

GSO 2/10

# ASIAN WOMEN AND SPORT





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## INTRODUCTION

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The Sports Council, with its motto 'Sport for All', seeks to facilitate opportunities for participation in sport.

To achieve such a goal, it is always necessary to identify the consumers and their needs.

In 1988, the West Midlands Council for Sport and Recreation produced a topic study identifying the needs of women in sport.

This paper seeks to present sports providers with a clearer understanding of the needs of 'Asian' women and to present guidelines to underpin the philosophy and practice of those who believe in community recreation.

***N.B. 'Asian' is used to denote people whose origin is from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh or Sri Lanka.***

The Sports Council (West Midlands) wishes to thank people from 'Asian' communities for reading, commenting on and correcting this paper in its production, and recognises the unique contribution made by Scott Fleming, research student at Brighton Polytechnic from whose paper - Asian Lifestyles and Participation - much information was obtained.

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## ***PARTICIPATION RATES IN SPORT***

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It has long been recognised that social class and gender influence the level of participation in sport. The Sports Council in its strategy document - 'Into the 90's' - identified women as a target group because of their relatively low level of participation. Since the publication of the strategy, further investigation has been commissioned into the effect of ethnicity on sports participation. This paper attempts to pull together the evidence already available which highlights the influences affecting the participation in sport by 'Asian' women.

What the relatively little evidence that is available suggests is that gender and ethnicity together do have an impact on participation. Carrington, Chivers and Williams (Leisure Studies Vol. 6 No. 3 1987) write:

"Whilst the available evidence on the responses of South Asian females to sport - both in and out of school - is extremely limited, there are indications, nevertheless, that differential socializations do have an effect on performance and participation alike... the Swann Committee (DES. pg 341-2 1985) and Glyptis (Leisure Studies 4 pg 347-62 1985) have shown how cultural and religious differences, family and home pressures, staff insensitivity to their values and beliefs and a lack of single-sex provision, may lead to the withdrawal of South Asian girls from sporting activities in school, and South Asian women from forms of physical recreation."

The subjective, but nonetheless valuable, observations of community sports workers is that the number of 'Asian' women attracted into active recreational activity, which has been traditionally established, has been minimal. The Action Sport projects, monitored by the Policy Studies Institute (Action Sport Evaluation 1986), also indicated a much lower take-up by 'Asian' women comparative to their numerical strength in the geographical location of the projects.



## ***GENDER INFLUENCES ON PARTICIPATION RATES***

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The WMCSR topic study, Women and Sport, highlights the barriers to participation for women. These factors include:

- lack of child care facilities
- income levels
- unemployment
- access to transport
- fear of attack
- sexism
- image of sport
- attitudes to sport

These factors also influence 'Asian' women but will not be dealt with in this paper. Nonetheless, these barriers are important to all women, including 'Asian' women.

## ***BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION FOR ASIAN WOMEN***

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A simplistic response to the barriers to participation for 'Asian' women, often given by sports providers, is that their religion and/or culture discourages participation. This view is often stereotyped to:

- Their religion prohibits them from participation
- Women are not allowed out of the house

This response does not reflect a full understanding of culture and religion, attitudes to sport, and the external influences of stereotyping and racism, nor the social consequences of the interaction of cultures in Britain.



## **DEFINING THE TARGET GROUP**

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Whilst the aim of this paper is to identify issues which affect 'Asian' women's participation in sport, over and above those that affect women in general - that is what ethnic variances there are, rather than gender variances - 'Asian' women do not form a simple homogeneous ethnic group. The term 'Asian' is used as a racial categorization of peoples whose origin is India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. However, the values, attitudes and social practices of 'Asians' vary between different communities due to religion, geographical origin (regional, urban, rural), class (including the caste system) and the impact of colonialism.

The major religions of the sub-continent are Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism. Religion remains a strong force in determining social conduct, in particular Islam which has a code of social behaviour defined by the Koran. Within each religion different emphases of social conduct will be stressed, according to the geographical location and the class of each community.

The 'Asian' communities in Britain reflect, in part, the diversity and complexity of the communities of the sub-continent. In addition, other British 'Asians' will have come to this country via African states and will have been influenced by prevalent attitudes there.

