

## REGIONAL SPORTS: NAVIGATING THE WINDS OF SOCIAL CHANGE FOR FEMALE ELITE ATHLETES IN ASIA

SAMANTHA NANAYAKKARA

IAN CULPAN

JANE McCHESNEY

*University of Canterbury*

Asia, the largest continent in the world, has more than half of the world's population comprising multi nations, religions, beliefs and political ideas. Many countries in Asia were colonies under Western rule in the past (Mangan, 2003). Said (1989) argued that "the body" was a central trope of colonial discourses that constructed differences between the West and the non-West. He also emphasised that non western bodies were portrayed as weak, barbarous, unclean, diseased or infantile which were the opposite to the idealised bodies of the west that is strong, ordered, hygienic, healthy and mature. Sport, however, is one of the main ways in which people of colonised countries demonstrate the strengths of their 'bodies', identity and competencies (Nanayakkara, 2008). Being involved in sports activities enables colonised Asian countries to demonstrate to others that they are equal in strength and ability (Nanayakkara, 2008). According to Mangan (2003), the emergence of sport promoted nationalism by elevating the status and image of the nations in Asia and, followed by the post imperial period, reduced the certainties of European imperialistic impacts on Asian politics and their nations.

The nexus of contemporary sport and Asia demonstrates that in 1913 The Empire of Japan, Philippines and The Republic of China created the 'Far Eastern Championship Games' to enhance the unity and cooperation among these nations (Olympic Council of Asia (OCA), 2010). Despite World War II which disrupted the continuity of this competition, during this time most of the Asian countries succeeded in earning independence from the Empires. Many of the newly independent countries developed the concept of 'Asian Games' with the purpose of strengthening mutual understanding among all Asian countries (OCA, 2010). In 1949 the Asian Athletic Foundation was formed and organised the 1st Asian Games in 1951 in New Delhi. Thereafter it was held once every four years (OCA, 2010) and present day Asian sport builds on the foundations of these events.

At present, Asia has become a centre of modernity under globalization and has undergone significant revolution along with economic integration and social development (Hong, 2002). Although there are diversities in landscape, culture and societies, sport has been advocated as a multi dimensional component in contemporary Asian culture (Mangan, 2003). The concept of regional sport has become more prominent within recent decades in Asia and increasingly popular within Asian cultures (OCA, 2008). The possible reasons for this popularity and prominence are twofold; firstly it is evident that not only have regional sports in Asia provided uniquely outstanding opportunities

to advance societies socially, politically and economically, but also sports have allowed Asian athletes to acquire many sporting skills. Mangan (2003) states,

Asian nations have taken western sports by the scruff of the neck and reshaped them in their own image (eg. Cricket and Baseball). This reshaping has been part and parcel of other cultural adjustments (P.8).

Second, Asia has some sports that have been embraced by the West, in particular Martial Arts and Polo (Mangan, 2003). Over the past twenty years sport movements in Asia have achieved high participation and competition levels helping athletes excel in more sporting events (OCA, 2008). The development and progress of sport in Asia particularly at the elite level has been clearly reflected in the winning of Olympic medals within the last ten years (OCA, 2008).

While Asia's rise in sport is a bright spot and the popularity of sport across Asia is remarkable, there is room for further improvement in sports management and promotion, especially for women. The purpose of this paper is to broadly discuss issues affecting regional sport in Asia for women and to offer suggestions for future development. In particular, this paper discusses the following:

1. Why regional sports have become increasingly prominent in Asia?
2. How regional sports have impacted on female athlete and gender equality in Asia?

### **Why regional sports have become increasingly prominent in Asia?**

The most significant feature of sport development in Asia is the increase in comprehensive sporting events admitted by the International Olympic Committee (OCA, 2008). The governing body of Asian sports development, the Olympic Council of Asia, has implemented two types of development plans in promoting sports competitions to fulfil the requirements of sport development in Asia. The first is the promotion of the Asian Games (summer and winter) and in parallel, the Asian Indoor Games, the Asian Beach Games, the Asian Martial Arts Games and the Asian Youth Games which provides opportunities for Asian countries to send their participants to compete at continental level. Second, the growth of events such as regional games in the five Asian zones, the South Asian Games, East Asian Games, Central Asian Games, South East Asian Games and the West Asian Games, have provided ample support and opportunity for the less developed Asian countries to strengthen their sporting abilities and training (OCA, 2008).

