it is not intended that generalisations about all member of this group of women will be drawn from the findings. Each individual interviewed had their own story to tell, offering a personal perspective on their situation. While there were similarities, there were also many differences.

### *Methods*

Given the consideration outlined above, the researchers utilised an interview-based method for the data collection. Issues of cultural diversity were able to be adapted to fit into each individual interview situation as the conversational style questions were less constrained by language and translation limitations present in standardised questionnaires. This method choice also complemented the first stage of this research where a questionnaire based survey was utilised. The survey provided base line data on participation rates but also raised a number of issues encompassing women's involvement in recreation and their attitudes to sport and physical activity. Interviews provided the opportunity to follow up these issues and probe about the reasons behind some of the quantitative findings. Furthermore, during the first research stage many of the women surveyed expressed an interest in further discussions about their views about recreation.

A series of semi-structured interviews, using convenience sampling, were undertaken with twenty Muslim women and twelve recreation providers within the state of New South Wales. The Muslim women interviewed represented a range of ethnic groupings, were either first or second-generation Australians and ranged in age from their early 20s to late 40s. The women were selected from a range of individuals supplied by key informants in the Muslim community. Potential interviewees were briefed about the purpose of the study and their

consent to participate in the research was obtained using both written and verbal methods. Participation in the study was voluntary and all responses have been kept anonymous, as such the names used in reporting the findings being fictitious.

The interviews with the Muslim women participants were conducted in a location nominated by the interviewee to ensure a non-threatening environment (Reinharz, 1992) and ranged from 45-75 minutes in duration. Where required, the interviews were conducted with the assistance of an interpreter. Female research assistants facilitated all of the interviews, as it was felt that this was a vital consideration for Muslim women. Interviews were guided by a standardised checklist which included questions about the place of sport and recreation in each women's life, their attitudes to and experiences of recreation, and exploration of issues related to their Islamic faith. All sessions were taped and transcribed verbatim for analysis. In the instances where interpreters were employed the transcribed text was sent to the interviewees for verification and modification.

The interviews with twelve recreation providers were conducted to explore their perspectives and experiences in meeting the recreation needs of Muslim women. Only providers who had experiences of working with Muslim women were interviewed, which significantly limited the size of the sample frame. Recreation providers who met these criteria were identified from a previous research study (Taylor and Toohey, 1998) and contacted to participate in this new research project. All of the willing providers were then interviewed. The providers ranged from state government sport and recreation agencies responsible for offering a range of activities to the whole community to small, privately owned businesses which concentrate on only one activity (eg bowling).

### *Frameworks for analysis*

A grounded theory approach was adopted for this study. This was considered as the most appropriate framework to analyse the comments made during the interview process. The basic components of the analysis were concepts, categories and propositions (as defined by Corbin and Strauss, 1990). Concepts are the basic units of analysis since it is from conceptualisation of data, not the actual data per se, that theory is developed. Categories, are formed by grouping concepts and propositions indicate generalised relationships between a category and its concepts and between discrete categories (Pandit, 1996).

The generation and development of concepts, categories and propositions is an iterative process. Grounded theory is not generated a priori and then subsequently tested it is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon (Pandit, 1996). Therefore, data collection, analysis, and theory should stand in reciprocal relationship with each other. One does not begin with a theory, then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

The transcripts of all of the interviews were read through several times to obtain an overall sense of the comments before being coded. Individual comments were initially grouped by concept theme and then further differentiated by category. Consistencies and inconsistencies between responses were examined before interpretation was attempted. Each of the concepts is discussed below, primarily by letting the words of the women interviewed speak for itself.

### **Experiences of recreation participation**

In their discussion of recreation participation, the women interviewed related a wide array of experiences. The common concepts running through all the interviews were classified under four headings: myths and stereotypes; inclusion; exclusion; and otherness.

*(i) Myths and stereotypes*

As previously identified, Muslim women have continually been subject to gross stereotyping within Australian society. Modi, a Muslim woman who has lived in Australia for many years, expressed her intense sense of frustration about the 'ignorance' that many Australians have about Muslims explaining that: "Most Australians are not familiar with Islam and many of their assumptions are not accurate". Modi then explained that she has found there are many assumptions made about Muslim women that are negative and limiting.