The physical characteristics of 'Asians' leads to categorization. This is the process of racialization; that is ascribing common behavioural patterns to groups of people with distinguishable characteristics (real or imaginary), usually skin colour. **However, it is ethnic influences, which are the result of religion, language, customs and social conditions which determine behavioural patterns.** The factors listed above mean that 'Asians' cannot be described as a single ethnic group, but within the 'Asian' communities living in Britain, there will be some shared common values, attitudes and behaviour due to geographical origin, that is 'Asian' culture, but also differences due to the vastness and richness of the cultures of that geographical location.

The interaction of these ethnic groups with other communities in Britain will also influence the attitudes, values and behaviour of these communities, most notably the effects of racial discrimination and racism. Only by working alongside 'Asian' communities will workers understand these communities and learn appropriate responses. Further to this, only by working alongside individuals will workers understand and respond appropriately to generational issues. For example, a young British/Pakistani/Muslim female quoted in 'Race in Britain - Continuity and Change' (Hutchinson 1982) states:

'The contradictions and conflicts over the years did increase. The adolescent years were filled with moments of having to sit back and analyse my situation vis-a-vis my family, my religion and the social mores of a wider society and what I would do.'

'Asian' women, therefore, living in Britain, are not a homogeneous group, and generalizations made about their attitudes to issues, including recreation, are dangerous.

## ***ETHNIC (CULTURAL) INFLUENCES ON PARTICIPATION BY 'ASIAN' WOMEN***

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Avoiding making unfounded generalizations about 'Asian' women, are there identifiable factors, which are shared by these different ethnic communities' women to some degree, which we can call 'Asian' culture, which may act as barriers to participation in sport?

Two main issues stand out:

- 1) **The role of women in Asian communities**
- 2) **'Modesty' of Asian women**

The role of women is not one of being subservient to men. Women can and do take their part in economic, political and social life. Mrs Gandhi, former Prime Minister of India and Benazir Bhutto, current Prime Minister of Pakistan, are prime examples. In Britain many 'Asian' women today hold positions of professional standing. However, although the role of women is not subservient, equality is often seen as a spiritual, rather than a functional issue. Women are often seen to fulfil different roles in society. In Islamic tradition, in particular, the role of the woman, whilst she retains her individuality, is to support her husband, and also to take responsibility for the education and social and moral development of children. Her role is that of the homemaker.

The rights of women, however, in Islam are very strong.

"You have the right to your own individuality, to retain your own name, and to own, inherit and use property as you wish. You have the right and duty to pursue education and vocational goals that would develop your talents, protect the interest of your family and strengthen the Muslim community". (Islam - the Natural Way MELS 1989)

The cultural inheritance of the 'Asian' communities leads to women being seen as homemakers. This role is seen as positive and valuable.

The 'modesty' which is generally expected of 'Asian' women, most notably seen in dress, but also affecting the social relations into which women enter, is also a culturally shared factor. The degree to which it operates vary.

With regard to dress, Gurmeet Singh, a Sikh, quoted in *Black British, White British* (Hiro 1973) states:

"In our society it is a man who shows his body, not a woman".

In the Islamic tradition, a code of conduct about the 'awrah exists for both men and women:

"The 'awrah of a male is the part of the body from the navel to the knee. The 'awrah of a female is the whole body with the exception of the face, hands and feet.

It is not allowed for a man to show his 'awrah to anyone except his wife.

A woman may not show her 'awrah to anyone except her husband. However, among Muslim males whom she cannot marry (such as her father, brother, son, uncle or nephews) her body from the chest down to her knees excluding the arms may not be shown.

Among Muslim females, a Muslim woman may not show any part of the body from the navel to the knee. Accordingly, a Muslim woman may not look at the thighs of her adult daughter, sister, mother or friend while bathing or otherwise. Among non-Muslim females, a Muslim woman may not show any part of her 'awrah'.

(Source: Abdullah Naasih 'Ulwaan - Education and the Training of Children in Islam' 1981)

The sense of modesty displayed by 'Asian' women will also be displayed in physical contact and proximity to males outside the immediate family.

The degree to which adherence to 'modesty' is followed is now varied between religious groups and generations.

These two factors, and adherence to them, enable women not to bring dishonour on themselves and their families for whom following such practice remains vital to their communities. The religious and cultural perspectives on the role and behaviour of women form part of the social mores of the communities. Similarly, for men, modesty in dress and social behaviour applies, and again varies from community to community.

These cultural factors may seem to act as barriers to participation in sport. Indeed for some 'Asian' women participation in many social activities is restricted by tradition. However, there is no proscription to participation by religion.