One advantage is that by participating in such competitions at continental or regional level, participants of Asian countries may increase their opportunity of taking part in competitive sporting events within a very short period. As mentioned above, these sporting opportunities were created to encourage more Asian athletes to achieve medals and to help them reach elite level in the world sporting competitions.

Asia is the fastest growing continent in the world in winning gold in the Olympics. In the last Olympics (2008) it was second on the gold medal table and third in total

medal count (OCA, 2008). From the 302 gold and 958 in total medals at the Beijing Olympics, Asian athletes won 86 gold and 111 medals in total (OCA, 2008). This was respectively 28.5% of the gold medal count and 11.6% of the medal count, represented in figure 1 below.

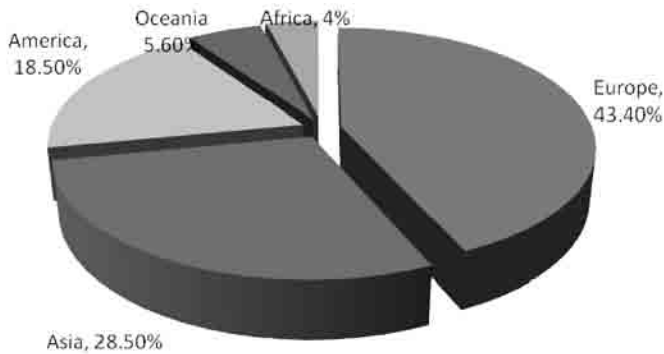


Figure 1. 2008 Olympic gold medal winning between continents.

In the past 20 years Asia has significantly increased by four times its number of Olympic medals from 21 in 1988 to 86 in 2008 (OCA, 2008). The number of Asian countries that won at least one Olympic gold medal increased from 3 in 1988 to 12 in 2008 (OCA, 2008). During the same period those who got a place on the Olympic medal table rose from 9 to 19 (OCA, 2008). It is also worthwhile to refer to the significant growth of athletes in particular Asian women participating in the Olympic Games during the past decades. Please see table 1 below:

Table 1

The growth of Asian women participation in the Olympic Games from 1996 - 2008 (IOC, 2008).

Asian Regions	Number of Women Participants 2008	Number of Women Participants 1996	Percentage increase in 2008 participation, relative to 1996 (%)
Central Asia	96	36	267
South Asia	38	20	190
South-East Asia	79	48	164
West Asia	20	5	400
East Asia	675	462	146
Total	908	571	159

It can be seen that there was a considerable overall growth for Asian women participating in the Olympic Games from 1996 to 2008. In particular, the West Asian region, which represents the majority of Muslim women, shows a considerable improvement of their international sport participation.

In the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Asian women athletes won 102 medals in total and this includes 1 gold, 1 silver and 1 bronze medal in the mixed events (OCA, 2008). The distribution of medals won by Asian women athletes in 2008 Olympics is recorded in table 2 below:

Table 2

Medal distribution of Asian Women athletes in 2008 Olympics (OCA, 2008).

Country	Region	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total
China	East Asia	27	11	20	58
Korea	East Asia	5	4	4	13
Japan	East Asia	5	2	5	12
North Korea	East Asia	2	1	2	5
Thailand	S. East Asia	1	1	0	2
Kazakhstan	Central Asia	0	2	2	4
Indonesia	S. East Asia	0	1	1	2
Singapore	S. East Asia	0	1	0	1
Mongolia	East Asia	0	1	0	1
Chinese Taipei	East Asia	0	0	2	2
Azerbaijan	Central Asia	0	0	1	1
Uzbekistan	Central Asia	0	0	1	1
Total		40	24	38	102

It is worth noting that women from “West Asia” represented by the Muslim majority and “South Asia” represented by the least developed countries did not win even one medal in the 2008 Olympics. Only 12 countries were able to win medals out of 45 Asian countries so it is important to investigate the reasons for this. Women athletes who represented the “East Asian” region were able to win the highest number of medals, followed by the “Central Asian” and “South East Asian” women athletes. There were 132 Olympic records set in the 2008 Olympic Games along with 43 world records, and all women achieved 45 records in total including Asian women athletes (OCA, 2008). This is recorded in table 3 below:

Table 3

Olympic records of Asian Women athletes, 2008 Olympics (Official website for the Beijing Olympic Games, 2008).