Bet, a Muslim woman who works for a Muslim Women's group, listed three of the most common myths she continually encounters: (i) Muslim women are oppressed, (ii) they are subservient to their husbands, and (iii) they don't think for themselves. Her advice for recreation providers working with Muslim women is: "Don't patronise and don't underestimate the women. Just take them as women .... Muslim women come from different backgrounds, Indian, Asian, Arab, you've got different cultural practices that they adhere to." In other words, Bet felt that in her experience it was important for providers to go beyond the stereotypes and find out what the women's needs and requirements are and aim to address these accordingly.

All twenty of the women interviewed felt that breaking down the myths and stereotypes were a critical stage in the change process. Recreation participation was spoken about in terms of 'missed opportunity' with several of the interviewees relating this to the misconception (in their opinion) that Muslim women did not want to be physically active or physically fit. As a consequence, the women expressed strong sentiments that providers often do not consider their needs a priority. In practice this means that providers often cater

for long standing user groups to the detriment of Muslim women because the former's requirements are known and understood and thus easy to deliver. As one recreation centre manager said, "We only have limited resources so we have to direct these into high return programs. If they aren't interested in coming to these, so be it." This attitude reflects the assumption that if a Muslim woman really wanted to participate they would, and that special consideration to meet their unique needs should not be required.

*(ii) Inclusion*

The women interviewed were only able to identify an extremely limited number of examples of 'best practice' which they had personally experienced. This can be taken as a general indication of the lack of recreation programs that cater for Muslim women's needs. Zeema, a South African Muslim, spoke about her involvement with a program that was able to accommodate alternative dress and provided a women-only environment, elements that therefore offered the opportunity to freely engage in activities. She had joined a women's private health and slimming salon which was expensive, but Zeema felt the price was worth it as the facility and programs were for women only and therefore met her religious considerations. While she had the financial resources to do this Zeema observed that many of her friends were not so fortunate and thus missed out.

Five of the other women interviewed had also joined recreation programs because they specifically offered female only environments. One of the women, Bet, spoke about a gentle exercise program that the local women's group had organised which scheduled classes to take into consideration her Ramadan requirements of the daily fasting that is adhered to from dawn until sunset during the ninth month of the Muslim year. She explained that other programs she had been involved with were not as accommodating and her requests to work around Ramadan provisions had prompted some hostile reactions that left her feeling ostracised.

The majority of the providers, however, expressed a certain amount of exasperation and frustration with their attempts to provide 'inclusionary' services. As one swimming pool manager explained, "We couldn't do it anymore, other people [males] were complaining that they weren't allowed the same rights and couldn't understand why such a small group should get the whole pool to themselves." Another provider, explaining why he could not meet all the requirements made by a team of female Muslim basketball players, said, "They didn't want men around when they played [basketball] but the other teams wanted their boyfriends to come and some had male coaches, it was a tough one." Unfortunately the Muslim women's team withdrew from the competition when males were allowed access. Providing a public space for expressions of religious identity can sometimes draw antagonistic responses from others.

*(iii) Exclusion*

Over three quarters of the women who attended school in Australia (n=11) indicated that they had experienced problems with recreation activities in school settings. These incidents mainly surfaced in high school, as Muslim girls do not have religious dress requirements in primary school. In speaking about herself and her friends one woman said of her experiences, "You've got to wear those short little dresses, it's against our practices, so what do they do? They can't wear that so they opt out. They pretend they can't run, they pretend they can't play softball ... it becomes a chain reaction." This point was also made by another woman speaking of her high school years and explaining why she did not play team sports: "I started wearing the Islamic things ... I couldn't wear a uniform and at that age you didn't want to stick out so I think I tended to do more individual things."

Ishel, who was born in Turkey, discussed the extra effort involved when one's requirements for participation are different: "You need to have not only motivation but everything else has to be convenient ... I found myself that I always had to make an extra

effort. We had to travel there [to a suitable venue] being Muslim women." Finding a program or service that meets religious requirements requires contacts, research and perseverance.

