

# A Look at Leisure

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**WOMEN AND LEISURE** Women and leisure is an important topic in the 1980s. As women's lives have begun to change in other spheres, there has been an increased interest in women's leisure and recreation. This bulletin, the 21st in a series published by Alberta Recreation and Parks, presents some of the recent research findings on women and their leisure experiences.



## INTRODUCTION

The last few decades have seen many changes in the lives of women. Women's expectations are changing. More women have moved into the work force. The views and institutions of society are adjusting to the changing status of women. These trends have important implications for leisure and the delivery of recreation services.

In the last decade, there have been changes in the recreation participation patterns of women. Studies such as the Canada Fitness Survey have shown increased interest in a fitness-oriented lifestyle. At the school and community level, there has been a rapid expansion in recreation opportunities for girls (Hall, 1980). An increase in personal development programmes for women is also evident. Sport Canada has established a Women's Program to increase leadership and participation by women. Nevertheless, concerns about obstacles which may limit participation are still present.

There are many factors which contribute to the leisure patterns of women. This bulletin looks at their motivations for participation in recreation activities and at obstacles they encounter. Differences among women of various ages and roles are also explored.

Much of the research on women's leisure has focused on organized recreation activities. However, researchers are also studying home-based leisure. Important topics are the time constraints which women experience due to domestic and childcare demands, and women's attitudes to leisure.

Some of the highlights discussed in the bulletin are:

- Women are more likely to participate in individual health-related activities than organized sport and team activities.
- The social aspect of leisure is very important to women.  
Home is the main site for leisure for the majority of women.
- The types of constraints which shape women's leisure include lack of time, household and childcare demands, and personal and societal attitudes.

## PARTICIPATION IN ACTIVITIES

Many studies show that women's participation patterns differ from those of men. Women participate less than men in active sports, sport spectatorship, and outdoor activities (Zuzanek, 1978). On the other hand, a higher proportion of women participate in individual health-related activities (Fitness and Amateur Sport, 1984; Hayes and Fishwick, 1987).



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Deem (1982) found that much of women's leisure outside the home takes the form of adult education, recreational classes, and clubs and organizations. They are also more likely than men to participate in cultural activities.

Findings of the 1984 *Public Opinion Survey on Recreation* show some of these patterns. The survey looked at activities recently started by Alberta women. Some of the findings were:

- Women were more likely than men to have started creative, cultural, social, and passive activities. These are activities such as crafts, hobbies, and reading. Participation in these activities increases with age.
- About five times as many women as men started aerobics/fitness activities.
- Fewer women than men started team sports, golf, or mechanized outdoor activities such as snowmobiling.

The survey also found that 44% of the female respondents were active in volunteer work, compared to 39% of men. Although women may belong to fewer volunteer organizations than men, women contribute equal or more time to volunteer work (Cox and Kreisel, 1984).

Bialeschki and Henderson (1986) found that the home is the main site for leisure for most women. This is true both for home-based women and for women working outside the home. Researchers have begun to look more closely at women's leisure experiences in the home. Recent studies have found that women may combine leisure activities (such as listening to music) with household tasks. Furthermore, some home activities may be experienced as either work or leisure (Shaw, 1987). For example, women may experience leisure while involved in child care or household work. Shopping has also received recent attention as a leisure experience.

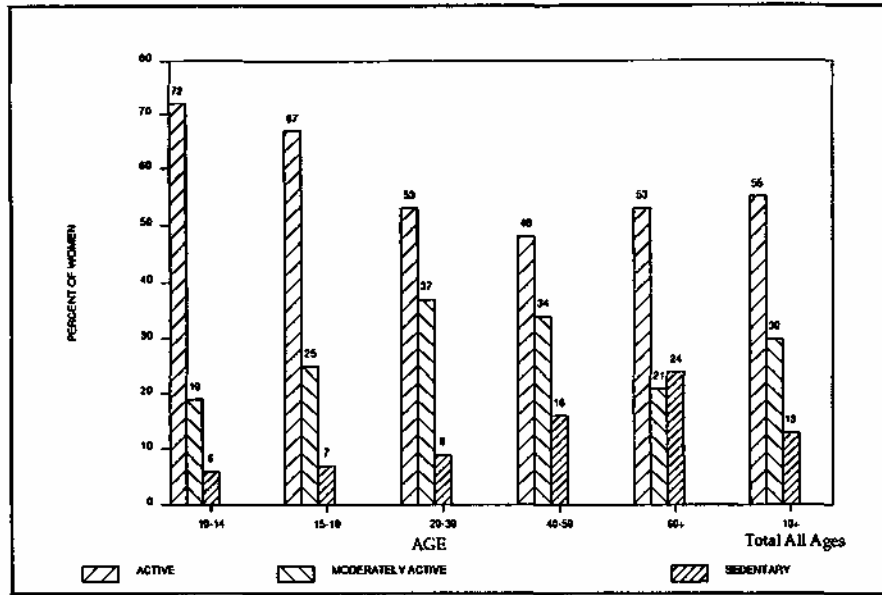
## **PARTICIPATION IN PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES**