Name of the athlete	Country	Sport	Event
Zhang Juanjuan	China	Archery	Individual women
Liu Chunhong (set three world records)	China	Weight lifting	69kg
South Korean women Archery team	South Korea	Archery	Team women
Chen Xiexi	China	Weight lifting	48, 95, 117kg
Prapawadee Jaroenrattanatarakoon	Thailand	Weight lifting	126 kg (clean & jerk lift)
Pang Jiaying	China	Swimming	200m swimming free style women (heat 4)
Guo Wenjun	China	Pistol shooting	10 meter women
South Korean women Archery team	South Korea	Archery	Quarter final team women
Chen Ying	China	Pistol shooting	25 meter women
Du Li	China	Air Rifle shooting	50 meter women 3 positions
Jang Miran (set three world records)	South Korea	Weight lifting	75kg (snatch)
Liu Zige	China	Swimming	200 meter butterfly

This data suggests that sport maybe becoming more important for women in Asia and that competition at the elite level is valued. In parallel to the increase in competitive sport and subsequent achievement in Asia, participation rates for non competitive purposes has increased. The increase in participation would appear to be for pleasure and the educational value of sport. Increased interest in sport can also be attributed to the establishments of new sport studies Universities and new sports science courses which have resulted in more research into Asian sports and an increase in sport education within Asian countries. For example Sri Lanka has introduced two new sport science courses into the University curriculum and at present they are researching collaboratively with the Ministry of Sports and Education. New sports policies have been implemented by many Asian governments including strengthening women's sport participation, for example, the development of women's sport clubs in Pakistan and Afghanistan. In addition, support has been given to female athletes to enhance their sport participation, such as insurance for female athletes, child care facilities for female athletes and improving facilities for females in the sporting complexes.

**How regional sports have impacted on women athlete and gender equality in Asia?**

Many Asian countries have distinctive cultural identities. Unfortunately in the past, most of the women athletes did not have the opportunity to participate in sport due to cultural barriers. For example, within some Asian cultures, imposed religious observances means sports dress code (short and tight) are not allowed because they do not provide for women’s dignity and pride. As a result some women athletes were not allowed to participate in sport. In some Asian countries (mostly South Asian) the virginity of a girl is very important until she gets married and many families are very keen for their daughters to retain this respect. A lack of awareness of sports injuries and the erroneous view that physical activity affects virginity has meant that many families forbid their daughters’ participation in sports. Code (2004), however, emphasises that the rise of Asian feminism and the women’s movement has tended towards political liberation and gender equity. Similarly, Hong (2002) points out that the concepts of social and political rights of women in Asia has resulted in a significant change in women’s empowerment. For instance Sri Lankan Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranayake became the first ever female Prime Minister in the world and was followed by Indira Gandhi (India), Benazir Bhutto (Pakistan) Begam Kalida Zia (Bangladesh).

Due to the dramatic transformation in economic and social development in Asia, there has been a huge change in attitudes in some cultures. At present, some Asian women are confident within themselves regarding their sport, culture and religion. Due to globalization, the number of women taking part in the Olympics and other mega mixed sex sporting events is rising in Asia. There has been growth in sporting events in Asia for both men and women, which have been promoted to world events and accepted into the program of the Olympic Games. Therefore, Asian women athletes will also have the opportunity to participate in various competitions which includes several sporting events. Please see the table 4 below:

Table 4  
The growth of women’s participation in Asian Games (OCA, 2010).

Year	Asian Games host country	Number of women athletes participated
1982	New Delhi	618
1998	Bangkok	2147
2002	Busan	3046
2006	Doha	3046
2010	Guangzhou	3591

Furthermore, even though they lived in radical Muslim countries, Friba Razayee became the first woman in the history of Afghanistan to compete in the 2004 Olympics as a Judo player, and Rubab Raza became the first woman to swim for Pakistan at the 2004 Olympic Games (OCA, 2006).

In 1993 there was an inauguration of a special international sporting competition named 'Women Islamic Games' to optimise the sport participation of Muslim women sport participation. This mega world sporting competition is organised by the Islamic Federation of Women's Sport (IFWS) under the patronage of the International Olympic Committee and the Olympic Council of Asia. All events in this sport competition are down from publicity and male spectators. Male referees and media coverage are only allowed in Golf, Shooting and Archery only (OCA, 2010). This is an advanced opportunity for the Asian Muslim women to take part in sport.