To substantiate this claim further - that is that 'Asian' culture (and in particular Islamic Law) need not hinder participation - written evidence has been obtained (The Status of Women in Pakistan - Ministry of Information and Broadcasting) to give knowledge of participation in sport by women in Pakistan, which is a Muslim country. The rights of women and girls to participate in sport and recreation are emphasised, and schools and colleges, which are usually single-sex, include physical education and sport in their curriculum and extra-curriculum time. Inter-school, inter-college, regional and national competitions occur. The sports most commonly played are table tennis, hockey, tennis, volleyball, swimming and netball. However, at this time women are not allowed to participate outside the country. The religious/cultural restrictions here are evident. Therefore, it can be shown that when religious requirements are met, the culture allows participation. Hindus and Sikhs also need to meet the social mores of their communities, but again there is no proscription on participation.

If, therefore, 'Asian' culture does not necessarily prohibit participation - are there other factors - apart from gender and class - which affect 'Asian' women over and above British (White) women?

There are two sets of factors which need to be considered:

- 1) **External factors - exerted by British society**
- 2) **Additional factors - attitudes of the 'Asian' communities in Britain**



## ***EXTERNAL FACTORS WHICH INFLUENCE PARTICIPATION IN SPORT***

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Two main external influences can be shown to have an impact:

- 1) Stereotyping and Racism**
- 2) Lack of provision**

Evidence from studies of school physical education, whilst showing the development of some good policy and practice, has revealed stereotyping. Hargreaves (Sport, Power and Culture 1986) has observed,

“that the predominant understanding of ethnic differences, as far as PE is concerned, is in terms of stereotypes, for example Asian girls are said to be less able to adopt certain postures than other groups.”

And Parmar (Young Asian Women - Multi-Cultural Education 1981) describes,

“how many teachers may assume that all Asian girls cannot participate in extra-curricular sporting activities. Neither the parents nor the girls are consulted about their wishes, and so they are automatically excluded.”

Therefore, there is often a lack of encouragement to participate by teachers. This attitude of stereotyping was also reported as present in the PSI study (Op Cit.). A lack of understanding of cultural issues was noted and further existence of racism was illustrated in this quote from a white worker on Action Sport (Op Cit.):

“Working with ethnic minorities is very difficult. Racism is rife. Action Sport has to face up to this but we do not understand their attitudes. This is all important, but nothing is done.”

The existence of racism inevitably affects social inter-action in community. Malik (Heart, Health and Asians in Britain 1988) states that many Asian women and girls do not use sports facilities due to fear of racism and the Bradford research team (The Social Conditions of Young People in Bradford 1987) state:

“White racism limits access to material opportunities for black youngsters and, importantly, access to safe public places.”

Racism, however, is not just about physical and/or verbal abuse. It is also about the decision making processes and how these affect provision for ‘Asian’ women. The Action Sport programmes, despite attempting to target ethnic minorities,

“showed that members of ethnic minorities were under-represented relative to their overall numbers in the local populations. Asian involvement, in particular, was extremely low.....” (Op Cit)

As the quote from the white worker on Action Sport states “nothing is done” to combat the difficulties of getting ethnic minorities involved in sport.

Herman Ousley, former race relations adviser to the GLC stated:

"The issue then in terms of racism is about organisation of power. It is about institutional power. It is about decision making, and that is really what we have got to deal with in determining how we are going to start to solve the problems of disadvantage through sport."

Lack of provision for Asian women has to be seen as a major contributory factor to the low level of participation, and is a result of lack of commitment from policy makers to understand fully the issues involved and to make appropriate responses. An example of the need for appropriate responses would be the provision of individual showers and changing cubicles to protect 'modesty'.

Racism and stereotyping in sport has, therefore, often led to little or poor provision. The lack of provision for 'Asian' women should be viewed in the context of the poor level of opportunity in sport and recreation for all women.

Some suggestions have been made that there are particular issues which affect British 'Asian' women, which lead them to not wanting to participate in sport, even if targetted provision is made, as in the case of Action Sport. The stereotypical view is that

- 'Asian' women do not want to take part in sport and recreation and that we (providers) should not force them.