Women's participation in physical activity was studied in the Canada Fitness Survey. The survey report, "Changing Times: Women and Physical Activity" (Fitness and Amateur Sport, 1984) is a good source of information about women's activities and attitudes. Data on the activity levels of Canadian females are reproduced from this report in Figure 1.

The Fitness survey found that the most popular activities for females are lifetime pursuits such as walking, swimming, cycling, home exercise and gardening. Skating, jogging, cross-country skiing, dance, and tennis also ranked in the top ten activities.

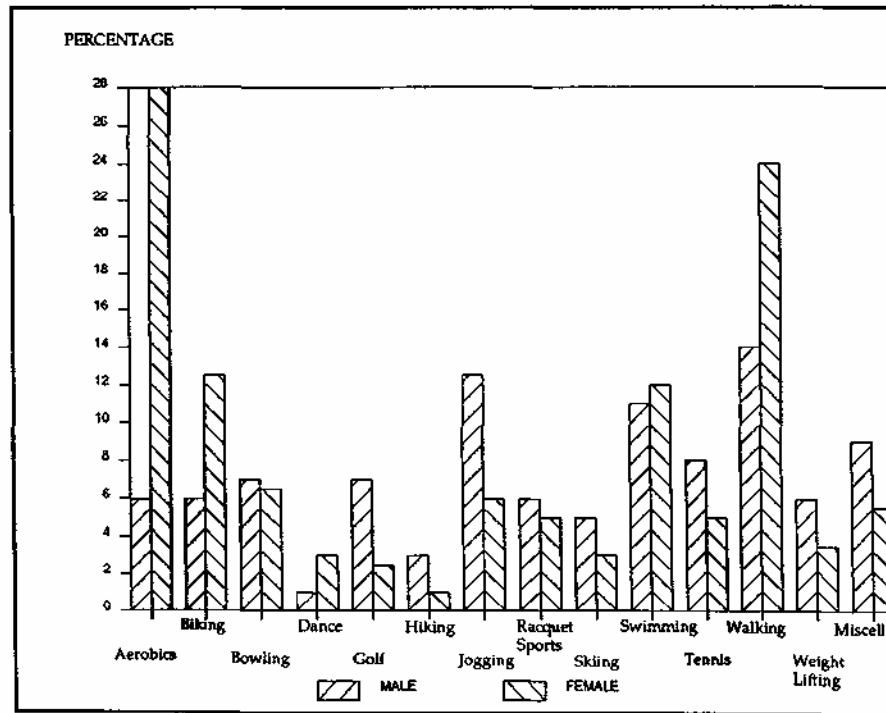


**Figure 1**  
Activity Levels of Canadian Females - 1981



Studies on women's activities have consistently shown that women have low participation in organized activities and team sports. For example, Hayes and Fishwick (1987) found that volleyball was the

**Figure 2**  
Individual Sport Participation



SOURCE: Hayes and Fishwick (1987)

only team sport in which female involvement was close to that of males. Females tend to favour individual sport participation in health-related activities. Participation rates of females and males are compared for a variety of activities in Figure 2.

Women's interest in physical activities has increased markedly since the mid 1970s. The Canada Fitness survey found that 72% of females aged 14 or over participated in 1981, compared to 46% of females in 1976. Activity levels are highest among well-educated, single women. Housewives are consistently less active than working women, and tend to prefer less strenuous activities. They are also less physically fit than women working outside the home.

The following discussion will examine some of the reasons underlying women's participation patterns. These include reasons for participation and obstacles which are experienced by women.

## **REASONS FOR PARTICIPATING**

Why do women participate in recreational activities? How do women's needs and motivations vary with age? Do they differ from those of men? This type of information is valuable for recreation practitioners involved in developing leisure services for women.