Sport is not just an exotic subject for women in Asia, it is also been supported by families. For instance, 22 year old Naseem Hamid, who was born and raised in the slums of *Korangi* in Pakistan, belongs to very poor parents. She became South Asia's fastest women by winning the 100 meter race in the 2009 South Asian Games, and became the first Pakistani women athlete to win the competition. Sara Nasir also returned to Pakistan with gold in karate in the same competition. A team of women's Cricket in the 2009 world cup, was the first in the history of Pakistani women's sport.

This situation has resulted in an increase in the number of women sports participants at the elite level in Asia, and these athletes become very famous within the new frontiers of the sporting world by winning world class medals. This popularity has helped women athletes to make great changes in their lives. In particular, it can be seen that sport has positively influenced the athletes' social status. For instance, Sri Lankan female athlete, Susanthika Jayasinghe, 2000 Sydney Olympic Bronze medallist, has become a candidate for the general parliament election in Sri Lanka in 2010. This incident can be shown as an example of the effect that empowerment through sport has to stimulate and inspire.

Due to the opportunities for participating in multi level competitions, the growing trend towards professionalisation and commercialisation in sport has also risen in the Asian regions. Sport has become an economic income generator and a good future investment. Elite athletes have the opportunity to earn millions by competing in sports. Triumphs even at a regional level have enabled athletes to overcome the hierarchy of traditional social stratification systems. The popularity of these athletes has also helped them to reach star status and become role models. Multinational companies have offered jobs to top level athletes to promote their products and athletes have the opportunity to participate in highly paid employment.

With the increasing number of women athletes from diverse backgrounds who are enthusiastically participating in sporting activities, Asian regional sports have helped women athletes from less developed countries in Asia, to enhance their sporting activities and increase their sport participation. The participation of women athletes in the most recent Asian Games is shown in table 5 following:

Table 5

Regional distribution of women's participation in Asian Games 2010 (OCA, 2010)

Region	Number of women athletes	Percentage %
Central Asia	328	9.13
South Asia	469	24.23
West Asia	250	6.96
East Asia	1674	46.62
South-East Asia	870	13.06
Total	3591	100

It can be seen that all Asian countries excluding the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have represented women athletes to the 2010 Asian Games. East Asian countries represented the majority of women athletes in Asian Games. However, West Asia which represent Muslim majority were able to send considerable women participants to the Asian games. South Asia which represents the most developing countries was also able to send substantial women participants to the Asian Games in 2010. This illustrates how Asian women athletes in particular, have been able to break the glass ceiling in male dominant cultures and inspire others to overcome their situations.

### **How to overcome the barriers existing in implementing regional sporting events for female athletes in Asia**

The United Nations have prioritised gender equity and empowerment of women in their Millennium Development Goals (UN, 2010). The United Nations and the International Olympic Committee's declaration (2010) emphasised the importance of sport as a vehicle for achieving gender equality and continues to strive for equal opportunities for women in and through sport both at grassroot levels and in leadership positions (UN-IOC, 2010). Although Asian women athletes are showing increased achievements in world sports, they need to make further efforts to participate in a diverse range of sports. There are many challenges facing Asian athletes and sports movements, and governing bodies of sports in Asia must find solutions for these challenges.

Most Asian countries have spent many years under ruthless colonial rule and were racially discriminated against while their country's resources were exploited by the Empires. Many Asian countries produced commercial crops which resulted in a foreign identity and virtually destroyed their agricultural based traditional cultures (Clive, 2001; Furnivall, 1956; Mangan, 2003). Most of these colonized countries are now developing countries and battered by often brutal internal or external political crises. Huge humanitarian crises continue such as, the Kashmiri problem in India, ethnic



conflict in Sri Lanka, Nepali Maoist activities, Afghani Taliban activities, the North and South Korean problem, the China and Taiwan problem, China and Tibet problem, Iraq war, Lebanon war etc. The attention of governments has therefore been focused on security, with little thought paid to sports development.

Andreff (2006) emphasises that there is a comprehensible difference of investment into sport between developed and developing countries and the government is the main sponsor and patron of sporting activities in many developing countries.

Sporting events and sports teams do not make people forget underdevelopment, poverty, hunger and illiteracy. Regardless of government's policy declaration, sport is neither a top priority in the state budget, nor a pillar of the country's education system in any developing country (Andreff 2006, p. 308).

