



Fitness Australia submission to the Senate inquiry into Women in Sport and Recreation in Australia

About Fitness Australia

Fitness Australia is the national peak industry body for the fitness industry in Australia. It is a not-for-profit, membership-based association, incorporated in 2002.

The membership of Fitness Australia consists of eight (8) State and Territory Member Associations who have a client base of around 500 business members and 14,000 registered fitness professionals across Australia.

Business members include fitness centre owners and managers from small to medium sized business and personal training studios through to large, multi-national businesses and franchises. Associate business members are businesses that are closely aligned with the fitness industry, such as equipment and apparel suppliers, training service providers, software suppliers, and providers of business support services.

Registered fitness professionals are those that have successfully attained the recognised qualifications, have registered with Fitness Australia and are generally employed or contracted by fitness businesses or are self-employed within the fitness industry.

Health benefits provided by participation in fitness activities

The fitness industry has been represented by Fitness Australia at a number of obesity forums including on the National Obesity Taskforce and is well informed about the serious public health issue of the increasing rate of overweight and obesity among Australian adults and children. Australia's combined rate of overweight and obesity is 45% for women and is more prevalent among women in lower socio-economic groups and those living in remote areas. Young women are gaining weight faster than any other group.

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The health benefits of regular exercise are well documented and the fitness industry is well placed to deliver a range of services to improve the health and fitness of women in the community in a safe and effective manner.

The fitness industry in Australia consists of around 1,400 fitness and health clubs providing services to almost 2 million people. There is strong growth within the industry particularly in relation to the emergence of small personal training studios and mobile fitness businesses. The industry has made a significant investment in facilities, equipment and qualified personnel in order to deliver a range of services to improve the health of the community.

Health benefits are derived from both cardiovascular / aerobic fitness activities as well as resistance training to improve strength, balance, muscle tone and bone density. This type of training is particularly important to women as they age.

Participation of women in fitness activities

It is estimated that around 55% of fitness centre clients are female which equates to around 900,000 women in Australia. The industry employs around 70,000 people, of which it is estimated that at least 50% are female. Most fitness centres provide special services for women, including women-only training areas and several businesses now cater exclusively to female clients.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the main barriers to participation in fitness activities by women are lack of time, family commitments and socio-economic issues. The fitness industry has demonstrated responsiveness to these issues through a variety of strategies including 'family memberships', personal training services and extended hours of operation.

The industry has the potential to engage with a much larger number of women to participate in regular fitness activities. Unfortunately the industry is somewhat constrained by a number of issues that may impact on participation levels amongst women. These include the following:

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- *Economic constraints*

Fitness centre membership fees are generally kept to a minimum through effective cost control. However the large investment in infrastructure, equipment and qualified personnel within the industry mean that the costs of running a fitness business are substantial. Any substantial increase in cost to the industry could result in increases being applied to membership fees which would result in a further barrier to participation.

For example, increases and proposed increases in music industry licensing fees by PPCA and APRA. The magnitude of the increases currently proposed by PPCA (>3,000%) would be very damaging for the fitness industry and could result in higher membership fees or outright removal of group exercise classes to music in some centres. This in turn would have a negative effect on female participation in fitness activities as this is a very popular form of exercise for women.

- *Lack of economic incentives to exercise*

The removal of private health fund rebates for gym memberships has removed an effective economic incentive for women to participate in fitness activities and improve their health and wellbeing.

In terms of women in the workforce, Fringe Benefits Tax (FBT) rebates on fitness centre memberships supplied to employees by the employer as part of a salary packaging arrangement would provide another economic incentive to increase the level of participation of women in fitness activities.

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