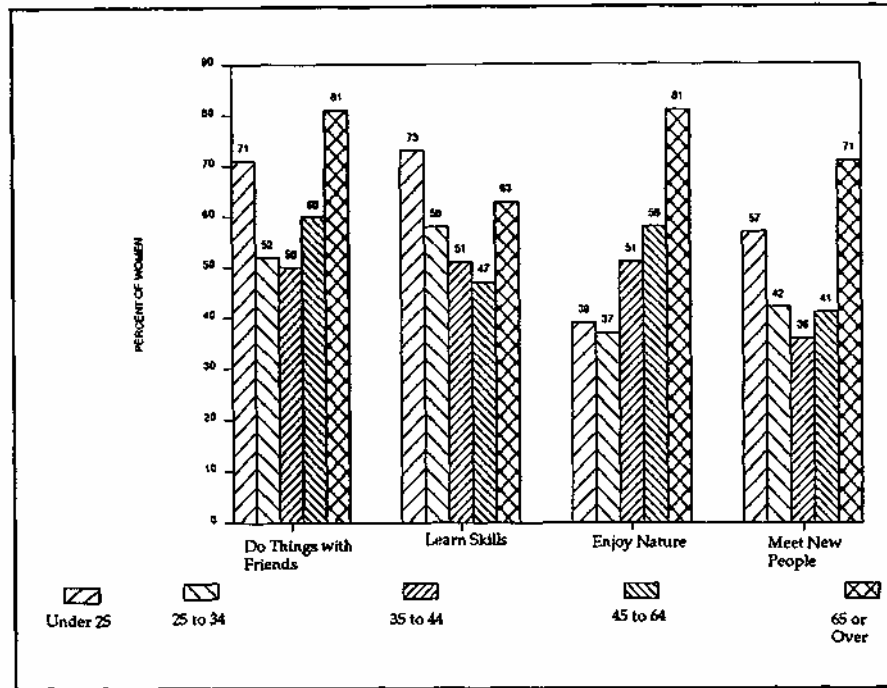
The 1984 *Public Opinion Survey on Recreation* provides information about women's reasons for participating in recreation activities. Health/exercise and relaxation ranked highest in importance for Alberta women. Interestingly, the rankings of the reasons were very similar for both women and men. However, women felt more strongly than men about the importance of health and exercise, socializing with friends, and learning new skills. Meeting new people was also especially important for women.

Women of different ages vary in their reasons for participating in recreation activities. Figures 3 and 4 show some of the age differences which were found in the 1984 *Public Opinion Survey on Recreation*. It is interesting to note that many of the reasons were important to younger and older women, but were of less importance to those in the mid-adult age range. Health and exercise, relaxation, and doing something different from work were consistently important across all age groups.

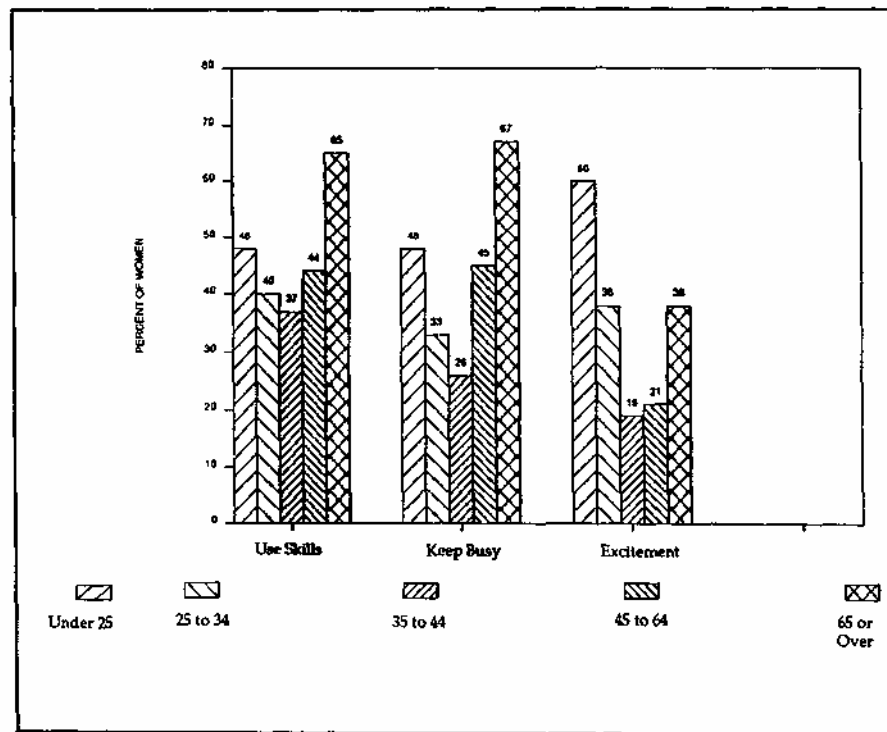
The Canada Fitness Survey provides some insights into women's reasons for participating in physical activities. Wanting to feel better was the most important reason for women of all ages. Controlling weight was important for all women, except for those over 60. Relaxation increased in importance with age but the importance of pleasure declined with age.



