

Impact Case Study

Building inclusive outdoor spaces for CALD Women

Introduction

Partaking in outdoor activities like sports, hiking, swimming and spending time in nature is a significant part of the Australian culture and way of life. The outdoor sector is a huge industry in Victoria and Australia, and something many take for granted.

For women of Culturally And Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds (CALD), access to outdoor spaces can be more challenging. RMIT's Centre for Organisations and Social Change (COSC) wanted to understand what being in outdoor spaces means for CALD Women.

The SAFE ("Social, Accessible, Fun and Equitable") outdoor project, led by COSC member and RMIT researcher Dr Ancy Gamage, alongside colleagues Dr Sadaf Sagheer and Dr Sehrish Shahid, explored the outdoor experiences of CALD women in Victoria, including challenges and limitations.



Background

Spending time outdoors can positively impact both physical health and mental wellbeing.

As well as positive impacts on an individual level, this has important implications for broader public health and economic benefits.

Outdoor activities contributed \$6.2 billion to the Victorian economy in 2015. Evidence suggests that Victorians engaged in outdoor activities 45 million times in 2015, leading to around \$265 million in avoided healthcare costs.

Despite these impressive figures, participation is not equal across all communities, including for CALD women. The unique experiences of how CALD women experience, access and benefit from the outdoors is not fully captured within the public health or outdoor industries.



The Research

The SAFE outdoor project examined the outdoor experiences of CALD women in Victoria, how engaging in outdoor activities positively impacted their lives, health and wellbeing and how to build inclusive outdoor spaces.

The project was a collaboration with Out Doors Inc., a non-for-profit organisation which supports opportunities for people and communities to spend time in nature. Out Doors noticed more CALD women joining their programs in recent years, and they wanted to understand what helps or hinders their participation.

The study adopted a holistic definition of 'the outdoors', looking at both structured (organised by a body or organisation) and unstructured activities (participant's own motivation e.g. personal hiking or camping) to best capture the variety of lived experiences of CALD women.

The project aimed to examine two critical questions:

1. What are the benefits that CALD women experience from outdoor activities?
2. What factors either support or prevent their participation and engagement with the outdoors?

The project answered these questions through qualitative semi-structured interviews and participation of **CALD women, outdoor professionals and industry experts.**

Participants consisted of CALD women from a range of ethnicities, backgrounds and ages.

In the second stage, the project took the CALD Women to Mount Macedon for in situ engagement. Embedding participants in nature allowed rich observations not possible in traditional settings.



Findings

The project identified a range of personal and cultural factors that influenced the engagement of CALD women with outdoor activities.



- **Comfort and Connection:** Outdoor environments helped participants feel relaxed and open, strengthening social bonds and making group gatherings meaningful.
- **Culturally Safe Spaces:** Women-only outdoor activities provided a safe environment for cultural practices, such as meditation, and reduced barriers associated with mixed-gender settings.
- **Intersectional Barriers:** Gender roles, cultural norms, and perceptions of the outdoors as a “male” or “white” space limited participation, alongside time pressures from family responsibilities.
- **Cost and Accessibility:** Financial constraints, equipment costs, and transport barriers highlighted the need for affordable, local outdoor activity options.
- **Representation and Inclusion:** Increasing CALD women’s leadership in outdoor programs and creating more inclusive marketing can support stronger engagement and community-led initiatives.
- **Diverse Experiences:** CALD women are not a homogenous group; their varied outdoor experiences point to the importance of further tailored research.
- **Broader Equity Gaps:** While centred on CALD women, the findings indicate that other under-represented groups would also benefit from improved outdoor access and dedicated research.

It showed giving CALD women more opportunities to participate in outdoor activities together led to lasting benefits, including stronger social connections, improved confidence and wellbeing, and greater awareness of the Australian natural environment.

By hearing directly from CALD women, the study identified systemic barriers and produced evidence-based recommendations to guide more inclusive policies and practices across the outdoor sector.

“You felt like you were reborn again, fresh air, going out with different people, talking different conversations. For me, it was very good... there were other people there that I haven’t seen for about 50 years. Okay, so we sort of got together in that sort of thing, and everybody joined in with everybody’s conversation, reminiscing like when we went to college or stuff like that.”

— CALD woman participant

Impact

The study proposed several recommendations to make outdoor spaces more accessible and inclusive for them. The report recommends strategies for inclusive outdoor spaces for:

- local councils and parks Victoria
- tourism and active outdoor operators
- industry associations and tourism boards.

Out Doors Inc. has leveraged key findings for their own knowledge base.

CALD community advocates and women have expressed further interest in outdoor opportunities following the project’s findings.



Funding support

Funded by the Victorian Office for Women & Sport under the Change our Game program Research Grants Program.

The Change our Game program led research initiatives “into gender barriers and issues impacting women in sport”.

COSC Research Themes

- Multicultural inclusion and organisations
- Gender equity and organisations
- Health, wellbeing and organisations

Next Steps

SAFE’s impact continues to grow: Dr Gamage is partnering with the Victorian Outdoor Industry Association to pursue further research into gaps the project uncovered.



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