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Mana Tohu Mātauranga o Aotearoa  
New Zealand Qualifications Authority

# **Scholarship 2023**

## **Health and Physical Education 93501**

# **SCHOLARSHIP EXEMPLAR**

## **Breaking through the Bamboo Ceiling: The unseen and unheard constraints Asian girls suffer from in sports.**

2012 - the first time my parents let me stay up late so that we could watch the Olympic Parade of Nations. I waited in anticipation for New Zealand to come on the TV screen as the letters passed by... L, M, N. There we were! Though I was equally excited to see our Kiwi athletes and to finally be able to go to sleep, I couldn't help but notice how no one on the screen looked like me.

2017 - the first time I joined a netball club. Netball became a large part of my life as I felt the highs and lows of painstaking practice and crucial competition, but I also felt something else. A sense of sinking estrangement that tugged at my subconscious every time I stepped on the court. Every time I missed that crucial intercept. Every time I didn't get the rebound.

2018 - the year I quit playing netball. The early Saturday mornings were replaced by sleep-ins as I came to the realization that I would never fully fit in with netball culture due to the discomfort that came with face-level insecurity. No one looked like me.

It was not only my over-arching feeling of unbelonging but also the small microaggressions and archaic stereotypes that led me to believe that being in a sports team was not something for me. The constant underestimation many young Asian girls face as a result of their athletic ability being undermined has led to many stories similar to mine, further discouraging us from participating in fear of reinforcing the damaging stereotypes. 'We are seen as very nerdy, very geeky, very studious, so, we can't be good at sports. We can't be fast, we can't be strong.' - Vietnamese-Australian bodybuilder, Amazin LeThi<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Morris, Natalie, 2020. Metro UK 'Racism and damaging stereotypes' prevent east Asian women from taking part in sport'

The inequities rooted in discrimination that not only young Asian girls, but several other minorities, face in the sporting world restrict the opportunities for self-expression and deny the unity found in a team, is an issue affecting all aspects of Hauora for many students around Aotearoa. However, this has seemingly not been addressed sufficiently in Sport New Zealand's *Women and Girls Strategy*, which "strives to achieve equity for all women and girls as well as seeking to understand and address the multiple barriers women and girls can face." Though the document attempts to encompass solutions to a wide range of issues women and girls face, it often fails to acknowledge the causes of issues it presents, especially regarding intersectionality and the diversity of Aotearoa. This report will reference the *Women and Girls Strategy* report to critically examine the causes, solutions and discussion surrounding the issue of a lack of participation and representation of Asian girls aged 10-18 in school sports and whether the issue is being addressed in an effective way.

The *Women and Girls Strategy* was created with the intention of addressing "clear inequalities for women and girls when it comes to participation, and their wider involvement and visibility within sport and active recreation in Aotearoa New Zealand." The specific inequalities which the report focuses on are leadership, participation and visibility with the aim of making "active recreation more inclusive and diverse, for the wellbeing and benefit of everyone in Aotearoa New Zealand." Despite the clear issues the *Strategy* intends to ameliorate, which is outlined in the introductory statements of the document, the extensive lack of recognition

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<https://metro.co.uk/2020/03/04/racism-damaging-stereotypes-preventing-east-asian-people-taking-part-sport-12333557/>

surrounding the demand for equity makes measuring the success of the proposed actions difficult to justify in an inclusive manner.

A lack of specific acknowledgement towards the different needs which must be met for different groups of individuals is an underlying flaw of the Strategy, reflecting the wider attitudes towards people of Asian descent still prevalent in our society which negatively affect every aspect of Hauora, especially *Taha Hinengaro* and *Taha Wairua*<sup>2</sup>. The intrinsic cause for the absence of young Asian girls participating in sports is ingrained in the same attitudes and harmful stereotypes which remain unresolved and unaddressed in our society.

### **Addressing the roots of the bamboo ceiling**

The 'bamboo ceiling' is a term coined and popularised by Jane Hyun in her book "Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling: Career Strategies for Asians". Though the book focuses on career opportunities, the "cultural barriers that play a role in career advancement"<sup>3</sup> are also applicable not only to young Asian girls in sports, but also to many endeavours of the Asian diaspora.

The prevalence of negative stereotyping and preperceived beliefs has led to a lack of representation and role models for young Asian girls in many fronts, but especially in sports. Moreover, the 'Model Minority Myth', which refers to "a group seen as having attained educational and financial success relative to other immigrant groups", further discourages participation due to the expectation for Asian people to excel in academic areas. This is a harmful perception which originates from early signs of discrimination against Asian people in Aotearoa.

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<sup>2</sup> Te Hauora me Te Akoranga Koiri: Health and Physical Education in the Curriculum  
<https://hpe.tki.org.nz/health-and-physical-education-in-the-curriculum/underlying-concepts/hauora/>

<sup>3</sup> Hyun, Jane, 2006 'Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling: Career Strategies for Asians'

Though our country has progressed to become a widely accepting, multicultural place with an extremely diverse population, it is important to examine Critical Race Theory as the origin of stereotyping and microaggressions.

Critical Race Theory “foregrounds race as the central construct for analyzing inequality”<sup>4</sup>, and postulates racism as originating not from individual prejudices, but as a result of legal systems which insinuate inequality.<sup>5</sup> Intolerance against Asians in New Zealand originated in the late 19th century as a result of the economic migration of Chinese gold-miners. There were vastly contrasting sentiments towards European and Asian immigrants, with early European migrants being ‘well received’ with Asian migrants being subjected to ‘significant racial intolerance’<sup>6</sup>. Malicious beliefs, such as the Liberal politician William Pember Reeves describing Chinese immigrants as ‘dirty, miserly, ignorant, a shirker of social duty, and a danger to public health’<sup>7</sup>, were common opinions and many anti-Asian policies were imposed. Between 1879 and World War Two, Chinese were the target of 55 race-based amendments, including a poll tax which charged Chinese immigrants the equivalent of nearly \$20,000 to enter the country<sup>8</sup>, sedimenting anti-Asian racism as a part of Aotearoa’s history. Though these explicitly discriminatory policies have been abolished, these underlying attitudes have been ingrained in our culture as a country.