**Figure 3**  
Age Variation in Reasons for Participating



**Figure 4**  
Age Variation in Reasons for Participating



The Fitness Survey found that women are concerned about health-related behaviours such as adequate rest, diet, weight control, and stress management. Yet only 44% of women felt that physical activity is important to their well-being.

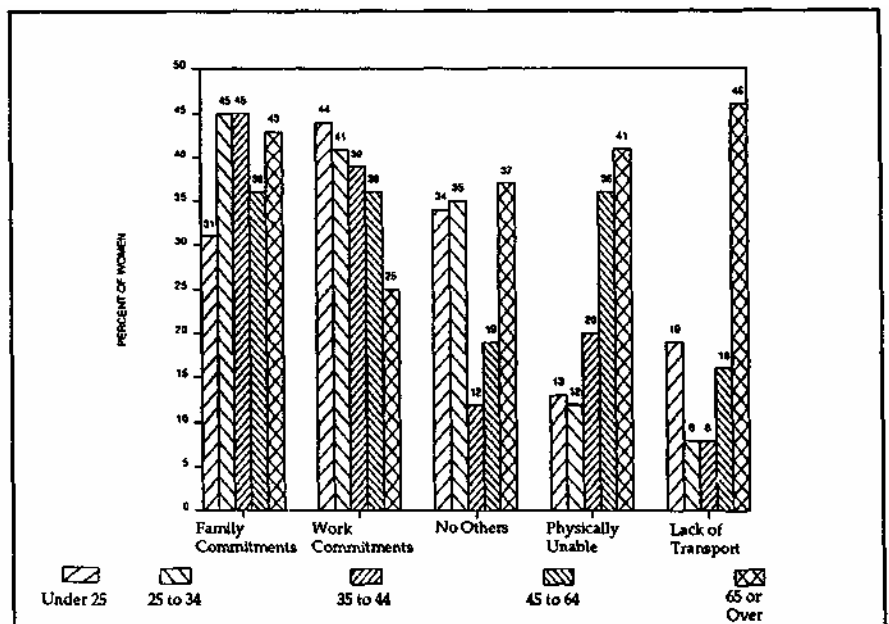
Many studies have shown that the social aspect of recreation participation is important to women. Meeting other women is difficult, particularly for women who may be isolated at home. Many women need a friend or relative to accompany them to an activity (Deem, 1982). The Canada Fitness Survey found that social incentives from family and friends is one way of encouraging women's involvement in physical activities. Having a partner is critical for women 60 and over.

## OBSTACLES TO PARTICIPATION

In the past two decades there has been increased concern about the societal constraints that women experience. Because of this interest, researchers have also begun to look at constraints which may affect women's leisure.

This research shows that women may encounter many types of obstacles which shape their leisure experiences. Some of these constraints may relate to a woman's upbringing, skill development, and personal attitudes. Constraints may be associated with women's roles, particularly *in* the home. Obstacles may also reflect attitudes of society about women's roles, and unequal opportunities for women.

Figure 5  
Age Differences in Obstacles to Participation





What types of obstacles do Alberta women experience? In the 1984 *Public Opinion Survey on Recreation*, time constraints associated with family and work commitments ranked highest in importance.

Although the constraints had similar rankings for both men and women, women did express greater concern about several of the constraints. Obstacles which were more important for women were: lack of others with whom to participate; lack of transportation; perceived lack of opportunity near home; not being at ease in social situations; and, the cost of admission and other fees.

Obstacles to participation vary with a woman's age, role, and stage of life. Figure 5 shows that the importance of work commitments declines gradually with age. Physical inability increases with age. Lack of others with whom to participate is mainly a problem for women under 35 years of age and women over 60. Although lack of transportation is not very important overall, this is a very significant concern for women over 65 years of age.

Deem (1982) has identified constraints experienced by women for leisure activities outside the home, and for home-based leisure. Most of these constraints are similar to those observed in the 1984 *Public Opinion Survey on Recreation*. Additional constraints which Deem identified were lack of money and attitudes about women going out on their own. Lack of energy may also be a factor (Fitness and Amateur Sport, 1984).

Barriers may also be psychological or attitudinal. Because of their upbringing, women may underestimate their recreation potential and need (Beach, 1984). Opportunities may be available, but women do not make leisure a priority. They may fail to build activities they enjoy into their daily routine (Sand, 1986). Although views are changing, women at home may be perceived as having "full-time" leisure; they may feel that they do not earn the right to recreation (Bialeschki and Henderson, 1986).