Overt racial or religious discrimination was not raised as a problem in the interviews. It appears that most exclusion is informal and, in most instances, is related to institutional practice and provision structure. This is certainly correlated with the commonly espoused provider claim, 'But we provide services for everybody, everyone is welcomed!'

*(iv) Feelings of otherness*

Ishel, spoke passionately about the stigma of difference and how this affected her recreation participation. She explained, "I remember in PE all the other girls wore short skirts, we just wore a tracksuit. I suppose I knew it was different and I didn't feel comfortable back in those times so whenever I could avoid it I avoided it." Seventeen of the interviewees discussed the feelings of difference that accompanied integrated participation and outlined how this led to them either discontinuing involvement or developing a preference to participating in a segregated environment.

Recreation participation opportunities can be constrained by feelings of being different, standing out or not being able to effectively communicate. Such feelings can facilitate one's desire to engage in activities with others who share the same cultural, linguistic and religious background. As a result women may prefer to engage in informally structured recreation with people they feel comfortable around, such as their family: "I like to go fishing with my husband and children, we can do it together and there are no rules or dress problems"; or with immigrant friends: "When we have a gathering of Iranian students we know each other, we have a net that we can put up in the different park ... just put up the nets and we play volleyball." Segregated participation provides an experience of commonality, understanding and acceptance.

Many of the women interviewed expressed the opinion that they preferred to spend time with people of the same background because of their shared interests, language etc rather than due to any feelings of alienation. As Marcia explained “we get together and talk, just talk and all our families talk, we all speak the same language not just Arabic but we know what we mean, it’s so much easier than getting together with a group of English speaking families who just can’t relate to our experiences.” However, this can lead to isolation and restriction of recreation choices as Nehe describes “I would like to do other things like tennis but I don’t know where to go, and I don’t have anyone to go with.” Fatima joined a local group of Muslim women who walk, swim and exercise together and explained that "These women were young mothers with children and they wanted to do something with the group and they wanted to do something as well."

The Muslim Women’s Association provides a range of recreation programs for women. They have also been active in lobbying both local and state governments to ensure that publicly provided facilities and programs are accessible and do not exclude Muslim women.. However, as their program co-ordinator points out, progress has been slow: “We are constantly meeting and talking with the government and they keep saying they will see that things change but they don’t. We have as much right as everyone else in the community to have access to public facilities, we pay rates too!”

### **Attitudes to recreation**

Experiences relating to feelings of difference were present throughout the narratives of the Muslim women spoken with for these interviews.

#### *(i) Personal*

Most of the women interviewed said that they felt a sense of extreme satisfaction when they could actually participate in recreation activities that met their needs. A participant



in a swimming program specifically designed for Muslim women said, “We had been deprived for so long. A lot of women want to get out there and do something. Swimming is fun and when it’s fun you don’t feel you need to be encouraged.” Another interviewee said that joining into a program that met her dress requirements was quite a liberating experience and felt that “when you do go there you find at that time there’s so much happiness among the women because they are able to dress as they want to.” Others expressed strong feelings of unhappiness at not being able to find appropriate programs to join.

*(ii) Family*

The women interviewed also highlighted the fact that their families did not encourage their recreation participation for a variety of reasons. This lack of family support generally fell into three areas; (i) it was seen as frivolous or trivial; (ii) certain pursuits were not viewed appropriate for women; and (iii) religious requirements had to be contravened to participate.

While certain activities are listed in the Koran as being relevant to all Muslims, in practice some families do not feel that participation in these recreation activities is a high priority. In discussing why her recreation experiences were so limited Ishel explained that "I had the extra disadvantage in it was not encouraged in my family ... they tended not to value it as much as I would have liked them to. So I had that disadvantage when I was growing up." This sentiment was echoed by others interviewed. As Natalie remembers "I always had to come straight home after school; my brothers played soccer but I had to help at home."