Casual racism and microaggressions are the dominant forms of racism against Asians in New Zealand today, especially after the COVID-19 global pandemic, with 39% of

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret Zamudio, Christopher Russell, Francisco Rios, Jacquelyn L. Bridgeman, 2011: ‘Critical Race Theory Matters: Education and ideology

<sup>5</sup> Sawchuk, Stephen, 2021. Education UK ‘What Is Critical Race Theory, and Why Is It Under Attack?’ <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/what-is-critical-race-theory-and-why-is-it-under-attack/2021/05>

<sup>6</sup> Spoonley, Pau: Ethnic and Religious Intolerance <https://teara.govt.nz/en/ethnic-and-religious-intolerance>

<sup>7</sup> William Pember Reeves, 1902: *State experiments in Australia and New Zealand*, vol. 3

<sup>8</sup> Mason, Cass, 2017: NZ’s long history of anti-Asian racism <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/98288039/nzs-long-history-of-antiasian-racism>



respondents in a survey reporting experiencing any kind of discrimination since the start of COVID-19.<sup>9</sup> Though the arguments can be made that racism is not as severe in New Zealand compared to other countries such as Australia and the United States, it is this exact denial of racism being a serious issue in our country which leads to the harm of all minorities being severely harmed due to the suppression of their convictions being deemed as 'not serious enough' to be addressed. "Racial microaggressions often go unnoticed and unacknowledged because they seem so familiar in everyday settings"<sup>10</sup>; these microaggressions i.e. holding unjustified beliefs that Asian girls are incapable of excelling in sports, have had impacts which can not be described as 'micro', repeating the cycle of causal racism in modern society.

Despite the role of Critical Race Theory in underpinning the lack of young Asian girls participating in sports, Stereotype Threat Theory plays a significant role in the reason why we are also not doing enough to break through the ceiling. Stereotype Threat Theory is the "resulting sense that one might be judged in terms of negative stereotypes about one's group instead of on personal merit"<sup>11</sup>, where individuals are at risk of conforming to negative stereotypes, further enforcing presumptions. The constant apprehension, and the "What will people think of me?", "Will they laugh when I don't catch the ball?" and "I wish I was better at sports" is the unfortunate reality of many young Asian girls, from physical education classes in school to out in the court, field and pool. This is not a reality which anyone should be subjected to, but the more we are afraid to break the stereotype, the more normalised and

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<sup>9</sup> New Zealand Human Rights Commission, 2021: Racism and xenophobia experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand during COVID-19: a focus on Chinese and Asian communities

<sup>10</sup> Derald Wing Sue, Lisa Spanierman, 2020: Microaggressions in everyday life

<sup>11</sup> Michael Inzlicht, Toni Schmader, 2011: Stereotype Threat: Theory, Process, and Application

accepted it becomes. The actions of both sides are ultimately flawed, and are the primary underlying causes responsible for the lack of participation and representation of Asian girls in sports; the fear of enforcing stereotypes has been so severely ingrained into our minds that many girls no longer have the confidence to believe that they can be proficient in physical endeavours.

In the *Women and Girls Strategy*, Sport NZ has failed to sufficiently recognise the additional support that is required for not only Asian girls but other ethnic minorities, to encourage participation due to the additional barriers they need to overcome. With visibility being emphasised as a large factor in constructing the document, why are the underlying issues which have caused a lack of visibility, being generally ignored?

### **So, what has been done to improve the issue?**

With the Asian population being the fastest growing ethnic group<sup>12</sup>, especially in Auckland, the lack of participation and representation among Asian communities of all age groups, genders and ethnicities has been a topic of concern and discussion. The issue surrounding overall participation in physical activities and recreation for New Zealand's Asian population have been addressed and acknowledged both by independent organisations and Sport NZ<sup>13</sup>, with recent improvements being made.

Contrary to the overall trend of sports participation following the COVID-19 pandemic, Asian communities developed increased interest towards exercise and sport.<sup>14</sup> The research was conducted by 'ActivAsian', an initiative established in 2009

<sup>12</sup> Stats NZ, 2018 Census

<https://knowledgeauckland.org.nz/media/1443/asian-people-2018-census-info-sheet.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Sport NZ, 2022 : Participation of Asian Population groups research report

<https://sportnz.org.nz/resources/participation-of-asian-population-groups-research-report/>

by Harbour Sport to acknowledge the inequalities and barriers Asian people may face regarding participation and representation in sports. Although their initial focus was on the North Shore in Auckland, they have since expanded to collaborate with Sport Waitākere and Sport Auckland in 2018<sup>15</sup> and have organised a wide range of events (including ActivRecreAsian and Walk With Us) to promote exercise and sports among Asian demographics. Despite the progress which has been made as a result of ActivAsian's efforts, the organisation also identifies the need for further research surrounding Asian rangatahi<sup>16</sup> and is the only "Regional Asian Ethnic Engagement initiative in Play, Active Recreation and Sport". With ActivAsian only primarily focusing on regional improvements for a large range of people who identify as Asian, a wider focus specifically on younger Asian girls is still needed. Due to the considerable disparities in their exercise habits and experience in comparison to older age groups and other genders, more targeted action must be taken.