## THE TIME FACTOR

Lack of time is a major constraint felt by women. Most studies have found that women have less leisure than do men. The amount of women's leisure has not increased over the past decades, even with new household conveniences. In fact, for many women who are now in the labour force, the amount of free time has actually decreased.

Because of household and child care demands, women's leisure is often divided into small segments. Deem (1982) found that women often fit leisure into short and unpredictable time periods. Women choose activities, such as knitting, which can be done in short periods





of time. Women often have difficulty arranging blocks of time for leisure that coincide with organized opportunities.

Women who work and manage a household have additional time pressures. However, women who work outside the home may give more priority to physical activity. They may have established childcare and transportation arrangements. This allows them to participate in programmes such as noon-hour or after-work fitness classes (Laberge, 1983).

## WOMEN AND SPORT

Women have a lower level of interest in organized sport and team activities. Neither girls nor women rank any competitive team sports among their ten favourite physical activities (Fitness and Amateur Sport, 1984). This situation is a concern for those who feel that women should be able to experience the health and psychological benefits of active sport participation.

There are many factors which contribute to women's low participation rates in sport and team activities. Although changes are occurring, the effects of many of these obstacles are still being felt. Some of the reasons are summarized below:

- Lack of early skill development - During elementary years, recreation and community agencies offer a greater variety of programs for boys than for girls (Beach, 1984).
- Peer pressure, particularly during the adolescent years when social life is given priority.
- A negative image of women in sport and few female role models. Myths about women in sport, such as not capable of competing, injury prone, or lack of desire.
- Ethnic and cultural constraints.
- The domination of professional male sports.
- Inequities in funding for women's activities.
- Lack of women in decision-making roles in sports organizations.

## IMPLICATIONS

Every girl or woman deserves a fair chance to develop leisure skills and physical abilities. There are two approaches which recreation agencies should consider in order to achieve these goals (Beach, 1984). One approach is to help change societal attitudes about women, leisure, and recreation. The other approach is to ensure that equal leisure opportunities are available for women.

What can be done to change attitudes about women and leisure? It is important to encourage women to value leisure and recreation, and



to manage their time to include leisure. Information distributed by agencies should try to increase awareness of the importance of recreation. Advertising should show women in active participation roles in an enjoyable social environment.

The issue of equal opportunities for women concerns funding and programming. How are funds distributed within your agency's programmes? What types of funding do programmes for women and girls receive? Do you try to adapt your programmes to suit women's leisure style, instead of trying to fit women into established formats?

One issue which agencies may have to deal with is the question of integrating or segregating programs for boys and girls. A recent court decision in Ontario has determined that girls should be allowed to play on boys' teams. What implications does this type of decision have for your agency's programmes?

A significant aspect of women's leisure is small blocks of time. What can you do to make your services more flexible for women's schedules? Drop-in or short term courses would provide more opportunities for women. More open access to craft equipment such as pottery supplies might be helpful. Family activities and childcare programmes are essential for women with children. Do you try to locate your activities in community facilities such as churches and schools? This will make it easier for women who lack transportation to participate. Have you considered taking some skill development programmes into the home by means of techniques such as video tapes?

How can you encourage women to become more physically active? Recreation practitioners need to stress the link between physical activity and well-being, weight control and stress management. Changing the names of courses to reflect these exercise benefits might attract more participation than a basic title like "Aerobics". Informing family physicians about the benefits of your activity programs may encourage referrals for health reasons.

Social aspects of leisure are especially important to women. Many women will not attend a new activity without the support of friends or family. Programmes for women should emphasize social opportunities. Recreation agencies might encourage involvement by approaching groups of women who already meet for other reasons, such as a church or volunteer group. The enthusiasm of friends in this type of setting might encourage some women who might not otherwise participate.



There is a need to increase the role of women in management of leisure services (Witt, 1987). This will ensure a woman's perspective in the development of leisure and recreation programmes. Are you actively recruiting women to your Recreation Boards? Are you providing leadership training to ensure effective female leaders? Many cultural groups are run by women who could benefit from leadership and management skills. Women would also benefit from employment-oriented voluntarism. This would train women in workplace skills while they work in volunteer roles (Ford, 1985).

There are many challenges to be met in helping women to achieve positive leisure experiences. Agencies may need to look closely at the basic format of their services, and not just at the content of programmes (Ford, 1985). An understanding of women's leisure needs and constraints will help agencies to meet these challenges.

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## **FUTURE ISSUES**

The next issue of *A Look at Leisure* will focus on youth and recreation.

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