

Network of Immigrant & Refugee Women Australia Inc.



Hon. Tanya Plibersek, MP
Minister for the Status of Women

Dear Minister Plibersek,

RE: The role of Sport for Young Immigrant and Refugee Women.

The Network of Immigrant and Refugee Women of Australia (NIRWA) welcomes the opportunity to submit a report on the above mentioned issue.

The NIRWA is an independent body that seeks to advocate for immigrant and refugee women at the national level by working to achieve cultural, social, economic, educational and gender equality for immigrant and refugee women living in Australia.

Our report identifies the benefits of sport for immigrant and refugee women, barriers to participation, key issues affecting immigrant and refugee women in sport and recommendations for the Government to help make sport more accessible to these women.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank you for taking the time out to meet with us to discuss the report. If you have any queries please feel free to contact Kiemi Lai on (03) 9680 6182 or Melissa Rudez on (08) 9492 9726.

Yours sincerely,

Kiemi Lai & Melissa Rudez

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Scope of Submission

The NIRWA's submission in relation to the role of sport for immigrant and refugee women and our recommendations for the Government to make it more accessible are dealt within the context of the 2008 Australian Government direction paper "Australian Sport: Emerging Challenges, New Directions", the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Independent Sport Panel established in August 2008 by the Minister for Sport to examine sport structures and challenges at both the elite and grassroots levels and the Australian Government's new National Women's Health Policy consultation discussion paper 2009.

Australian Government report "Australian Sport: Emerging Challenges, New Directions"

The recommendations provided in this submission is consistent with the 2008 Australian Government paper "Australian Sport: Emerging Challenges, New Directions", in particular its edict to improve the status of women in sport and to take "real and practical steps to tackle the underrepresentation of women in sport". The Rudd Government promises to act upon the issues identified by the 2006 Senate Committee Report on Women in Sport and Recreation in Australia. However, the specific needs of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) women are not addressed in either the 2006 or 2008 reports.

United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)

Article 13 of CEDAW expressly calls for State parties to take appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in areas of economic and social life in order to ensure, on the basis of equality between women and men, the same rights, including the right to participate in **recreational activities, sports** and all aspects of cultural life.¹

As a signatory to CEDAW, Australia should uphold its commitment to take all appropriate measures, including introducing legislation and temporary special measures, for women to enjoy all their human rights and fundamental freedoms in the context of sport and physical activity.

¹ United Nations (1979), *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*. Adopted by the General Assembly on 18 October 1979, New York



Independent Sport Panel

This report is consistent with the Independent Sport Panel's focus to "identify and recommend opportunities to break down barriers to participation at junior, adult and senior ages with a view to making it simpler and easier for Australians to participate in the sport or physical activity of their choice, including for women, the disabled and Indigenous people."² However, there is a noticeable lack of representation on issues affecting immigrant and refugee women (as opposed to separate CALD and female sub-populations) in the submissions, selected panelists and terms of reference.

New National Women's Health Policy consultation discussion paper

The new National Women's Health Policy aims to improve the health and wellbeing of all women in Australia, especially those with the highest risk of poor health and promote health equity among women.³ We believe that immigrant and refugee women fit into the category of women with the highest risk of poor health and that participation in sport and physical activity has a large role to play in the new National Women's Health Policy.

Recommendations

One size DOES NOT fit all when it comes to women's participation in sport

- **Recommendation 1:** The unique needs and challenges of engaging immigrant and refugee women in sport be recognised and acknowledged in the Government's reform of the Australian sports system.
- **Recommendation 2:** Further funding into research into the ethnic relations and sport participation patterns and experiences among various immigrant and refugee groups is needed, in particular in relation to women.
- **Recommendation 3:** Affirmative action to provide more opportunities for immigrant and refugee women to participate in grassroots sporting activities is required by all levels of Government through state and territory sport and recreation authorities to address the low participation rates in sport and physical activity by immigrant and refugee women.