Since the publication of the *Women and Girls Strategy*, Sport NZ has addressed the differing needs of differing groups of people in regards to physical activity. In June 2023, Sport NZ conducted the study *Participation of Asian population groups*<sup>17</sup> following the results of the Active NZ survey, which concluded that Asian communities were among the the least active groups in Aotearoa. The recognition of

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Turner, Shea, 2022: Auckland's Asian community less active, more interested in sport during lockdown  
<https://www.stuff.co.nz/sport/300550143/aucklands-asian-community-less-active-more-interested-in-sport-during-lockdown>

<sup>15</sup> ActivAsian, Harbour Sport <https://test.harboursport.co.nz/communitysport/asian-community-sport/>

<sup>16</sup> ActivAsian, 2022: Impact of COVID-19 Restrictions on the Physical Activity Level of Asian Communities across Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland  
[https://test.harboursport.co.nz/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/ActivAsian\\_Impact-of-COVID-19-Final-Report.pdf](https://test.harboursport.co.nz/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/ActivAsian_Impact-of-COVID-19-Final-Report.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Sport NZ, Te Hau Kori – Victoria University, University of Waikato, 2023: Participation of Asian population groups



the discrepancies Asian New Zealander's experience is a large step in the large direction; specifically addressing a particular ethnic group's struggles is important to reducing inequalities. However, though the study includes a comprehensive range of voices from a diverse range of ethnicities under the 'Asian' umbrella, no definite action to improve the issues raised is proposed due to the focus of the study being on experience of the community. The study also prioritised qualitative research, using a sample size of only 36, with the quantitative research being derived from the Active NZ survey conducted from 2017-2021. Within the 36 participants, only 4 were in the age group this report aims to examine - the gender of these participants was not specified. An accurate representation of the limitations and improvements young Asian girls in Aotearoa face can not be accurately represented by such a small number of people, though their experiences still regrettably reflect circumstances which can be extended to many young Asian girls involved in sport and physical activities. This is the representation which is also absent in the *Strategy*, despite its claim to "Understand and address the challenges or opportunities women and girls can face due to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, age or ability". Though the study is a monumental step towards improving inequities, there is still a disproportionate absence of research surrounding Asian rangitahi in sporting endeavours, especially in comparison to other ethnic minorities such as Maori and Pasifika, who have generally higher participation rates (see Fig. 1).

### **Other factors to be considered**

Contrarily, there are different perspectives which can be taken into consideration when recognising the causes of lower participation rates in Asian girls aged 10-18 in sports. There is discussion surrounding biological factors and the relationship

between race and athletic ability due to the imbalance of ethnicity and race in many sports. Though Asian participation and representation at higher levels of play is more common in sports such as table tennis, badminton and many martial arts<sup>18</sup>, as opposed to the unconscious bias that certain races are better at certain sports, sociological factors play a much greater role in influencing the sports we choose to play. Furthermore, it is generally accepted by anthropologists that “race is neither a genetically nor biologically sound paradigm but instead a social construct”<sup>19</sup> and that biological deviations are a result of environmental adaptations over time.

In Metro UK's article about Amazin Le Thi's uphill endeavour to becoming a bodybuilder<sup>20</sup>, she reveals her personal struggles with both racial stereotypes and expectations within Asian culture which motivated her to succeed. Although she shares her story, the comments on the article include “yes, biology is racist Natalie” (in reference to the writer of the article) and “The only thing that restricts abilities in sport are physical or mental limitations”. The outrage in the response can only be described as insensitive and accusatory, ignoring both scientific evidence and sociological factors which influence personal experiences. The extremely negative responses on this article are a further reflection of the dismissive attitudes held towards Asian girls and women who try to speak out about the unjustified discrimination they face; a notion which is already discouraged in Asian culture.

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<sup>18</sup> Asia Media Centre, 2019: Kiwi Sports Stars Find Opportunities In Asia  
<https://www.asiamediacentre.org.nz/features/the-asian-zone-kiwi-sports-stars-find-opportunities-in-asia/>

<sup>19</sup> Kerr, Ian, 2010. Western Michigan University: The Myth of Racial Superiority in Sports  
<https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1027&context=hilltopreview>

<sup>20</sup> Morris, Natalie, 2020. Metro UK 'Racism and damaging stereotypes' prevent east Asian women from taking part in sport'  
<https://metro.co.uk/2020/03/04/racism-damaging-stereotypes-preventing-east-asian-people-taking-part-sport-12333557/>

It is clear that biological variation does not influence athletic ability, and 'mental limitations' are strongly linked to cultural influences, as opposed to only being a result of individual hardship.

Another argument against the lack of participation and representation of Asian girls is that due to Achievement Goal Theory, which is strongly interlinked with the Model Minority Myth, young girls are in fact, participating.

