

Issues of cultural diversity in women's sport

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Abstract

In Australia, women from minority ethnic backgrounds have significantly lower participation rates in sports and physical activity than Anglo-Australian women. Secondary data sources and surveys were used to investigate this issue on a broad level and within a specific sport - netball. The women and girls surveyed for this research reported fewer constraints than for netball than any other sport. However, the levels of participation of females from culturally diverse backgrounds in netball were still significantly below that of Anglo-Australian females. The women and girls from non-English-speaking backgrounds who played netball placed more emphasis on fun and physical benefits, whereas, social benefits were perceived as less important for respondents from non-English-speaking backgrounds than for other respondents.

Issues of cultural diversity in women's sport

The under-involvement of women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds has been quantified in several studies of organised sport in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1994, 1998, 2001). Low levels of participation of this same group of women have been found not only in sport, but also in physical activity (Armstrong, Bauman, & Davies, 2000). As women born in non-English-speaking backgrounds comprise nearly 23 per cent of the Australian population (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, 1999) they are a substantive sub-grouping within the community and their low levels of activity warrant investigation not only on equity grounds but also in relation to quality of life issues, as physical activity can contribute to better quality of life and lower risks for health problems.

Research to date has established that decisions to participate in organised sport and physical activity can be linked to perceived cultural inclusiveness and the level of felt difference and dissonance (Taylor, 2000). Such findings are not surprising given that the Australian sports environment has been labelled as intensely masculine, particularly parochial and steeped in Anglo-Celtic tradition (Cashman, 1995). In order to investigate issues of gender and cultural diversity in a localised sporting context a case study of netball, a predominantly female sport, was undertaken. The research aimed to discover levels, characteristics and motivations of schoolgirls and netball club members.

Women and cultural diversity

Research on ethnic minority women has been primarily concentrated around African-American women in the USA and Asian women in England. Wiese-Bjornstal (1997) reviewed a series of American studies that examined physical activity and different cultural groups and noted that

reported attitudes toward physical activity varied between ethnic groups. The Women's Sports Foundation (1989) found that Hispanic female athletes were more likely than non-athletes to improve educational results and to attend college. *The Wilson Report: Moms, Dads, Daughter and Sports* (Women's Sports Foundation, 1988) concluded that African-American girls had fewer resources for lessons, equipment and transport to games, and the *Miller Lite Report on Sports and Fitness in the Lives of Working Women* (Women's Sports Foundation, 1993) revealed that girls 'of colour' were significantly less likely to receive encouragement from their parents to engage in physical activities. As these studies indicate, 'gender belief systems and contexts probably interact with race and ethnicity systems in complex ways' (Gill, 1994:273).

In England, research within the South Asian community, revealed that women's leisure and recreation has centred around the family and religion, the women interviewed felt that they had little time for sports participation (Lovell, 1991). South Asian women in this study found it difficult to be committed to regular sporting activities such as netball because these team games were not part of the South Asian female culture. The significant under-representation of Asian female participation in sports in the United Kingdom has been extensively documented elsewhere (Bhandari, 1991). Language difficulties, dress requirements and embarrassment have been identified as contributors to the low participation figures of Asian women (Phillip, 1995). In contrast to South Asian women, other research has found that African-Caribbean women living in Britain were heavily involved in sports, in particular sports such as netball which are played in their country of origin (Lovell, 1991).

Carrington *et al.* (1987) have noted the low levels of minority ethnic female participation in sports in the United Kingdom. The study focussed on how parents constrained participation of females; finding that gender differences were more pronounced amongst South Asians than 'Whites'. This is the experience of many women from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Encouragement into sports can be further compounded by physical education experiences in primary and secondary school environments, which have been consistently found to be culturally and gender biased. Teachers and other students alike often perpetuate racist and stereotyped sentiments (Benn, 1996). Add to this a lack of female ethnic minority role models as leaders, coaches, and administrators which has been commonly identified as a problem that contributes to low participation rates (Acosta, 1993), and the socialisation of ethnic minority girls into sports becomes highly complex.

It has also been suggested that women from minority groups may wish to participate in a way that is different to the mainstream, and to assert their own identity in sport. Hargreaves (1994) outlined such a situation in the case of a netball team in England that clashed with official rules when they chose to adopt a uniform that they felt expressed their identity. The team were mainly working class and non-white women who wanted to play the game with 'style', which for them meant wearing shorts, crop tops and associated exercise gear instead of the traditional short shirt, matching bloomers and top. Their choice of uniform contradicted the association's dress regulations and created dissension in the competition. For these women, participating in netball meant that all players were given the opportunity to contribute to the construction of the club's identity.