## ***THE ATTITUDE OF 'ASIAN' WOMEN TO SPORT IN BRITAIN***

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The suggestion that sport does not rank as a priority for 'Asian' communities in Britain has been made by Malik (Op Cit). It is suggested that work, especially for men, is the most important lifestyle factor (Lloyd, Work and Leisure in the 1980's 1986) and education (academic) the means of social mobility for children (CRC, The Education of Ethnic Minority Children 1977). In rigorously pursuing work and education, the original objectives of the 1950's immigrant population - that is the search for better prospects - can be met. Croft and Klein (Agenda for Multi-Cultural Teaching, School Curriculum Development Committee Publications 1986) assert that:

"Some Asian families are not convinced of the educational potential of physical education and 'play'".

Further to being unconvinced of the educational value of Physical Education, the recreational value of sport may also be regarded of little value compared to work, family and religious duty and other leisure pursuits.

Carrington et al (Op Cit) stated that in their survey the most common reason given by 'Asian' young men for not participating was lack of time.

For 'Asian' girls and women in Britain, sport and recreation may be regarded as of even less value. With regard to Physical Education, Teresa Lewis (Ethnic Influences on Girls PE, British Journal of PE 1979) states:

"The West Indian girls and Asian girls are poles apart in the terms of games skills..... The English (white) girls lie midway between these two groups."

She postulates that this is because the role of homemaker for women is strongest in 'Asian' families and these are therefore the skills taught to girls in the family. Play, on the other hand, is not encouraged. Restrictions on girls' and women's leisure activity is reported in Carrington et al (Op Cit) survey. The reasons for this, however, are more complicated than simply that influence of homemaking, and revolve around the interaction of cultures and communities in Britain.

Hurst (Critical Education and Islamic Culture, in Cultural Identity and Educational Policy 1985) reports that many 'Asians', and in particular Muslims, consider Western culture lacking in moral values and social standards. Consequently, upholding the honour of the family and the modesty of women is a continual struggle in a society where different cultures conflict. 'Asian' communities wish to preserve their cultural identities and, therefore, protect their identity by segregating their communities.

This process, however, is not simply a matter of choice. A much fuller multi-cultural society might be established in Britain if 'Asian' communities did not feel the considerable pressures of racism which have created discrimination in immigration laws, the job market, education, housing and leisure provision. Racism also causes verbal and physical abuse to be inflicted on 'Asians'. Inevitably, 'Asian' communities isolate themselves further from other communities and from interaction with other cultural values.

What becomes important for 'Asian' communities and for 'Asian' women, therefore, is employment, housing, families, religion and the community. Sport may not be a demanded priority.

However, sport and recreation is a need for many 'Asian' women now, and certainly will be required by future generations who will, it is to be hoped, received encouragement through physical education and wish to make sport and recreation part of an active lifestyle. Recent work on health (Dr F Rebbee, Muslim Women in Birmingham 1989) suggests that lack of exercise is the most important factor relating to poor health, including heart disease and other stress-related illness. Many members of 'Asian' communities are now realising the importance of active recreation for a healthy lifestyle.



## **REVIEW**

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Reviewing the available evidence, therefore, suggests:-

- 1) Gender and ethnicity have affected participation rates of 'Asian' women.
- 2) Gender influences, both practical problems and ideological issues, restricts participation by all women.
- 3) The need for 'Asian' women to protect their cultural heritage means that sport and recreation normally needs to be a single sex activity.
- 4) No religious influences directly prohibit participation.
- 5) Stereotyping and Racism has meant that providers have not understood the culture of 'Asian' communities or made sufficient efforts to make appropriate provision.
- 6) Sport and recreation are part of a wider society. The prevalence of racism in society will continue to inhibit the development of multi-cultural activities, including sport.
- 7) British 'Asian' families may not have regarded sport and recreation as important activities, but this is changing with a growing awareness of health related factors.

## **POLICY AND PRACTICE**

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The WMCSR Topic Study - Women and Sport - examines the issue relating to female participation in sport and makes recommendations on promoting participation. The recommendations of this paper should be read in conjunction with the Topic Study recommendations.

In examining the needs of 'Asian' women in particular, the most important factors are to **provide women-only activities, with women staff, and allowing women to wear culturally acceptable clothing in environments which are 'safe'**. Because of the diversity within the 'target group', what is considered to be a 'safe' environment will vary. Providers should look to a variety of venues - leisure centres, schools, community centres, and youth clubs in which to make provision, and to develop each and every opportunity in conjunction with 'Asian' communities.