² Australian Government (2008) *Independent Sport Panel*, www.sportpanel.org.au

³ Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing (2009), *Development of a New National Women's Health Policy Consultation Discussion Paper*



- **Recommendation 4:** Increase the role of secondary schools to provide opportunities for immigrant and refugee adolescent girls to participate in sport, as cultural expectations increases the pressure for them to not actively participate in sport.
- **Recommendation 5:** Provide incentives and support for National Sports Organisations (NSOs) to develop cultural diversity frameworks and strategies to actively increase the rates of participation in their sports by immigrant and refugee women, including supporting women-only sessions and programs at leisure centres as well as through mainstream sports clubs and associations.
- **Recommendation 6:** Provide sporting opportunities through CALD play groups and/or mothers groups, taking into consideration the importance of occasional childcare in immigrant and refugee women's participation in sport and recreation.

The need for congruence between sport participation and women's health

- **Recommendation 7:** Government initiatives to support policies, research and programs which addresses the congruence between sport participation and women's health.
- **Recommendation 8:** Promote the role of sport and improved physical and mental health in achieving broader settlement goals for immigrant and refugee women, such as gaining empowerment, literacy, employment, education and social skills.
- **Recommendation 9:** Health education campaign to immigrant and refugee women reinforcing the health and social benefits of sport participation rather than competition.
- **Recommendation 10:** Recognise the importance of organised and informal physical recreation activities as well as organised sports to the health and social benefits to women. Provide funding not just for organised sport but non-organised sport and physical activities, such as walking and cycling groups, and new programs which change traditional concepts of 'sport' and 'women in sport' and promotes lifetime sport participation emphasising health and skill development.
- **Recommendation 11:** Use sport as a platform to address the issue of personal safety for women eg. Female friendly sporting facilities and greater support for programs targeting prevention of harassment and abuse, both sexual and racial, at the grassroots sport level, including support to leisure centres and facilities.
- **Recommendation 12:** Targeted funding and partnership relationships between women's health agencies, NSOs, cultural organisations, leisure centres and settlement and migrant agencies to



enhance the capacity of organisations to effectively support the involvement of immigrant and refugee women in sport by promoting the role of sport in health.

The need for more role models and women in leadership positions

- **Recommendation 13:** Provide opportunities through funding and programs to develop the capacity of women in local areas to take an active role in the promotion of women's sport, especially through sports leadership initiatives, eg. Establishing CALD peer support and peer education sports programs.
- **Recommendation 14:** Sporting organisations target immigrant and refugee women for leadership positions, eg. Board members, coaches and officials.
- **Recommendation 15:** Policies be developed to make diversity in sport visible, eg. By publicly promoting the cultural diversity of women in sport.
- **Recommendation 16:** A peak body for CALD women in sport is implemented to help identify and promote CALD female role models and leaders in sport.
- **Recommendation 17:** The Australian Sports Commission recognises immigrant and refugee women as a priority market for community sport and active recreation with funding allocated to promote opportunities for newly arrived communities.
- **Recommendation 18:** The CALD women category under the Australian Government's Sport Leadership Grants for Women to be reinstated.

Impact on Women

Sport is an integral part of Australia's social and cultural identity. There are a range of physical, mental, social and psychological benefits related to participation in sport and physical activity, along with positive effects for communities.

Sport presents a valuable opportunity to strengthen community cohesion, increase community engagement and neutralise feelings of alienation and marginalisation that may be experienced by immigrant and refugee women. It can be an integral tool for empowerment through the skills and values learnt, such as team work, negotiation, leadership, respect and communication.

Immigrant and refugee women stand to gain further benefits from participation in sport and physical activity, such as:

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- Managing weight for those affected by migration-related changes in diet;
- Develop a sense of identity and have increased self esteem and self confidence in their new country;
- Recovery from torture and trauma affecting refugee women in particular (eg. Through improving mental health and wellbeing, decreasing stress levels and enhancing sleep);
- Facilitate social interaction for socially isolated women, including facilitating English language acquisition and friendships;
- Promote ethnic and cultural harmony through mixing with people from other cultures;
- For youth aged girls in particular, provide an avenue for social diversion and eliminate the likelihood of engaging in risk taking behaviours;
- Provide employment and volunteering opportunities, for example through coaching and officiating; and
- Providing a forum for receiving education and information on sexuality and health.