In physical education specifically, Achievement Goal Theory proposes that parents and coaches are able to create a motivational climate to maximise motivation in youth.<sup>21</sup> Despite the general emphasis which is placed on academic achievement in Asian cultures, this Theory is believed to still prevalent in many families due to the emphasis placed on the need to be successful in all aspects of life, including maintaining physical wellbeing. These cultural values not only apply to competitive sports, but also exercise in everyday life due to different motivations such as leisure, community/family or physical wellbeing benefits<sup>22</sup>. In a survey conducted by ActivAsian<sup>23</sup>, 76.1% of female students were reported to have participated in swimming regularly within a year, with 73.1% swimming outside of school. On an interpersonal level, swimming also seems to be a more popular recreational sport among Asian communities for all ages, with swimming being a life skill which many Asian households highly encourage their children to learn. Especially in Aotearoa,

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<sup>21</sup> UKEssays, 2018: Achievement Goal Theory

<https://www.ukessays.com/essays/psychology/achievement-goal-theory-and-perceived-motivational-climate-psychology-essay.php#:~:text=Achievement%20Goal%20Theory%20>

<sup>22</sup> Sport NZ, Te Hau Kori – Victoria University, University of Waikato, 2023: Participation of Asian population groups

<https://sportnz.org.nz/media/eiulzcl0/presentation-asian-participation-combined-qual-quant-elise-v2.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> ActivAsian, 2010: Sports Survey for Chinese Students

<https://harboursport.co.nz/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/2010-sport-survey-chinese-students-four-schools-2.pdf>

where participating in a wide variety of sports both in and out of school is heavily ingrained into the country's culture, the participation of Asian communities far from being completely limited. However, there is still a conspicuous disparity between rates of participation for Asian girls, who are spending less time both in informal participation (5.6 hours per week compared to 7.6 hours among all young people), organised participation (2.7 hours per week compared to 4.2 hours) and competitive participation (14% compared to 23%)<sup>24</sup>, than the *Strategy* seems to acknowledge.

### **Why is the Women and Girls Strategy not doing enough?**

Following the publication of the *Women and Girls Strategy*, there has been specified attention given to Asian communities in addressing the motivations and barriers they face by Sport NZ, however, these documents place more emphasis on a wide range of ages and gender. The gap which should be filled by the *Strategy* is not sufficiently accounted for within its proposed actions and goals, despite the claims initially presented to 'create equity'<sup>25</sup>. Similar to the general perspectives exemplified towards Asian communities from New Zealand's history to modern attitudes, from internalised stereotyping to externalised marginalization, the *Strategy* disproportionately neglects equity for minorities in 'Strategic Priority' suggestion, which does not provide any specific numeric goals or definite targets and instead provides vague notions to "Engage with women and girls who have lower levels of physical activity and support and empower them to create opportunities to be more active". This lack of detail, which can contrarily be seen in other proposed objectives such as "Sponsor an award category supporting 'Best Coverage of Women's Sport'

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<sup>24</sup> Sport NZ, 2021: Active NZ The New Zealand Participation Survey 2021  
<https://sportnz.org.nz/media/5108/active-nz-updating-the-participation-landscape-2021.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> Sport NZ, 2018: Women and Girls Strategy  
<https://sportnz.org.nz/about/news-and-media/news-updates/women-and-girls-strategy/>



at the TP McLean Sports Journalism Awards” which provide clear goals for improving the experience of girls and women in Aotearoa's sporting scene, is a frustrating issue which makes only certain voices valued.

The *Strategy* explicitly addresses this imbalance throughout statistics: “Young females (5–17 years) who identify as Asian spend significantly less time per week (2.9 hours less per week)

Average number of hours spent participating over the last 7 days



Fig. 1

participating in sport and active recreation than the total for all young females.” This is shown in Figure 1, which is included in the Girls and Young Women Profile.<sup>26</sup> Figure 1 also visually represents the large gaps specifically between European, Maori and Pasifika ethnicities in comparison to Asian ethnicities. However, in all three sections of the Strategic Priorities, there is no mentioned action to target this issue. Despite mentioning inequalities in the statistics, there is no clear recognition for the need for additional support required to improve these issues, where change can only occur if specific initiatives are put in place. The recent results from the *Participation of Asian population groups* survey reinforces this, as little to no change has been made as a result of the lack of targeted action to help Asian communities. “While New Zealand holds its sports culture in high regard, the recent study underscores the need for greater inclusivity.” The negative experiences of Asian girls and women living in Aotearoa have been sustained not only through teenagers today, but older groups such as young adults. The mistreatment and prejudice Asian girls have faced in sports and physical education

<sup>26</sup> Sport NZ, 2018: Girls and Young Women Profile  
<https://sportnz.org.nz/media/1551/girls-and-young-women-profile.pdf>

at school has been an issue which has remained underevaluated for many years.

This is shown through the anecdotal evidence in the recent survey<sup>27</sup>:

“It was sort of an assumption that none of us would participate and I was definitely grouped with the rest of the Asian girls... she was grouping me in with the others, because I’m clearly different from the girls that she is picking for the good position, good games and stuff. I thought, “oh, what am I doing wrong?” and then it took me a while to realise it wasn’t what I was doing, it was her perception of me/the group.” (Chinese woman, early 30s).

“Even if it’s just like unconscious bias, there is [a stereotype] that Asians are just bad at sport.” (Chinese female, teen).

Both Asian girls and women are constantly being subjected to microaggressions, strengthening the effects of Stereotype Threat Theory, and the *Women and Girls Strategy* conforms to the disregard generally shown towards the different inequities different ethnic groups face in sports. Upon evaluating the *Strategy*, this was undoubtedly what stood out to me as the most important and detrimental flaw to the overall approach towards issues surrounding the overall mistreatment of girls and women at all levels of sports. Though the document does acknowledge that the “category of girls and young women aged 10–18 includes many diverse individuals with different and evolving needs”, this can not be seen as an explanation for not prioritising intersectionality and equity for people with differing socioeconomic

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<sup>27</sup> Professor Holly Thorpe, Sheryne Lok, Dr Tom Kavanagh, 2023: The Changing Nature of Asian Participation in Play, Active Recreation and Sport Voices from the Community  
<https://sportnz.org.nz/media/1zykk1bt/sport-nz-report-the-changing-nature-of-asian-participation-in-play-active-recreation-and-sport-thorpe-et-al.pdf>

backgrounds, cultural beliefs and varying barriers to their participation and representation. It is impossible to account for everyone within a singular strategy, but this does not mean the experiences and needs of all girls and women can be classified as equivalent. The minimisation of issues within supposedly inclusive documents like the *Strategy*, especially for young Asian girls in this case, leads rangatahi to believe that their adversities are invalid or not worth improving. This has an extremely negative effect on Hauora, especially *Taha Hinengaro*, which in turn leads to less motivation to participate in physical activity, damaging *Taha Tinana*. For Aotearoa to truly progress as a diverse community and accepting nation, weak attempts at inclusivity must be replaced by genuine concern for the issues individuals face to form solutions which encompass a larger range of people.

