



# The myth of a 'fair go': Barriers to sport and recreational participation among Indian and other ethnic minority women in Australia

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## ABSTRACT

The latest national data shows that ethnic minority women in Australia have the lowest rates of sport and recreational participation, raising doubt about whether everyone has “a fair go” to participate. This article explores the types of barriers perceived or experienced by Indian women in Sydney, compared to a larger group of culturally and linguistically diverse women across Australia. Support was found for socio-cultural, access, resource and interpersonal constraints. Moreover, it appears that Indian and other ethnic minority women generally perceive *access* to sport as equal, but not necessarily the *opportunity* to participate, indicating a level of social exclusion. The researchers suggest that promoting an image of cultural diversity in the institution of sport can significantly stimulate the interest and participation of Indian and other migrant women. This may not only benefit their personal health and wellbeing, but it may also increase their sense of social inclusion in sport (and) in Australia.

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## 1. Introduction

Sport and recreation are key leisure activities in Australia and integral components of national culture and social life. Indeed, sport “has been loftily described as the national obsession of Australians” (Taylor & Toohey, 1998a,b), and arguably forms part of the stereotyped national identity; to be Australian is to be “sporty”. In addition, sport in Australia is widely considered to be a ‘level playing field’ (Kell, 2000), where all people, regardless of their age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or disability for example, have *equal access and opportunity* to participate.

However, the most recent national data shows that large discrepancies in regards to participation in sport and recreation occur across different groups in the Australian community. The figures in Table 1 indicate that women participate less than men, and people from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) participate less than their English-speaking counterparts. The discrepancies are considerably stark when the rates are examined by both gender and region of birth.

As Table 1 shows, women from Southern and Central Asia have particularly low participation rates. While almost two-thirds of Anglo-Saxon women participate in sport and recreation (64.7%), only 43.6% of women from this region, of whom Indian women are likely to form the largest proportion, participate.

Given that Australia has firmly established itself as a multicultural nation, with 24% of its population born in non-English speaking countries (ABS, 2007, 1301.0), it is important to explore why this cultural diversity is not emulated in national rates of participation. Indeed, sporting and leisure organisations and associations could be missing out on a large group of people

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**Table 1**

Participation in sport and physical activity by sex and region of birth, Australia (2002).

Region of birth	Males (%)	Females (%)
North-West Europe	69.8	64.7
Australia	68.5	63.6
Oceania and Antarctica	69.1	63.6
Sub-Saharan Africa	72	60
Americas	67.5	56
North-East Asia	68.8	53.5
South-East Asia	61.1	52.3
Southern and Central Asia <sup>a</sup>	63	43.6
Southern and Eastern Europe	44.1	40.7
North Africa and the Middle East	42.7	19.5

Source: Migrants and participation in sport and physical activity (ABS 2006b, p. 10).

<sup>a</sup> Countries that comprise Southern Asia include India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal; countries included in Central Asia are Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan (ABS 1249.0). Data from the ABS report, 'Migrants and Participation in Sport and Physical Activity' (ABS 2006b, p. 10) does not provide information on the proportion of women from each of these countries. However, given that India is the only country from the Southern and Central Asia region that is in the top ten country of birth list of overseas-born Australian residents (ABS, 2007, 3101.0), we infer that they are likely to comprise the largest group in these results. The 43.6% rate of participation for women from this region has been used as a proxy of participation for Indian women here.

who could increase their membership and add to the cultural richness of their organisations. Moreover, increasing participation among people from non-English speaking backgrounds may also assist in improving social inclusion more generally, as well as the health and wellbeing of individuals (Collins & Kay, 2003; Cortis, Sawrikar, & Muir, 2008).

The lower rate of participation is likely to be attributable to a number of factors, and which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For example, it could reflect cultural differences in a value for participation in sport and recreation, or it could reflect measurement issues in the way "participation" is defined. However, it could also reflect institutional, or broader social barriers that inhibit or prevent migrant women from participating. If the latter is the case, then social exclusion is occurring. That is, ethnic minority women have lower levels of participation because of factors beyond their control, and not because they do not value participation per se (Burchardt, 2000). This challenges the myth that sport in Australia is a level playing field to which all people have a "fair go".

Indian women have been selected for this study because Indian-born Australians form one of Australia's largest minority groups (ABS, 2007, 3101.0). Currently, there is no known research about the experiences of Indian women's participation in sport and recreation in Australia. However, this is demonstrative of a broader issue in the current knowledge base on gender and ethnicity issues in sport and recreational participation.

Research into the barriers NESB women face to sport and recreational participation is not extensive and has only recently received empirical and theoretical attention (Taylor, 2004). As Stoddart (2006) has pointed out "the role of sport in ethnic communities . . . in Australia is almost untouched by investigation" (p. 753). As it is, research about women in sport has been criticised for developing relatively slowly, let alone moving beyond the overwhelming focus of those born in Australia or Britain (Taylor & Toohey, 1997). Thus, the tendency for gender and ethnicity to be analysed separately (Burdsey, 2006; Hanson, 2005; Scraton, Caudwell, & Holland, 2005) has left gaps in knowledge about the nexus between gender and ethnicity in sport and recreation (Taylor, 2004).

Also, much of the research which has examined and explored issues for NESB groups, does so generally; grouping together the experiences of several ethnic minority groups with the effect of homogenising their needs and challenges (Hanson, 2005). While Taylor and Toohey (1998a,b) have done some sound research into the issues faced by *specific* NESB groups in Australia, there is little understanding of how the experiences of women from a particular ethnic minority group may reflect the experiences of women in the broader NESB community in Australia.

Finally, most of the research in this area is from overseas, especially the UK (e.g. Carrington, Chivers, & Williams, 1987; Scraton et al., 2005), USA (e.g. Hanson, 2005), Canada (e.g. Choudry, 1998), and Norway (e.g. Walseth, 2006). The research in Australia can only be said to be nascent (e.g. Taylor, 2004; Taylor & Toohey, 1998a,b). This article will contribute to the national (and international) literature on Indian women's lower participation in sport in Australia, the nexus between gender and ethnicity, and on the cross-cultural comparative experience of ethnic minority women in Australia.

More importantly, if participation in organised or formal sport is going to increase for Indian-born women in Australia, and other ethnic minority women, it is important to understand perceived and experienced barriers and to determine how some of these barriers could be addressed. Therefore, this article aims to understand why participation rates are lower for Indian women; to determine the perceived or experienced barriers that Indian women may face and how these compare to other ethnic minority women living in Australia; and, finally, to outline how some of these barriers could be overcome to support the inclusion of Indian women and other ethnic minority women who face similar barriers. By addressing these aims, the article will inform the development of policies and practices aimed at increasing the participation of ethnic minority women in organised or formal sport and recreation. This will assist to ensure that a "fair go" means real social inclusion; that is, policies and practices address not only the right to access sport, but also other barriers that might currently preclude people's *opportunity* to participate.

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