In March 2009 Ms Carolyn Hannan, Director of the UN Division of the Advancement of Women emphasised the potential for sport to achieve equality, freedom and empowerment for women, as well as to challenge gender stereotypes, for example by informing men and boys of gender equality.

However, Ms Hannan also noted the “persistent unequal access of participation in sports,” despite some positive developments in recent years.⁴ Those who stand to benefit most from increased levels of participation in sport and physical activity are the most underrepresented and least resourced.

Immigrant and Refugee Women’s Participation in Sport

Despite the proven benefits of sport and physical activity, immigrant and refugee women remain appallingly underrepresented in the sector. The facts relating to immigrant and refugee women's lack of participation in sport is clear:

- Women from CALD backgrounds make up around 16 per cent of the total Australian population;⁵

⁴ Hannon, Carolyn (2009), *53rd Session on the Commission on the Status of Women*, Monday 2 March 2009, United Nations Headquarters, New York

⁵ Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing (2009), *Development of a New National Women’s Health Policy Consultation Discussion Paper*

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- Women born in countries other than the main English speaking countries are less likely to participate in sport and recreation than Australian born women, especially if they are not proficient in spoken English (ABS, 2006); and
- Women born in North Africa or Middle Eastern countries are least likely to participate. Only one in five of these women, compared to three in five Australian born women participate in sport and recreation (ABS 2006:10).

There are a diversity of factors that contribute to the lower levels of participation by CALD women in sport and active recreation. These can be categorised as:

- Cultural and religious issues, such as customs, cultural practices and family commitments;
- Social relationships including the lack of social support and the prevalence of isolation;
- Socioeconomic factors, such as low education and literacy levels, financial pressures and budgeting issues;
- Environmental barriers including a fear of one's safety, inappropriate facilities and clothing requirements; and
- Perceptions of health are not a priority in some communities⁶.

Sport is traditionally and culturally the domain of men. In particular when dealing with issues affecting the participation of CALD communities in sport, too often immigrant and refugee women are neglected. For example, sport is a popular vehicle amongst sport organisations, ethnic groups and settlement services to address integration and social inclusion for youth aged males in particular, but rarely for youth aged females and even less for women at greatest risk of social isolation and health inequalities such as newly arrived immigrant and refugee young mothers.

Immigrant and refugee women, in particular visible minorities, face the double jeopardy of sex and ethnicity. Not only are immigrant and refugees more likely to lack the access to the social, geographic and economic resources

⁶ Division for the Advancement of Women of the United Nations Secretariat (2007), *Women, gender equality and sport*.



for good health and wellbeing, including access to sport and physical recreation⁷, immigrant and refugee women have lower levels of English proficiency than their male counterparts.⁸ Furthermore women and girls in general are often faced with additional challenges associated with participation in sport and physical activity, such as poor media exposure of women in sport leading to less profile, exposure, sponsorship, remuneration opportunities and financial support.

Key Issues Affecting Immigrant and Refugee Women in Sport

Sport participation rates among women and girls will not continue to increase automatically. Sports administrators are currently leaving inclusion to occur through chance rather than any direct planning.⁹

Participation needs to be nurtured and developed through continued support, encouragement and affirmative action policies, such as **Title IX of the Educational Amendments (1972)** in the United States, which mandates equal opportunity in all programs in any organisation receiving federal money and **Women in Sport: A Sport Canada Policy (1986)**, which not only sets out the official goal of equality of opportunity for women at all levels of sport in Canada but calls for specific action-oriented programs to achieve this goal.¹⁰

1) One size DOES NOT fit all when it comes to women's participation in sport

Women born outside the main English speaking countries are less likely than other women to take part in organised or non-organised sport and those not proficient in English have even lower levels of involvement (ABS, 2006). Hence a one size fits all approach to women's participation in sport is unrealistic and unachievable if we are to attain full gender equality and raise the participation rates of immigrant and refugee women in sport. In 2006, the rate of sports participation in Australia of women born in main English speaking countries (66.5%) was almost double that of women born outside the main English speaking countries (34.7%).¹¹

⁷ VicHealth (2008), *Burden of disease due to health inequalities*

⁸ Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing (2009), *Development of a New National Women's Health Policy Consultation Discussion Paper*

⁹ Cortis N, Sawrikar P & Muir K (2007), *Participation in Sport and Recreation by Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Women*, Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales, p. 14.