Within this general framework, providers can develop services on the basis of equal opportunity for 'Sport for All'. Many of the responses to the needs of 'Asian' women (and ethnic minorities generally) have been short-term, interventionist and project based. The development of good practice responding in varied ways to the needs of different communities, age groups and individuals is now required.



In order to achieve the development of good practice, three key recommendations are made:

- 1) Ascribe to a person, or team, within the Leisure Services Department, the role of stimulating and co-ordinating action.
- 2) Adopt a Community Development approach, that is, work with 'Asian' communities to develop activity, continually ensuring that developments meet the needs of the target group.
- 3) Appoint paid part-time Sports Leaders from the community to run specific activity sessions.

Through targetting and a development approach particular projects may emerge. For example, Action Sport teams may set up sessions in local mosques or temples; Home Liaison staff in schools may establish recreational activities in schools; or a leisure centre may introduce Bangra dance into its programme. Trained Sports Leaders will run these sessions. All initiatives should be welcomed, monitored and evaluated. If the appropriate developmental work has been achieved, each initiative should be successful. Equally important, projects could be the marketing of women-only activities which already take place in the mainstream service, which some 'Asian' women will wish to attend. This will especially be the case where a women-only session in a sports hall and/or swimming pool is located in the appropriate location and all the staff and instructors are women, including Asian women.

However, initiatives need stimulating, developing and co-ordinating. Activity for 'Asian' women needs to be focused on a person or team and due attention needs to be paid to the ethnicity, gender and ability of the person/s ascribed to the task. The principle of focusing the work of Sports Development Officers to take a lead on specific issues and programmes is not new. For most authorities sufficient resources will not be available to fund a post specific to 'Asian' women as a sole target group. However, this work could come under the umbrella of a Women's Sports Development Officer and/or an Ethnic Minorities Sports Development Officer, or other suitable identified personnel.

## **CONCLUSION**

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Probably the lowest participative group, at all age levels, is 'Asian' women. It is hoped that this paper will

- a) **Provide a useful starting point for new developments**
- b) **Act as a catalyst for that development to occur**

In conclusion, if a comprehensive leisure service is to be offered to all the community, including 'Asian' women, it will only occur if it responds to the real recreational needs of people. This demands the community development approach that has been stressed in this paper. However, in addition, this whole process will only be truly effective if there is adequate representation of ethnic minorities, including 'Asian' women, in the management and delivery of the service. Therefore, last, but by no means least, a real commitment to an equal opportunities employment practice is vital for the development of a leisure service strategy.

## ***SUGGESTIONS FOR INITIATIVES***

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- 1) Increase opportunities for 'women - only' sessions at different venues - swimming pools, leisure centres, schools, community centres.
- 2) Recruit and train women part-time paid Sports Leaders to run activity sessions.
- 3) Promote multi-lingual literature on leisure provision. This should be done for all literature, not just for specific targeted work. The purpose of translation is not simply for literacy, but to show respect for the multi-cultural society in which we live.
- 4) Make contact with existing ethnic minority organisations, especially Asians women's groups and work with them. Be prepared to take sport into mosques, temples, community centres etc., as well as bringing people to leisure centres.
- 5) Train 'Asian' women as community sports leaders, and offer further training to encourage women into voluntary/part-time paid sports leader roles.
- 6) Organise visits to facilities and activities for community groups, and/or get providers to visit and talk to community groups.
- 7) Train all leisure service staff in community development and race and cultural awareness.
- 8) Network with other statutory and voluntary organisations i.e., Health Authorities, in pursuit of joint-funding, co-operation, information sharing.
- 9) Ensure that an effective equal opportunities policy is actioned.