The research undertaken for this paper explores several issues raised in previous studies on women, sport and ethnicity. Namely, identifying factors that influence the involvement of women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in sports; assessing if are gender and cultural diversity aspects of access and equity addressed within current sporting policies and practices; and suggesting how sports participation opportunities and organisations can become more inclusive of women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Current rates of participation

A 1997 survey showed that sports participation rates for Australian-born persons was 37.6 per cent compared with 21.2 per cent for those born overseas. Furthermore, the participations rates for immigrants from the main English-speaking countries (29.8%) were almost double that of people born in non-English-speaking countries. The differences were even more pronounced for women. While 26.7 per cent of women born in Australia played sport, the comparative rate of women from non-English-speaking countries only 8.4 per cent. The non-player rates are similar with 4.4 per cent of Australian-born females surveyed indicating they had a non-playing role in sports, compared with 1.5% women from non-English-speaking backgrounds (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998). Also, more Australian-born people (48.7%) went to sports events than those born overseas (32.2%) of which people born in non-English speaking countries attended at a rate of 24.5 per cent (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1994). However, it should be noted that the use of 'country of birth' as the measurement variable places second-generation persons into the Australian-born category. In order to better understand why such significant under-representation is present in the Australian sporting environment a case study of netball was undertaken.

Netball in Australia

Netball has the highest level of female participation of any team sport in Australia. Australian Bureau of Statistics data (1998) has indicated that for young girls aged 5-14 years, netball and swimming were by far the most popular sports or physical activities. A recent study of over 18 year olds concluded that on average netball participants are female, aged between 18 and 24 years, are Australian-born, have never married and are employed full-time (Australian Sports Commission, 2000). The prominence of netball as the most popular female game in Australia

was the reason it was chosen to investigate cultural diversity issues in female dominated sport.

Method

The specific research methods used in this research were a questionnaire survey of schoolgirls and a questionnaire survey of netball players. The questionnaire method was employed to assess the general behavioural and descriptive components of female sports participation or non-participation. The survey of schoolgirls was undertaken to gain a broad sense of sporting participation patterns and general attitudes to sports. Sports participation involves cognitive and affective characteristics as well as overt behavioural aspects. Therefore, to complement the broad data on female attitudes to sports and their participation in sports, a socio-demographic profile for netball participation was obtained via a representative sample of three district level competitions. This survey allowed for comparisons with the general schoolgirl study and to provide base-line data for the netball case study.

Schoolgirl Questionnaire Survey

Girls from schools located in three collection regions, all areas with high levels of cultural diversity, completed a questionnaire survey. The survey was designed to explore participation rates and reasons and determine if ethnic origin impacted sports involvement. Some 1150 questionnaires were distributed and 972 were returned completed, the response rate was 84.5 per cent. Respondent characteristics, sports participation patterns and preferences are presented in the following results sections.

Schoolgirl Respondent Demographics

Of the 972 questionnaire respondents 90.4 per cent (880) were born in Australia and 9.6 per cent (92) overseas. However, a sizeable proportion, 48.3 per cent, had a mother born overseas and 63.7 per cent had a father born overseas. The details on the girls' countries of

birth are presented in Table 1 and the parental countries of birth are outlined below in Table

2.

Table 1 Non-Australian born distribution: Schoolgirl survey

Country of birth	Number	Per cent
Lebanon	12	14.2
Vietnam	6	6.3
China/Hong Kong/Asian	3	3.2
Italy	2	2.2
Greece	1	1.1
Other English-speaking country	30	32.3
Other NESB country	38	40.9
Total	92	100.0

Table 2 Parents Country of birth: Schoolgirl survey

Mother's country of birth	Nos.	%
Australia	503	51.7
Lebanon	71	7.3
Italy	42	4.3
Vietnam	30	3.1
Croatia	14	1.4
Greece	14	1.4
China/Hong Kong/Asian	5	0.5
Serbia	1	0.1
Other *ES country	186	19.1
Other NESB country	106	10.9
Total	972	100.0

Father's country of birth	Nos.	%
Australia	450	46.3
Italy	82	8.4
Lebanon	78	8.0
Vietnam	30	3.1
Greece	22	2.3
Croatia	18	1.9
China/Hong Kong/Asian	6	0.6
Serbia	3	0.3
Other *ES country	95	9.8
Other NESB country	188	19.3
Total	972	100.0

*= English-speaking

Sports Participation and Experiences

The schoolgirl participants were asked to respond to a series of questions about their current sporting involvement, attitudes to, and experiences of, sports. For the purposes of the survey data interpretation two categories of schoolgirls from non-English-speaking backgrounds were identified; the first grouped data set are girls born overseas in a non-English-speaking country (NESC1) n=92, the second are girls with at least one parent born overseas in a non-English-speaking country (NESC2) n=335 and the third category (ESC) n=545 represents all other girls.