¹⁰ Coakley, JJ (1998), *Sport in Society: Issues & Controversies*, 6th Ed, McGraw-Hill, p 212.

¹¹ ABS (2006b:10) *Migrants and Participation in Sport and Physical Activity*

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We believe that lack of participation does not necessarily signify disinterest but rather a lack of opportunities and support.

Currently research, data and policies capture women as one whole sub-population but few address the issues relating to immigrant and refugee women. Indigenous women's issues and data are often captured, but not immigrant and refugee women. This was highlighted by the 2006 Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA) report into the participation in sport and recreation by CALD women, which found that "the perception of sport as a 'level playing field' is pervasive, and supporting cultural diversity is not currently considered a high priority by National Sporting Organisations (NSOs). With the exception of Indigenous Australians, NSOs tend to promote their sports to the mainstream rather than particular cultural groups, and do not tend to monitor the cultural backgrounds or characteristics of participants."¹²

There are many myths relating to immigrant and refugee women's participation in sport that still needs to be debunked. For example, there is a common misconception that CALD women do not participate in sport because they are either 'just not the sporty type' (ie. Disinterested in sport) or culturally are not allowed to participate. These misconceptions and stereotypes place immigrant and refugee women in a cycle of non-participation in sport. By being stereotyped as being 'not very sporty' or disinterested in sport, sporting organisations and service providers do not give priority to increasing the participation of CALD women in sport (especially in comparison to their CALD male counterparts). Yet if CALD women are not given the opportunity to participate in sport, they will never learn the skills or have the opportunity to attain the self esteem, confidence and interpersonal networks to actively participate in sport that can be gained from participating in sport!

The barriers women face to participate in sport and physical activity are well documented, for example, lack of accessible childcare, inflexibility of organised sports times, lack of safe and accessible facilities. Immigrant and refugee women have the added barriers relating to culture such as language proficiency and cultural notions of gender roles and expectations (eg. In relation to the family and the household), female physicality and dress clashing with the norms and requirements of sporting organisations and the overall low priority and value given to sports participation by immigrant and refugee communities.¹³

Culturally embedded gender roles underpin an unequal distribution of family responsibilities. There is an unequal burden of childcare and household responsibilities that restricts immigrant and refugee women's participation in sport, especially during adolescence and motherhood (ie. During adolescence more cultural

¹² Cortis N, et al, (2007)

¹³ Op Cit, p.9

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emphasis is placed on developing 'women's skills' like cooking and playing sport becomes even less of a priority as compared with pre-pubescent girls).¹⁴

Language is another reason why the Government cannot take a one size fits all approach to women's participation in sport. Language proficiency is a key factor in women being able to find out about, access and participate in sport and recreation activities, and poor English skills can leave women socially isolated and misinformed.¹⁵

A social justice framework needs to be applied when addressing immigrant and refugee women's participation in sport. The application of the same rules to unequal groups can generate unequal results. Hence **affirmative action is required to address the low participation rates in sport and physical activity by immigrant and refugee women.**

2) The need for congruence between sport participation and women's health

Key facts relating to women's health and participation in sport:¹⁶

- Women have higher rates than men of insufficient exercise and being sedentary;
- Two in five Victorian women are overweight or obese;
- Women are more likely to report poorer mental health than men;
- Women are more likely to be diagnosed with depression, anxiety, eating disorders and borderline personality disorder; and
- Only 53% of 14 year old girls and 30% of women over 65 participate in organised sport.¹⁷

Immigrant and refugees are faced with further health challenges such as¹⁸:

¹⁴ Op Cit, p.46

¹⁵ Op Cit, p 47

¹⁶ Victorian Government Department of Human Services (2009), *Victorian Women's Health and Wellbeing Strategy Stage Two: 2006-2010, Action Plan 2009-2010*, p.13