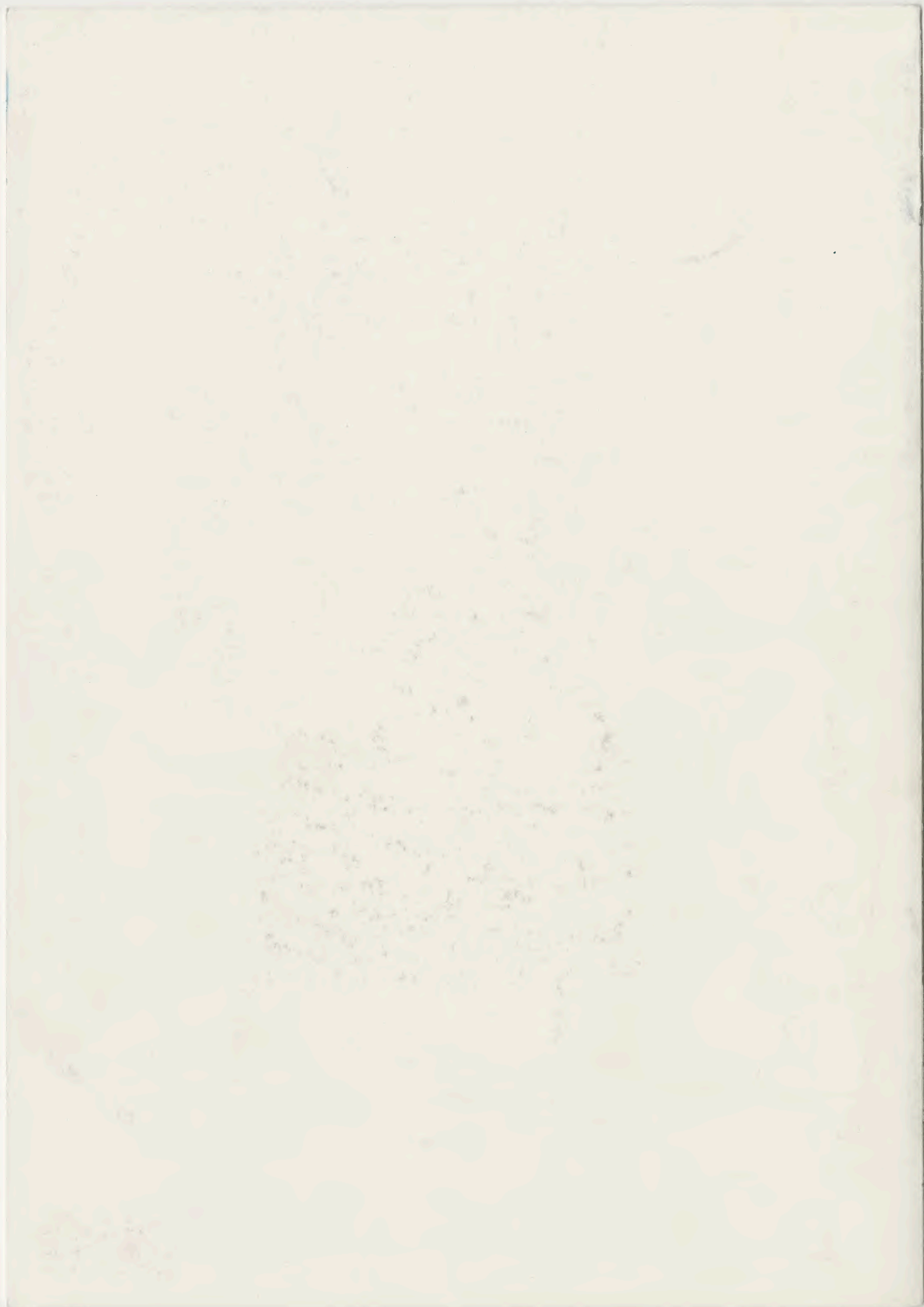
## ***PROBLEMS AND ISSUES***

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- 1) **Stereotyping** - This paper has been very careful to examine the diversity of needs of 'Asian' women whilst looking at common issues to help progress policy and practice. Targetting enables us to be clearer about the needs of people, but we must always be wary of stereotyping.
- 2) **Information** - There have only been a few projects working with 'Asian' women and sport. There has been very little research. Some of the conclusions of projects and research are questionable. The development of policy and practice will inevitably have to be slow, but the sharing of information on a regional and/or national level will be vital for future success.
- 3) **Marginalisation** - Community sports development and targetting particular sections of communities is still often regarded as a poor sister to facility provision. Where the target group is female and of ethnic minority origin, the dangers of marginalisation increase. Understaffing, under-resourcing and undervaluing community initiatives will inevitably lead to frustration and failure. Decision makers need to understand the issues fully and commit themselves to equality of opportunity.
- 4) **Specialisation** - The target group approach and the focusing of responsibility on a person or team can lead to neglect of duty by other providers. Creating opportunity for target groups is the responsibility of **all** providers. The specialists are necessary to activate and co-ordinate, but should not be regarded as the direct providers of opportunity.









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