Another criticism surrounding the construction of the document and its Strategic Priorities is under the participation section of the *Strategy*, and the 'Young Women's Activation Fund' which provided funding towards projects to "help more young women get and stay active."<sup>28</sup> Though admirable work has been done by Sport NZ to fund and enable projects, including specific programmes which aim to help Maori and Pasifika girls as well as former refugees and newer migrants, external organisations should not be relied upon to cater to different groups. The recognition Sport NZ and the financial support which has been given to non-profit sport organisations is important, but many organisations still go without additional funding. The Activation Fund can only supported a limited amount of projects, which highlights the additional attention which needs to be given by Sport NZ to different groups through internal initiatives. The fund is a step in the right direction towards

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<sup>28</sup> Sport NZ, 2019: Young Women's Activation Fund  
<https://sportnz.org.nz/resources/young-women-s-activation-fund/>

bridging the gap between different participation rates among different groups, and shows that priorities from the *Women and Girls Strategy* can be met. Nonetheless, improving the participation and representation of Asian girls specifically is not something which is undertaken within the Strategy, despite the clear divisions between Asian girls and other marginalised groups.

### **Understanding different voices and sociological influences**

The need for higher participation and representation for both female tamariki and rangatahi of Asian descent is undeniable. But, with the increasing attention on the issue in years following the establishment of the *Women and Girls Strategy*, including Sport NZ's study dedicated towards listening to the voices of a diverse range of people within the Asian community, the importance of further understanding why it is so difficult for girls to break through the ceiling becomes essential in reducing inequalities.

There is sufficient evidence to prove that young Asian girls do want to participate in sport. As shown in Figure 2, 74% of female Asian tamariki and rangatahi wish to participate in sports more, which is the largest percentage among all



Figure 2 <sup>29</sup>

female participants. If this is the case, why is participation still so low?

Other than the aforementioned discriminatory attitudes that underpin wider issues which affect participation and representation, there are varying factors derived from social and cultural influences that also impact the issue.

<sup>29</sup> Sport NZ, Te Hau Kori – Victoria University, University of Waikato, 2023: Participation of Asian population groups



### The power of perception

The *Strategy* notes that girls in general “prefer experiences that are fun, social and improve physical wellbeing.” The same notion is equally as common amongst Asian girls as well, with recreational activities being preferred to competitive sports.<sup>30</sup>

Unfortunately, this is not only due to the desire to have fun while playing sports, but is also a consequence of perception surrounding Asian girls participating in sports. With the innately competitive nature of sports in New Zealand, sociological barriers are presented when Asian girls want to participate or try out a new sport; this is especially true for non-New Zealand born Asians who may come from a country where sporting culture is not as prominent. Due to the lower rates of participation among Asian tamariki, as we grow older, it becomes substantially more difficult to be involved due to the fear of being perceived as “not good enough”<sup>31</sup>. Even with declined rates of participation, Asian girls are perceived to be inadequate at sports before they even pick up the ball; most of the time, they are hardly given a chance to try a new sport out before being disregarded as an unserious player. This is also linked to Stereotype Threat Theory, which will only worsen as the cycle continues from generation to generation. When young Asian girls are already perceived to not meet standards of play, it is inevitable they will also lose confidence in themselves, which also affects *Taha hinengaro*.

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<sup>30</sup> Sport NZ, Te Hau Kori – Victoria University, University of Waikato, 2023: Participation of Asian population groups

<https://sportnz.org.nz/media/eiulzcl0/presentation-asian-participation-combined-qual-quant-elise-v2.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> Professor Holly Thorpe, Sheryne Lok, Dr Tom Kavanagh, 2023: The Changing Nature of Asian Participation in Play, Active Recreation and Sport Voices from the Community

<https://sportnz.org.nz/media/1zykk1bt/sport-nz-report-the-changing-nature-of-asian-participation-in-play-active-recreation-and-sport-thorpe-et-al.pdf>

### Confining Environments and Alienation

Though perception may be limited to unexpressed or internalised biases, harmful stereotypes may also lead to hostile sporting environments and microaggression driven alienation. Racial anxiety, a phenomenon where individuals increased stress and discomfort when around people of different races, negatively affects both the minority and majority within sporting groups. "People of color experience concern that they will be the subject of discrimination and hostility. White people, meanwhile, worry that they will be assumed to be racist."<sup>32</sup> A prominent reason as to why Asian youth may find difficulties in assimilating into teams and feeling a sense of belonging and unity within them may simply be the fact that they share less social and cultural commonalities with others in the team.

"The reason why I'm stopping netball competitively and in general is because, again, there's no Asian people there and ... I don't know, it's just the type of thing where you just feel more comfortable with people of your own ethnicity. I don't know, it's probably a culture thing, but you just fit in better. But yeah, I think it definitely makes a big difference."

This anecdote shared in the *Participation of Asian population groups* study resonated with me due to how similar it was to my personal experience; these discomforts are echoed in many other girls who participate in sports where Asian people are the minority. Racial anxiety is a concept often overlooked as a credible reason for a lack of representation, due to it being a hard idea to pinpoint in terms of the exact reasons as to why it is an issue.