Some 83 per cent of NESC1, 85 per cent of NESC2 and 85 per cent of ESC girls answered that they had participated in sports during the two weeks previous to the study. This data implies a much higher rate of sports participation than has been found in previous research, which has suggested that an estimated 40 per cent of girls are actively participating in sports by the time they reach 15 years of age (Fitzpatrick and Brimage, 1998). The high participation rate reported in the research can be linked to the fact that the majority of respondents completed the questionnaire when in a physical education class and therefore had just participated in a sporting activity. The responses should be viewed within this context. Therefore no conclusions are drawn from these rates of sporting participation in the school environment.

A better indicator of participation in formal sports is activity level in sports outside of school. The sports club system is prominent in Australia for school-aged children. In response to sporting club membership the data show an interesting pattern with very low NESC1 sports participation, significantly higher participation amongst NESC2 girls and significantly higher again for ECS respondents. The data presented in Table 3 indicate that while new migrant arrivals are unlikely to join sports clubs, girls from subsequent generations are more likely to join but to a slightly lesser degree than girls from English-speaking backgrounds.

Table 3 Membership in a sporting club: Schoolgirl survey

Respondents	NESC1 (n=92)	NESC2 (n=335)	ESC (n=545)
Club membership	11.9 % (11)	51.9 % (174)	53.76 % (293)

In assessing the explicit nature of sports participation the data presented in Table 4 indicated that the sports activities most frequently participated in for were similar for all girls but the frequency of participation varied.

Table 4 Sports participation: Schoolgirl survey

Sport	NESC1 <u>M</u>	SD	NESC2 <u>M</u>	SD	ESC <u>M</u>	SD
Netball	2.07	0.88	1.73	0.76	1.22	0.58
Other team sports	2.96	1.12	2.21	1.67	2.30	1.40
Swimming	2.92	1.32	2.84	1.20	2.66	1.22
Racquet sports	2.96	1.14	2.53	1.21	1.97	0.35
Cycling	2.98	0.80	2.64	0.98	1.50	0.80
Athletics	2.33	1.22	2.14	1.02	1.81	0.35
Martial Arts	3.87	1.80	3.01	1.56	3.33	1.40
Dance	3.87	1.75	2.86	0.90	1.50	0.40
Sample size	93		341		566	

Scale: 1= more than once a week; 2=weekly, 3=monthly, 4=a few times a year, 5=never

The girls surveyed were asked why they played sports and Table 5 lists the responses. Since the question was a categoric multiple response the corresponding percentage responses are noted. These showed that each grouping of girls' believed that the 'fun' dimension of sports was most important followed by health and fitness related reasons. Notably 'social aspects' listed by less than half of the respondents. There was a significant difference at the five per cent level between first generation girls from NESB and the other two groupings on every dimension but no significant difference between NESB2 and ESC.

Table 5 Most common reasons indicated for playing sport – Schoolgirl survey

Reason for playing sports	NESC1 %	NESC2 %	ESC %
Fun	100.0	87.7	88.9
Physical/Health	85.8	74.5	75.5
Looking fit	85.8	70.9	71.8
Skill development	55.5	55.8	58.7
Social aspects	38.6	42.5	48.4

Table 6 lists the limitations to sports participation as indicated by the survey respondents. The NESC1 girls indicated a higher level of perceived limitation than the other respondents. The most strongly felt limitations were similar across all groups. A one-way analysis of variance was used to compare the three sample means and the results are noted.