Some sport and recreation activities are not viewed as suitable pursuits for girls by their parents. Jenny spoke excitedly about playing softball in primary school but she quit because her mother felt it was too aggressive for teenage girls. Lisa stopped playing soccer because her father did not approve of her being coached by a male. Maree had to discontinue playing volleyball, even though she wanted to continue, because her family did not want her

playing a sport where the uniform prerequisites did not comply with religious dress requirements.

### ***Meeting of recreation needs***

The pre-requisites discussed in the interviews for meeting the needs of Muslim women fell into the four categories outlined below.

#### *(i) Knowledge and understanding of Islam*

Jenny, a recreation officer, who has worked with Muslim women in a number of recreation programs, explained that when she began her current position with a recreation provider in an area that had a substantial Muslim population she immediately arranged to meet with local Muslim women. The result was overwhelming. "They were so unbelievably happy ... they just welcomed me with open arms. They were just ecstatic about it because they didn't actually have anything for women." The women asked for enclosed spaces; no male present; female instructors/leaders; religious considerations of time of year, and time of day (around prayer times). Finding venues that were appropriate was often difficult, especially for activities such as swimming, and Jenny had to finally use a special school's swimming pool for the women's swim program. While the pool was structurally suitable, it was not close to public transport nodes and could only be used out of school hours. None of the public swimming pools, which are philosophically assumed to be available for all community members, were prepared to meet the conditions.

The feedback Jenny has received from the women involved in the program has been very positive. "They're just so happy to be able to get out and do something that they want to do and always wanted to do." Unfortunately the number of success stories we were able to find are not abundant, not because providers have tried and failed, but inasmuch as very few have seriously attempted to understand and meet the requirements of Muslim women.

#### *(ii) Fulfilment of an Islamic lifestyle*

Swimming, horse riding and archery are recommended in the Koran but there are few opportunities for girls and women to pursue these activities. The contrast between the provision of appropriate venues in Muslim countries versus Australia was noted by many of the women interviewed. As Modi pointed out, "The recreational side is very important and vital part of our healthy life. There are no facilities whatsoever here in the western suburbs. When I was a girl I loved P.E. but it all changed when we moved here." This lack of opportunity was raised as an element of constant frustration by many of the women interviewed, Natalie said, "Part and parcel of our religious requirements is to learn swimming and safety but you'll find that none of our women have any idea of water safety or to be able to just tread water in the pool." One of the swimming centre operators interviewed indicated that he was sensitive to the requirements of Muslim women, but explained that in practice his financial management imperative mitigated any actual provision, "We can't afford to close the pool to all males when just a handful of women want to go swimming."

If the women do eventually learn to swim somewhere, then practising their skills becomes difficult, as most local pools do not have any 'women only' hours. Therefore, programs must be more than just isolated events if they are to offer any real contribution to the ongoing recreational opportunities for Muslim women.

### *(iii) Differing priorities*

Simal, who has lived in Australia for 5 years is originally from Iran. She plays volleyball and soccer at social gatherings with other Iranians, mostly when they get together outdoors for picnics. She prefers to recreate with other Iranian Muslims because she feels comfortable and supported in their company and the whole family can be involved.

A commercial bowling centre targeted Muslim women for its daytime sessions. Initially, the Centre management tried to recruit women via their husbands who bowled at the

venue but this strategy was not successful. After exploring a range of options the centre staff subsequently found that the most effective way of attracting women into the complex was to initially target parents to hold their children's birthday parties at the Centre. The staff were then able to speak to the women who came along face to face, and encourage them to come back and try bowling. The strategy proved to be successful and several teams of Muslim women joined the daytime competition.

Ayesha used to play field hockey but gave it up after she had two children (she now has five) because she wanted to participate in activities that involved all of the family. Fishing became a popular activity because everyone could join in and it was also something Ayesha could do while she was pregnant. She has encouraged her daughters to be active and two play competitive field hockey.

However, the desire to recreate with others of the same background can be misinterpreted by recreation providers as hostility or lack of desire to conform to societal practices. As the director of a recreation service said "we tried and tried to get them to use our facilities but they were more interested in dropping their kids at school and then sitting around chatting than doing something which would be good for their health." Such requirements are often met with mixed reactions, as one sport centre manager said, "Yeah, we talked to the group representative but they were making outrageous demands and weren't willing to compromise, or pay higher costs, so in the end it was just dropped in the too hard basket. Not a good outcome for anyone."