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<sup>32</sup> Racial Anxiety, Perception.org <https://perception.org/research/racial-anxiety/>

Though racial anxiety is a common issue which contributes to the low participation rates of Asian girls, especially in competitive sports, in more severe cases, issues surrounding exclusion become considerably more harmful. Statistics surrounding racism against Asian girls in sports specifically is something which needs further research, however anecdotal evidence and overall statistics can be used to infer that hostile attitudes towards the Asian community in general has had an effect on how Asian tamariki and rangatahi are treated in sport, where they are often a minority. Research by the New Zealand Human Rights Commission<sup>33</sup> has show that 39% of respondents reported experiencing any kind of discrimination since the start of COVID-19, with the most common response to any forms of racism was to ignore it at the time. With many people choosing not to speak up, the opportunity for hostile environments and alienation increases. The dimensions of alienation can be described as powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, sense of loneliness and self-estrangement,<sup>34</sup> where an individual is left without means to become accepted and included. Alienation of Asian girls in sport due to pre-perceived assumptions about their athletic ability, racial anxiety or other reasons, may not always be a result of malicious intent. However, intrinsic and often unconscious unwillingness to be accepting of people from wider cultural backgrounds is still harmful, creating environments where individuals feel isolated. Though these effects may not be realised, the negative emotional consequences of not being able to assimilate and feel unity affect *Taha hinengaro*, discouraging girls from playing a sport they may enjoy. This feeling of not being able to belong has

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<sup>33</sup> New Zealand Human Rights Commission, 2021: Racism and xenophobia experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand during COVID-19: a focus on Chinese and Asian communities

<sup>34</sup> ÖZDEMİR, Nurgül. "ALIENATION AND SPORTS." *ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN SOCIAL, HUMAN AND ADMINISTRATIVE SCIENCES-II*: 373.

become internalised in many Asian girls, taking away from the positive experiences playing sports and being part of a team has to offer due to the constant doubts about personal ability and whether you 'fit in' with the team.

### Eastern versus Western Cultural Attitudes

Cultural factors, especially barriers which arise as a result of wider cultural beliefs, are arguably one of the most significant influences on the participation of Asian tamariki and rangatahi - especially for girls.

In popular discourse, Asians and Non-Asians alike often claim the reason why Asians exhibit strong educational outcomes is due to the prioritisation of academics in Asian culture<sup>35</sup> - this is the general consensus not only in Aotearoa, but in other Western countries such as Australia and the United States. Due to a majority of the younger generation within the Asian community being second generation after their parents immigrated from Asia, many beliefs parents hold have been influenced by cultures outside of Aotearoa. Habits of parents and their experiences as children and teenagers are also imposed to varying degrees upon their children. This includes the prioritisation of academics and extracurricular activities such as learning instruments significantly more prominent among Asian rangatahi and tamariki; sport is not seen as a priority by many parents, which is reflected by their exercise habits as well.

I think one of the barriers is that it just wasn't a priority for us in our culture. My parents didn't force me to go do a sport. I think it's a bit different from when you look at here, the Kiwis here, a lot of them they put that as a priority ... We are sort of like, study and get good grades."

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<sup>35</sup> Lee, J. and Zhou, M., 2015. *The asian American achievement paradox*. Russell Sage Foundation. [https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=QwZpCAAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PR7&dq=why+do+asians+value+academics&ots=YIqHuIBkpx&sig=oQxDvUSN1nuhPIMNgbS\\_wYtwxyQ](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=QwZpCAAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PR7&dq=why+do+asians+value+academics&ots=YIqHuIBkpx&sig=oQxDvUSN1nuhPIMNgbS_wYtwxyQ)



Though playing sports is far from discouraged in Asian cultures - there are countless successful athletes of Asian descent both living inside and outside of Asian countries - the love many Kiwis have for sports such as rugby and netball does not translate as well into Asian households, with encouragement to participate in these sports being rare. Even when cultural barriers are surpassed, the inevitable pressure faced by Asian rangatahi to perform academically consumes a large proportion of time. This results in Asian youth being "more likely to identify the barriers of being too busy and parents wanting them to focus on schoolwork."<sup>36</sup>

Additionally, the more 'masculine' physique which would be attained through participating in certain physical activities, such as going to the gym or contact sports, are generally frowned upon within Asian beauty standards. As well as concern surrounding risk of injury, female participants in the *Participation of Asian population groups* study often reported that they would sacrifice their own enjoyment or goals in favour of meeting expectations from family members to maintain a slim physique. Compared to the more 'laid-back' approach families of other ethnicities may take, familial factors seem to be much more prevalent in restricting the participation of Asian girls in sports, along with other expectations which they feel they need to meet appease their parents and other family members.

#### Underrepresentation in the professional scene

Due to the coalescence of the previously mentioned sociological and cultural factors, the overall representation of Asian-New Zealander athletes, especially female ones, in professional sports is extremely disproportionate. With one of the most notable

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<sup>36</sup> Sport NZ, 2021: Active NZ The New Zealand Participation Survey 2021  
<https://sportnz.org.nz/media/5108/active-nz-updating-the-participation-landscape-2021.pdf>

examples being Lydia Ko, who “ascended to the number one spot in the women’s world golf rankings”<sup>37</sup> at only 17 years old, there are opportunities for female Asian athletes to represent Aotearoa at an national and international level. Ko has acted as a role model for many young Asian girls due to her inspiring achievements, but she is one of few female Asian-New Zealander athletes who have risen to professional success. The lack of role models for tamariki and rangatahi to look up to undoubtedly influences their interest in sports. Seeing “no others-like me” caused by lack of representation at higher levels within the sporting world can discourage younger tamariki especially, who are more susceptible to being influenced by media. Similar to other forms of media, when Asian girls are not represented in sports media, unconscious biases and internalised prejudice form, leading individuals to believe that sport is not something they should be involved in. Due to the primary reason for the disproportionate representation of female Asian athletes being a direct result of factors such as stereotyping and cultural influence, there is no way to break out of the cycle unless specific initiatives are implemented. In the Value and Visibility section of the *Women and Girls Strategy*, there is no mention of also increasing ethnic diversity specifically within the women represented in media, which is a notion many other industries are working towards. Being able to break the cycle to break through the ceiling is essential to fostering better participation and representation in future generations.