Table 6 Most common limitations to sports participation: Schoolgirl survey

Limitations to sports participation	NESC1 M	SD	NESC2 M	SD	ESC M	SD	Sig
No one to go with	1.92	1.01	2.01	1.07	1.82	1.01	*.006
Time	2.30	1.10	2.26	1.04	2.06	0.92	*.006
Lack of skills	2.01	1.10	1.88	1.00	1.69	0.94	** .005
Family responsibilities	1.95	1.12	1.81	1.03	1.70	0.95	.118
Not enough information	1.86	1.10	1.78	0.98	1.65	0.93	.062
No appropriate programs	1.83	1.16	1.91	2.41	1.62	1.01	.058
No appropriate facilities	1.83	1.22	1.67	1.04	1.54	0.99	*.048
Can't afford	1.73	1.18	1.58	0.96	1.49	0.93	.121
Don't enjoy sports	1.65	1.13	1.73	1.13	1.54	1.01	*.031
Parental restrictions	1.81	1.17	1.71	1.12	1.56	1.12	.086
Co-ed environment	1.61	1.20	1.55	1.21	1.54	1.10	.062
Racist attitudes	1.78	1.31	1.58	1.52	1.39	1.02	*.025
Language	1.85	1.41	1.65	1.35	1.47	1.19	*.029
Cultural difference	1.61	1.20	1.55	1.21	1.41	1.10	.138
Religion	1.68	1.29	1.62	1.30	1.48	1.19	.169

Scale= 1. always, 2.frequently, 3.sometimes, 4. seldom, 5.never

There were significant intergroup differences for seven of the items. The most striking finding was in relation to perceived lack of skills with girls born in non-English-speaking countries finding it significantly more limiting than other girls. 'No one to go with' and time limitations were also very significant. As would be expected language and racist attitudes were also significantly different between groups. It is interesting to note that the girls born in English-speaking countries found cultural

differences more limiting than girls born in non-English-speaking countries. Birthplace differences within the former group could be not tested due to small cell size.

The survey findings reinforced existing assumptions about low levels of female minority group involvement in formal sporting organisations outside of schools, reasons for playing sports and perceived limitations to sports participation. The data highlighted a number of issues about sports that were then explored in further detail in the interviews.

Survey of netball players

The second stage in the data collection process involved the implementation of a questionnaire survey of netball participants. The questionnaire was designed to gather base-line data and information about current netball participants. Netball NSW was approached to gain permission to contact their associated clubs about participating in the study. The Association approved the application and sent a letter to three district associations requesting permission to survey their members. The three associations chosen were located in corresponding areas to the schoolgirl study.

Table 7: Netball Survey Respondent Profile

Place of birth	under 18 yrs	18-24 yrs	25-34 yrs	35-44 yrs	45-54 yrs	55+ yrs	Total
Australia	114	85	78	46	5	1	329
Britain/Ireland	1	0	3	3	0	0	7
Other ES country	4	7	7	2	0	0	20
Europe	2	2	5	1	0	0	10
Asia	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
South America	0	1	1	0	0	0	2
Other NES country	0	0	3	0	0	0	3
Total	122	95	97	52	5	1	372

The netball players who completed the questionnaire were primarily young women, with a more than half (55.5 per cent) under 24 years of age. Despite this relative young cohort, the mean length of time that netball each player had been playing was 10.8 years (SD 8.2). Some 83 per cent of netball respondents were born in Australia. Of the 17 per cent who were not born in Australia, seven per cent were born in an English-speaking country and 10 per cent in a non-English-speaking country.

The respondent sample was too small for analysis by each country of birth so the distinction used in the following discussion refers to all player-respondents from non-English-speaking backgrounds by birth or by parents' birthplace (first and second generation respectively).

Survey findings

The questionnaire requested the respondents to nominate the reasons why they played netball, the perceived benefits and limitations. Motivations and influences on the decision to play netball were school (40% - ESC) and (39%- NESC) and friends (30%- ESC) and (46%- NESC) the relationship between the two groups was significant at the five per cent level (Chi square 10.40, 2 DF).

In response to the questions about why they continue to play netball, all of the players clearly indicated that they found the sport fun and valued the physical benefits associated with playing. The respondents from non-English-speaking backgrounds placed more emphasis on fun and physical benefits as outlined in Table 8. Social benefits were perceived as less important for respondents from non-English-speaking backgrounds than for other respondents.

Table 8 Reasons given for playing netball: Netball survey

	% of ESC players (n=296)	% NESB players (n=76)
Fun	80.2	90.3
Physical benefits	73.1	60.4
Social aspects	54.3	44.9
Competition	54.6	48.7
Skill development	35.3	26.2

Players from non-English-speaking backgrounds nominated ‘friends’ as the main influence on their decision to play netball. The other players listed ‘school’ as the most common reason for their decision. The influence of parents was important for respondents from English-speaking backgrounds. The data show that only 18.2 per cent of players from non-English-speaking backgrounds had mothers who played netball, while 35.2 per cent of other players had mothers who played netball. Of the 18.2 per cent all were second generation migrants. Of those respondents whose mothers had played netball a substantial 67.5 per cent chose ‘parents’ as the main reason they started the sport. Family history clearly had an influence on the decision to play netball. This finding might also be related to the fact that since netball is primarily played in Commonwealth countries with women and girls born in such countries having a greater likelihood of having parents that are familiar with the game.