These concepts fit well with Asian developing countries as their societies are at risk and governments are the main sponsors and patrons of their countries' sport development. In particular, sport connectedness in developing Asian countries is interrelated with economic and social capital. However, sport is under-represented and given low priority in governments with low economic capital alongside social exclusion and low social capital. Consequently the output of these developing countries receives negative international sport recognition. This negative reputation directly impacts on sport development of developing Asian countries. Figure 2 below demonstrates the cycle of how, on a micro level, sport investment influences the macro level outcome in developing Asian countries.

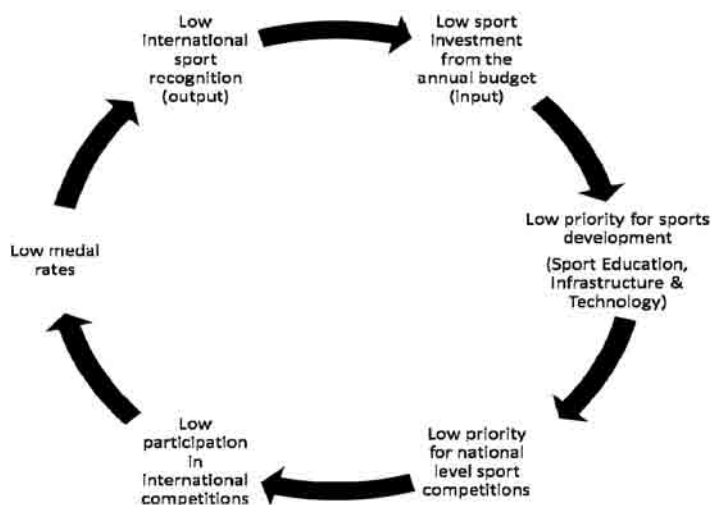


Figure 2. The Cycle of Interconnectedness of inputs and outputs of sport in developing Asian countries.

Achievement of medals is one of the scales used to measure the sport development in a country and a high sport medal rate promotes a country to a thoroughly modern state. This is the reason for including the term 'medal rates' in the cycle of Interconnectedness of inputs and outputs of sport above. China is a good example that promoted their sporting reputation by achieving 'first place' in the 2008 Olympic Games. Another example is the triumph of India in obtaining second place in the 2010 Commonwealth Games. Conversely, due to the inequalities in sport development, none of the developing Asian countries could achieve such a place.

Discussing the inequalities in sport development in Asia even further, it can be seen that the most powerful countries in Asia have world class sporting complexes such as the Chinese Bird's Nest, Sang-am Stadium in Korea, Japan's National Olympic Stadium, Rajamangala Stadium in Thailand and Bukit-Jalil National Stadium in Malaysia. These stadiums are at present used to host national and international events continuously, and show that they have the capacity to attract huge number of spectators. Humphreys (2006) suggests that "spectator sports are important public goods. Casual and fervent sports fans derive important consumption benefits from attending and watching sporting events" (p.217). Unfortunately most of the less developed Asian countries do not hold any world class sporting facilities and are unlikely to be able to host a world class sporting event. Developing Asian countries are still lacking resources that may provide infrastructure for their sports development programmes. For instance, the lack of venues suitable for world class events illustrates the need for government support for building sports infrastructure and facilities. There needs to be feasibility studies from the Asian governing bodies of sport to solve these problems of inequality. Humphreys (2006) points out that each dollar of direct spending in a sporting facility generates more dollars in secondary or indirect spending in the surrounding community. As a result sporting facilities per capita income generates a country's economical and social stability. Thus governments need to create the infrastructure to fulfil the sporting requirements of the entire nation; not only for elite athletes but also for use in non competitive sports.

It is also important to pay more attention to the technical development of sport in Asia. Many new innovations have been developed in the West relating to sports and a failure to adapt to the new technologies will be a great disadvantage for Asian athletes and sport coaches. Accordingly Asia must enhance the development of technical facilities in sport. This can be achieved by sharing technical assistance, providing sport scholarships, donating new equipment, sharing sports research, and inviting poor athletes to train under the well established sport venues in developed countries. This integration can be accomplished with the mutual cooperation between Ministries of Sport, National Olympic Committees and Asian Sport Federations.

Government projects aiming to enhance the quality of services provided to athletes and to improve athletes' training, living and educational conditions should also be expanded. For example, there is much demand for establishing sports universities, institutions and academies in Asia to train athletes, sport coaches, referees, physical education teachers and sports lecturers.