Taking steps towards understanding the multifaceted nature of this issue is vital in improving the Haurora of young Asian girls. The damaging effects of perceptions, microaggressions and the feeling of ‘not belonging’ greatly impacts all four aspects of

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<sup>37</sup> Williams, David, Asian Media Centre, 2022: Asian Kiwis in New Zealand Sports  
<https://www.asiamediacentre.org.nz/features/asian-kiwis-in-new-zealand-sports/>

Hauora. With lower overall participation rates, *Taha tinana* is the most directly affected. Sociological and cultural barriers preventing from female Asian tamariki and rangatahi from exercising and playing sports should not be as influential as they are, and are not only leading to individuals being unsatisfied with their physical activity habits, but also leads to less healthy lifestyles. Especially in a society with impossibly unrealistic beauty standards for teenagers, this may result in girls attaining unhealthy eating habits or other means of maintaining a 'desirable' physique to compensate for lack in physical activity. The effects on *Taha tinana* directly impact the other aspects of Hauora as well. *Taha whānau* suffers due to the exclusion Asian girls may experience, limiting their opportunities for socialising within their sports teams or P.E classes at school, with the absence of other Asian participants also discouraging them from initiating social interaction.<sup>38</sup> *Taha hinengaro* and *Taha wairua* are both influenced by detriments to the other aspects of Hauora due to the direct relation between externalised experiences and internalised thought. All four walls of *Te Whare Tapa Whā* need to be considered in resolving inequalities surrounding participation and representation for Asian girls.

Questions of equality versus equity must also be raised; should certain races and ethnicities receive more attention from documents such as the *Women and Girls Strategy*, or all should perspectives be considered equally? When is addressing issues perceived to be 'more severe' for certain groups of people in light of intersectionality neglecting the needs of other groups? In this case, I believe that equity should be prioritised over equality. With clear statistics to prove certain groups struggle more with participation, leadership and visibility in sports, I believe that

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<sup>38</sup> Sport NZ, 2021: Active NZ The New Zealand Participation Survey 2021  
<https://sportnz.org.nz/media/5108/active-nz-updating-the-participation-landscape-2021.pdf>

future revisions of the *Strategy* should place a heavier emphasis on equity rather than viewing all issues as needing equal amounts of attention. Without equity for groups who are already struggling, they will only continue to fall further behind.

### **Changing our future**

The Asian population is the fastest growing ethnic in Aotearoa, being projected to make up 26 percent of the total New Zealand population by 2043, with 44% of Aucklanders predicted to identify as Asian.<sup>39</sup> In approaching years, Asians will not be a minority in the population anymore, and will be a substantial influence in Aotearoa's socioeconomic climate. The voices and experiences of people within the Asian community can no longer be ignored, and to truly improve participation rates, representation, and the often difficult experiences tamariki and rangatahi have within sports, action must be taken.

The three Strategic Priorities mentioned on in the *Women and Girls Strategy*, participation, value and visibility and leadership are three aspects which all need to be considered. Increasing participation is the essential barrier which must be overcome to enable improvement in other areas. Creating more accessible community spaces, where people can feel unjudged and accepted regardless of the athletic abilities, allows for tamariki and rangatahi to feel empowered and confident. ActivAsian is an outstanding example of an group which connects with people as opposed to instructing, with development manager Alvin Cheung prioritising "a focus on building community."<sup>40</sup> This also entails educating people on stereotyping and microaggressions, not only for Asian girls but for many minority groups. Campaigns

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<sup>39</sup> Stats NZ, 2022: Subnational ethnic population projections: 2018(base)-2043  
<https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/subnational-ethnic-population-projections-2018base2043>

<sup>40</sup> Williams, David, Asian Media Centre, 2022: Asian Kiwis in New Zealand Sports  
<https://www.asiamediacentre.org.nz/features/asian-kiwis-in-new-zealand-sports/>



or programmes within schools and workplaces to raise awareness about the harmful effects of 'causal racism' Aotearoa, and the discriminatory roots from which prejudice stems from, is a socially focused solution which also has a positive impact on wider communities. Education on underlying issues and willingness to cater to a wide range of needs and experiences is important to building the truly inclusive environments many people need. With out dated perspectives still being held as a result of minimal large-scale attempts to reduce racism against Asians in Aotearoa, especially after COVID-19, educating Kiwis about unconscious biases or even internalised stereotyping will improve the disposition and Hauora of not only tamariki and rangatahi, but all age groups and even future generations.

More ethnically diverse media coverage of sports with a higher number of female Asian athletes specifically will also encourage young girls to participate. With only 11% of media sports coverage in Aotearoa being focused on women's sport<sup>41</sup>, visibility and representation of a wider variety of sport overall also needs to be improved upon. With the already limited space for representation on large platforms, female Asian athletes are hardly featured in more popular sports among women and girls, such as netball and rugby sevens. Especially due to the growing Asian population in Aotearoa, coverage of sports which are not seen as more significant parts of Kiwi culture, such as badminton, table tennis and martial arts, may cater to Asian audiences and encourage them to consume sports media. With the importance of being able to see "others like me" in sports in encouraging tamariki and rangatahi to get involved, a wider range of sports with more gender diversity should be covered in sports channels.

