

Submission to the
Victorian Gender Equality Strategy
March 2016



Women's Health in the South East endorses the submission of the Women's Health Association of Victoria, the peak body for women's health services funded under the Victorian women's health program. We also outline our support for submissions submitted by the three statewide women's health services and the regional women's health services, who work to advance the health, safety and wellbeing of women and girls across Victoria.

This submission has been prepared by Women's Health in the South East (WHISE).

We congratulate the Victorian Government for committing to the development of a Gender Equality Strategy.

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About us

Women's Health in the South East (WHISE) is the regional women's health service for the Southern Metropolitan Region. The organisation works within the two priority areas of: Prevention of violence against women (PVAW) and sexual and reproductive health (SRH).

Key elements of the work of WHISE are:

1. The provision of leadership and expertise in the areas of prevention of violence against women and sexual and reproductive health;
2. Placing immigrant and refugee women at the forefront of all efforts to prevent violence and to optimise access to sexual and reproductive health through employment of a culturally secure approach;
3. Monitoring all aspects of regional women's health, advocating on key women's health issues and facilitating integrated responses;
4. Delivering tailored training to organisations to assist in the orientation of policy and practice to recognise violence against women as a workplace issue and build capacity regarding gender equity;
5. Taking a whole of community approach to tackling the drivers of violence against women by influencing: service systems, regional policy and practice approaches, community attitudes and supporting community action;
6. Working in partnership to identify and reduce barriers to access for all women to sexual and reproductive services and to strengthen advocacy and the evidence-base in this area;
7. Evidence creation, translation and dissemination on issues relating to violence against women and sexual and reproductive health in partnership with ANROWS (Australia's National Research Organisation on Women's Safety) to inform best-practice approaches.

What are the most urgent areas of gender inequality that Victoria should tackle first?

Addressing gender inequality within Victoria is a complex and multi-faceted concern that is deeply rooted in the socio-cultural conventions maintained within the Australian context. Therefore, the gender inequities experienced by women are a cause and consequence of the broader social determinants of health. As a result, due to the coupling and multidimensional effects experienced by women within society, all areas regarding gender inequality are important. Challenging the current patriarchal society that underpins the disadvantage and discrimination experienced by women is fundamental, in order to advocate and encourage gender equity in all areas for female health and wellbeing.

Recommendations

- A stand alone gender equality strategy with regional action plans
- A co-ordinated systemic approach that encompasses legislative policies and practices to eradicate the gender equity women experience in all areas of women's health and wellbeing

What needs to be done to promote women's health and wellbeing?

The health and wellbeing of women can be better promoted by the adoption of integrated, inter-sectoral, whole-of-government policies to address the current gender based social and health inequities experienced by women. Gender based inequities are rooted in the social determinants of health which are 'the social, economic and political conditions in which people grow, live, work and age, and the structural drivers of those conditions'. An outstanding example of how effective Government policies can impact gender based inequities is the recent adoption of the policy recommendations from the special advisory committee on women and girls in sport. One of the adopted recommendations is to support sporting associations and peak bodies to fill at least 40 per cent of their board positions with women or miss out on funding. In addition, there is also the commitment of \$1 million to help remove cultural and structural barriers to women and girls getting involved in sport. The impact of these policy initiatives will positively impact girls and women's participation rates in sport, which will have positive life course impacts in their social determinants of: health, social inclusion, education and employment.

Furthermore, below are key social determinants which promote the health and wellbeing of women:

Violence against women

Violence against women (VAW) is the leading cause of ill health and death of women aged 15 to 44 years, with marginalised women carrying a disproportionate burden. VAW occurs within a social and cultural context that supports the underlying gendered drivers of violence. Socioecological factors associated with higher prevalence of VAW are the structures, norms and practices that reinforce gender inequality. Addressing the current structures, norms and practices that supports this inequality constitutes a preventative approach to VAW.