¹⁷ Australian Government (2008), *Australian Sport: Emerging Challenges, New Directions*

¹⁸ Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing (2009), *Development of a New National Women's Health Policy Consultation Discussion Paper*

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- The adoption of Western diets and lifestyles and changed environments can accelerate the development of chronic diseases and conditions in some migrant and refugee groups;¹⁹
- Refugees often have little or no family support; and
- Mental health issues arising from post traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression;

The Rudd Government has already decreed that “sport is an integral part of its preventative health agenda”²⁰ and we support the shift of Sport into the Health portfolio by the Government. Yet, at the grassroots level the topics of Sport and Health continue to be incorrectly addressed as separate agendas.

Sport has a large role to play in addressing two of the three priority areas for action identified by the Victorian Women’s Health and Wellbeing Strategy (2009)²¹ – mental health and wellbeing and social connectedness.

In relation to mental health and wellbeing, sport has the capacity to play a role in recovery from torture and trauma and in developing positive life skills through increased self esteem, coping skills and physical capacity to achieve greater self actualisation and independence.

In relation to social connectedness, women who participate in sports teams and clubs will have increased capacity to cope and care for themselves and strengthen social connections.

As well as addressing mental health and social connectedness priorities, sport and physical recreation is a well documented avenue of encouraging improved physical health and managing chronic diseases such as obesity and type 2 diabetes.

We believe that sport and physical recreation should be viewed as a conduit for a confident and healthy women’s population and **recommend that the Government provide greater support for policies, research and programs which addresses the congruence between sports participation and immigrant and refugee women’s health.**

¹⁹ Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing (2009), *Development of a New National Women’s Health Policy Consultation Discussion Paper*

²⁰ Op Cit.

²¹ Victorian Government Department of Human Services (2009), *Victorian Women’s Health and Wellbeing Strategy State Two: 2006-2010, Action Plan 2009-2010*



3) The need for more role models and women in leadership positions

Women have been and continue to be underrepresented in positions of leadership in sport eg. Governance, administration, coaching and officiating. Whilst participation levels are increasing, there is still a very significant gap in their representation in leadership roles.²²

In the media, value placed on women's sport is often lower and very much underrepresented. It is often presented in a different style that reflects and reinforces gender stereotypes. Promoting and documenting the success of women in the world of sport is an important step in raising awareness and providing encouragement and support to other aspiring leaders. Women in leadership and decision making positions act as mentors and role models that encourage more women to participate.²³

The need for culturally appropriate female role models in sport is particularly important for immigrant and refugee women as, traditionally these women are not actively involved in sport. Women are assigned the responsibility of child-rearing and little importance is given to activities out of the home. **Identifying immigrant and refugee women as role models in sport can alleviate some of the cultural stereotypes and provide a pathway to encourage more women to be active.**

Summary

NIRWA genuinely believes that participation in sport can enrich, enhance and develop immigrant and refugee women's lives. This submission reinforces the proven research supporting the physical and social benefits of participation in sport and active recreation for women and girls. However, sport can also play a further role for immigrant and refugee women as it provides a platform for community development, social cohesion and achieving gender equality in both public and private spheres.

Despite the proven benefits of sport and physical recreation, immigrant and refugee women remain appallingly underrepresented and there is much more that can be done at all levels of government to better promote and expand the opportunities for immigrant and refugee women to participate in sport and physical recreation activities, and in turn improve their health and wellbeing.

²² Oldenhove.H (2009), *Women and Leadership – A Discussion Paper*, www.wswest.asn.au

²³ Division for the Advancement of Women of the United Nations Secretariat (2007), *Women, gender equality and sport*.

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However, it should be noted that initiatives to increase sport and physical activity can only produce positive outcomes for immigrant and refugee women in the context of a society that is committed to the principles of achieving gender equality and the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.

NIRWA hopes the Ministers for Women, Sport, Health and Ageing will consider our recommendation for reform in its deliberations, and we would welcome the opportunity to discuss this issue further with the Ministers, should the opportunity arise.

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