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<sup>41</sup> Sport NZ, 2021: Sports Media and Gender  
[https://sportnz.org.nz/media/5233/sports-media-and-gender-report-20\\_33.pdf](https://sportnz.org.nz/media/5233/sports-media-and-gender-report-20_33.pdf)

As a result of improving participation and visibility, leadership among Asian women and girls will increase as they gain the confidence and respect in a space where stereotypes has dominated for so long. All aspects of Hauora will be improved and health promotion within Asian communities will become less challenging if safer environments where individuals feel encouraged to participate in physical activity are implemented on a larger scale. Overcoming stereotypes is an issue which is far from being unique to Aotearoa, and is prevalent in countless countries around the world. However, increasing participation, visibility and leadership among Asian girls will be significant steps in helping all Asian-New Zealanders in breaking the bamboo ceiling, enabling to achieve their true potential and sporting goals free of constraints and the threat of stereotypes resulting in inequal opportunities.

In future revisions of the *Women and Girls Strategy*, I hope to see a specific section dedicated to recognising intersectionality as a large factor in limitations women and girls face regarding sports and physical activity. Specific goals and priorities which are set specifically to support marginalised groups show these groups that they matter; feeling seen and heard is one of the most important sentiments in improving inequalities. Instead of briefly touching upon a diverse Aotearoa, focus on what it truly takes and a deeper understanding of the constraints and motivations different groups face. This way, the *Women and Girls Strategy* will not only improve the physical wellbeing of many New Zealanders, but will also convey the message that Aotearoa truly wants to be an inclusive place.

This is a difficult challenge due to the widely varying experiences different people within different groups have. Within Asian communities in Aotearoa, there is a rich background of different cultures and countries people identify with, and the

respective struggles individuals may need to overcome. Though the statistical disparities between female Asian tamariki and rangatahi is more significant for other age groups and genders, it is important to also consider the participation and habits of males, adults and people of older age due to the direct influence which they may have on female engagement. The term 'Asian' encompasses some of the most diverse cultures in the world, and with the increasing multiculturalism of Aotearoa, it is essential to recognise that the needs of individuals often can not be grouped under a singular, 'one size fits all', category.

### **Summary**

Throughout recent history, Aotearoa has generally made significant improvements in inclusivity initiatives, but for female Asian rangatahi and tamariki, not enough is being done to address and understand the the underlying issues and overlying consequences of underparticipation and underrepresentation. Due to the lack of targeted action in The *Women and Girls Strategy* to recognise the importance of intersectionality, many of the different voices from the Asian community and specific experiences and expectations Asian girls have seem to remain unheard. Initiatives such as ActivAsian and studies including the recent *Participation of Asian population groups* have helped to raise awareness surrounding the lack of attention placed on these issues, however, additional solutions established on the bases of education and media visibility are still needed to supplement prior efforts. Dedicating time and resources to improving the relationship Asian girls have with sports will undoubtedly accelerate participation, leadership and visibility in both the present and future, paving a pathway free of stereotypes and full of confidence.

**“I want to feel safe to participate. I don’t want to feel judged”**

## Scholarship

**Subject:** Health and Physical Education

**Standard:** 93501

**Total score:** 16

Q	Score	Marker commentary
1	06	<p><b>Application of knowledge</b></p> <p>The report draws on a large number of theories, such as Model Minority Myth, Critical Race theory, Stereotype Threat theory, Achievement Goal theory. Stereotype threat theory is integrated quite well, with several references made to it throughout the report. The report would have been strengthened by referring to more of these theories through the report.</p> <p>Sociological factors, such as stereotypes and culture, are examined and integrated into the report.</p> <p>The underlying concept of 'attitudes and values' is implicit in the discussion, and Hauora is referenced several times with a light touch. The report demonstrates depth of understanding of their topic, and the candidate uses their own experience where relevant. At times there is a reliance on research or quotes to make their points, where more independent reflection would have strengthened their argument.</p> <p>Future suggestions are linked to the three areas of strategy identified in the document, <i>Women and Girls Strategy</i>. The suggestions are coherent but not divergent or sophisticated. They are not tied to health promotion theory, which would have helped to strengthen their application of knowledge.</p>
	05	<p><b>Critical thinking</b></p> <p>The report demonstrates regular critical evaluation of the <i>Women and Girls Strategy</i> and where the strategy could be improved or added to. The report also critically evaluates the effectiveness of programs and research done by Sport NZ, such as ActivAsian.</p> <p>Issues around female Asian participation is questioned and challenged with insight, and independent reflection on the issues is demonstrated. Independent reflection could have been more sustained for a higher grade, including reflecting on and integrating the theories that were discussed earlier in the report.</p>



	05	<p><b>Communication</b></p> <p>The report starts strongly, using the candidate's own experiences to create interest and demonstrate the relevance of the selected topic. The topic is clearly outlined, and concepts defined. Higher level theories are explained and connected to the topic. The report is structured in a logical and coherent manner and is convincing, with a large amount of research referenced.</p> <p>The report demonstrates good depth in some areas. Long quotes are used several times and could have been used in a more purposeful way. The use of images was purposeful and integrated into the discussion well, although one image was small and difficult to read.</p> <p>There is consistent integration of the <i>Women and Girls Strategy</i> throughout. The preferred referencing method of footnoting has been used.</p>
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