To have this level of development of sport in Asia through regional games it is a duty of all governments to utilize the public money wisely by providing incentives to athletes. Humphreys (2006) argues that many people hold the opinion that one or more high profile professionals sport teams and facilities help to make a 'world class' city. All of these factors are inclined with economic value and they support the argument that public funds should be used to subsidise sports facilities. Therefore sporting governing bodies should implement a well balanced sporting policy with strategies to develop male and female sport participation. In order to reach the long and short term objectives of each country's sport policy, it is very important to identify each country's weakness and strengths, and develop plans to realize the desired progress. However, there should be more attractive promotions in women's sport to encourage and support women's participation in sport. For example, governments can implement projects at different stages of women's lives such as sports promotion for girls, mothers and elderly women as well as for competitions and recreational purposes. Women should also be welcomed to contribute strong decision making at the sports management level. This opportunity can be enhanced at club, national federation, regional and international level.

## Conclusion

Regional sport has become more popular and influential overall but especially for Asian women because they can acquire many sporting skills and take advantage of more opportunities. These situations have helped Asian women athletes to break the glass ceiling in sports and to become more dominant, courageous and able within many other areas of society. There should be more attractive promotions in Asia in "women's sport" to encourage and support women's participation in sport. Government projects need to enhance the quality of services provided to athletes and to improve athletes' training, living and educational conditions.

## Bibliography

- Andreff, W. (2006). Sport in developing countries. In Andreff, W. & Szymanski, S. (Eds). *Handbook on the Economics of Sport*. Cheltenham, Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd. (p 308-309)
- Clive, C. (2001). *Ideology and Revolution in South East Asia 1900-1980: Political Ideas of the anti colonial era*. London; Routledge, (p 60-124)
- Code, R. (2004). (Eds). Asian Feminism. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). *Encyclopaedia of Feminist Theories*. New York, Routledge. (p32)
- Furnivall, J. (1956). *Colonial Policy and Practise: A Comparative Study of Burma, Netherlands and India*. New York
- Hong, F. (2002). Into the future: Asian Sport and Globalization. *International Journal of the history of sport*, 19: 2, (p 401-407)
- Humphreys, B. (2006). The Economic impact of Sporting facilities. In Andreff, W. & Szymanski, S. (Eds). *Handbook on the Economics of Sport*. Cheltenham, Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd. (p 214-218)

- IOC. (2010). List of Olympic medals, 2008 Olympics. Retrieved from [www.olympic.org](http://www.olympic.org) on 22.4.2010
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2010). 1st UN-IOC Forum. Retrieved from <http://www.olympic.org/en/content/Olympism-in-Action/Development-through-sport/Development-through-Sport-First-UN-IOC-Forum-shows-way-forward/> on 2.10.2010.
- Jinxia, D. (2003) *Women, Sport and Society in Modern China*. London, Frank Cass. P26-27
- Mangan, J. (2003). Asian Sport: From the Recent Past. In J. Mangan, F. Hong. (Eds), *Sport in Asian Society Past and Present*. (P 1-10) New York: Frankcass Publication
- Nanayakkara, S. (2008) Olympism: A western liberal idea that ought not to be imposed on other cultures? In R. Barney, M. Heine, K. Wamsley & G. MacDonald (Ed), *Pathways: Critiques and Discourse in Olympic Research. 9th International Symposium for Olympic research*, (p 351-358). Ontario, University of Ontario.
- Official website for the Beijing Olympic Games. (2008). Retrieved from <http://en.beijing2008.cn> on 21.10.2010.
- Olympic Council of Asia (OCA). (2008). Medal tally of Asian NOCs in Beijing 2008 Olympic Games. Retrieved from <http://www.ocasia.org/BeijingAsianResults.asp> on 22. 3. 2008.
- Said, E. (1989). Representing the colonized: anthropology's interlocutors. *Critical inquiry*, Volume 15, No 2 (winter). Chicago, the University of Chicago Press. (P 205-225)
- United Nations (UN). (2010). Millennium Development Goals. Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/> on 12.8.2010.

### Biographical notes

Samantha Nanayakkara is a doctoral candidate in the School of Sciences and Physical Education, University of Canterbury.

Associate Professor Ian Culpan is the head of the School of Sciences and Physical Education, University of Canterbury.

Dr Jane McChesney is a senior lecturer in the School of Sciences and Physical Education, University of Canterbury.