In response to the questions about why they continue to play netball, all of the players clearly indicated that they found the sport fun and valued the physical benefits associated with playing. The respondents from non-English-speaking backgrounds placed more emphasis on fun (90%) than English-speaking background respondents (80%). Social benefits were perceived as less important for respondents from non-English-speaking backgrounds (45%) than for other respondents (54%).

Respondents were asked to rank perceived limitations to netball participation. The findings were that respondents from non-English-speaking backgrounds indicated similar limitations to other players. To compare the means an independent samples t-test was used and no significance was found at 0.05 level on any of the dimensions. This is not overly surprising given that the women interviewed were those who were playing netball and not those who had found the limitations to playing too significant to join the competition.

In summary, the survey of netball players established that women from non-English-speaking backgrounds were proportionately under-represented in the competitions surveyed. Participation rates were particularly low amongst first generation players but increased for second generation players. Friends and school influences impacted significantly on the players' decision to join a netball team. Their reasons for continuing to play netball were primarily social. Culturally-based constraints were not identified a major limitation for the women from non-English-speaking backgrounds. However, this is not to say that cultural constraints were minimal, as the women who have chosen not to play netball were not represented in this survey of players. The survey served to reinforce what is already known about sport participation rates for females from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Comments and Conclusion

In the first instance the survey findings revealed that for all participants, regardless of cultural background, social reasons for playing netball were more important than psychological reasons. Girls played to have fun and be with their friends. This finding

is consistent with previous research on women in sports. For example, Deem (1990) Leaman and Carrington, (1985) Henderson and Bialeschki, (1994) have all concluded that social and fun aspects of participation are of significant importance to women.

While a lower proportion of girls from culturally diverse backgrounds played netball, it was consistently identified as having a lowest level of perceived limitation. It is argued here that this minimum level of limitation attached to netball participation indicates that netball could be classified as an ‘allowable’ sport (Eitzen, 1996). This is a sport that women can play and still retain their femininity; a sport which does not require body contact with opponents or unacceptable overexertion and does not call into question the sexuality of the participant. Netball is perceived as a safe space for women to express their sporting selves and therefore provides for a ‘compliant femininity’. It allows for individual expressions of femininity and women players do not appear to be in conflict with the masculine tag that is attached to many male dominated sports. The low levels of perceived constraint could also be related the level of skill and athletic ability required to play netball. The promotional material designed for netball pointedly stresses that all levels of ability are catered for (Duncan, 1994) and this certainly can be translated into the findings of the survey as ‘lack of skills’ was not perceived as a significant constraint.

The low level of involvement of girls and women from culturally diverse backgrounds in netball is reflective of national studies on levels of participation in physical activity (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001). The lower level of involvement can be partially attributed to the finding that family history and influence was a significant factor in a girl’s choice to play or not to play a particular sport. That is, girls whose

mothers had played netball were more likely to play netball than other girls. As many girls from culturally diverse backgrounds did not have a history of netball being played within the family they were consequently not as likely to take up netball. In other studies the absence of minority female role models has been identified as a contributor to low participation of marginalised women in sports (Acosta, 1993; Glanvill, 1995; Harris, 1997; Lirgg, 1992). In netball there are very few role models for the girls from marginalised ethnic groups to emulate. However, the lack of role models for women from the same cultural background was not in itself perceived as a significant deterrent to involvement.

In the interest of equity sports organisations should aim to go beyond stereotypes and find out what the women's needs and requirements are and aim to address these accordingly. In the interest of economic survival it is imperative that sports organisations become gender and culturally inclusive and address the opportunities and challenges that this brings. It is evident that it is the way in which sports 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 family friendly environments, flexibility in the clothing worn, or interpreter services, will assist in meeting women's needs. However, these initiatives need to be more than isolated attempts to deal with the issue that ignore the entrenched systemic concerns identified by this research. Women should not have to subvert their identity to enjoy the benefits of sports participation. Ideally, sports provision should provide a model of inclusion and acceptance across religious, racial, gender and other social groupings that have significance in the wider community.

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