### *Discussion*

Muslim women who wear the hajab stand out in the Australian community. Their clothing, which symbolises their difference, is often perceived by others in the community as indicating social and cultural distance from mainstream values and practices. Consequently,

Muslim women are often stereotyped by recreation providers as having quite different recreational needs from the rest of the community leading to informal exclusionary practices.

As Leith and Shaw (1997) argued in their study of women and physical activity, not all constraints fit neatly into the categories often used in the literature and personal experiences and interpersonal factors also need to be taken into consideration. This study also highlights the need to question current theoretical explanations of beliefs and their cultural bias. In this instance the emergent proposition

Lack of appropriate venues and programs obviously plays a large role in their choice of recreational activities, as evidenced by the numerous examples provided by the women interviewed. In addition, the effect of the anticipation of some form of discrimination was alluded to by a number of the women, conjointly influencing the selection of recreation activities and the choice of where or with whom to participate. Many of the women explained that they avoided situations where they might be unwelcome and enjoyed environments where they felt comfortable and participated with others with whom they could relate to by language, culture and religion.

These recreation participation patterns promote what Shaul and Gramann (1998) call selective-acculturation in leisure. Leisure activities that occur in the context of family and friendship groups with few social limitations serve to provide a supportive environment for the expression and transmission of subcultural identity, that is, the retention of certain core cultural or religious traits. This phenomena was evident in the recreation behaviours of the women interviewed whereby participation with family and friends was identified as a comfortable and non-threatening, non-discriminatory option. The ensuing proposition is that the Muslim women interviewed have chosen to follow the path of least restriction or resistance and meet their recreation needs via alternative formats where they can feel content and able to express their religious identity.

### *Conclusions and Implications for practice*

These experiences of Muslim women trying to access meaningful and fulfilling recreation experiences indicate that there is plenty of room for improvement in recreation provision in Australia. Most of the problems in service provision derive from a lack of knowledge and understanding about this population's needs and requirements. This, coupled with a limited exposure to group members, few past experiences to draw upon and the prevalence of incorrect stereotypes that suggest Muslim women do not want to engage in many recreation activities, results in informal exclusionary practices which deny many women the right of participation.

Providers must aim to go beyond stereotypes and find out what the women's needs and requirements are and aim to address these accordingly. It is evident that it is the way in which recreation activities are organised and not the activities themselves that are the main limiting factor. The provision of programs that meet women's requirements, such as female-only environments and flexibility in the clothing worn, will assist in meeting recreation needs. However, these initiatives must be more than isolated attempts to deal with the issue, which ignore the entrenched systemic concerns identified by this research. For example, the apparent absence of Muslim women holding sport and recreation administration positions, or enrolled in leisure and recreation tertiary education programs is indicative of the extent of their exclusion in all spheres of recreation.

A multi-faceted approach is necessary whereby current providers restructure services to be more inclusionary and more Muslim women become involved in the provision process. Muslim women need to be targeted and encouraged to become actively engaged in all dimensions of recreation provision from personal participation, to local community planning and development. In developing their careers in recreation Muslim women can use insights

gained from their own experiences to forge a new more inclusive future for recreation provision. Muslim women should not have to subvert their identity to enjoy the benefits of recreation participation.

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**Table 1. Total population of Muslims in Australia**

<i>Census Year:</i>	1976	1986	1991	1996
<i>Population:</i>	45,200	109,521	147,487	200,900
<i>Ratio % of pop :</i>	0.3%	0.7%	0.87%	1.1%

(source: Australian Bureau of Statistics Census data 1976-1996)

**Table 2. Australian Muslim distribution by country of birth**

<i>Nationality</i>	<i>Ratio %</i>
Lebanon	28.3
Turkey	26.3
Former Yugoslavia	6.5
Cyprus	5.4
Malaysia	4.1
Indonesia	4.7
Egypt	2.5
Fiji	2.0
Other countries	21.2

(source: Australian Bureau of Statistics 1996).