Recommendations

- To effectively address VAW, a preventative approach is a critical element of an integrated, whole of community response. Prevention efforts must be systemic, inter-sectoral and address the gendered drivers of VAW (Vic Health, 2015). In addition, preventing VAW initiatives must be linked to effective evaluation frameworks to measure effectiveness and sustainability.
- Education programs that build the preventing VAW literacy of the community must be implemented across all settings including workplaces, education and early education settings. In addition, health promotion initiatives that engage, educate and activate the community towards greater awareness of VAW and that contribute to sustained community action need to be resourced and supported. Specialist organisations such as Women's Health Services are vital to the success of a sustained reduction in VAW. In addition, evidence informed and targeted initiatives to address the disproportionate VAW burden carried by marginalised populations of women such as: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI), culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD), women with disabilities and geographically disadvantaged women need to be sustainably resourced into the long term.

Education and training outcomes and post-school study and work prospects

There is a large body of international evidence showing an inverse relationship between education outcomes for women and the level of violence they experience. Improving outcomes should be a primary focus to improve the health and wellbeing of women and girls. Although girls generally outperform boys at school, they are less likely overall to transition from school to full engagement in work, education or a combination of both. In 2012, 73.5% of young women (aged 18–24) compared to 79.3% of young men were fully engaged in

employment, education or training. This gap has remained relatively unchanged for the past ten years. Women from lower socio-economic areas are doubly disadvantaged. In 2011, 53.6% of young women living in the most disadvantaged areas were fully engaged in work or study after leaving school. In the least disadvantaged areas the proportion was 82.1%, 28.5 percentage points higher. In addition, girls and women with low education levels are at far greater risk of violence and teenage pregnancy. Education and employment has been shown to be a protective factors in both reducing the risk of experiencing intimate partner violence as well as practicing safe sex practices. It is important for young people to receive respectful relationships and sexual health education in all education settings.

Recommendations

- The implementation of evidence-informed, tailored programs targeting girls from low socio-economic backgrounds to provide supportive pathways for employment and tertiary education. This will help to increase engagement and completion rates
- Consistent respectful relationships and sexual health education is required across all education settings

Participation in the labour force, as well as leadership and pay equality

Financial disadvantages start as soon as women enter the workforce. Graduate starting salaries are overall significantly lower for women than men—and in six of 23 specific fields. In 2013, women’s average weekly earnings were 17.5% lower than men, and women are less likely to be in higher-level or leadership roles. It is known that less than 3% of ASX 500 companies are chaired by women, and 28.9% of parliamentarians are women. Furthermore, women hold 39.2% of senior executive roles in the Australian Public Service (APS) despite making up 57.3% of the APS workforce. In State and Territory governments, between 27.6% and 40.0% of senior executives are women. To improve the number of women in leadership positions, organisations can set targets or implement quotas for the amount of women on boards or executive teams. This has been achieved by the City of Port Phillip with women totalling more than 50% of their management team, staff and councillors.

Similarly, access to child care significantly impacts on women’s employment. In 2011, a quarter of families with children under 12 did not access child care due to the financial costs. These lower pay and workforce participation inequities further contributes to women retiring with an average of 36% less superannuation than men.

Recommendation

- The adoption of organisational systems which support the identification of salary disparities between men and women. In addition the adoption of a gender lens approach across policy, processes and practice within all organisations

Health outcomes and use of and access to health services

Barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive health services for women include: lack of availability, paucity of specialist women's services, financial costs of specialist services, geographical distance, lack of culturally available services, low health literacy, reduced availability of abortion and termination services and health professionals bias in refusing to refer women to termination services.

Recommendation

- Implement monitoring processes that identify and address access barriers for women to sexual and reproductive services. Greater 'pro-choice' support with the medical and health sector including education programs for health professional in the areas of 'bias free' referral

Use of homelessness services

Almost half of all homeless persons in Australia are women aged 18-34 with marginalised women (CALD, ATSI, women living in rural and remote areas, women with disabilities and women with mental health issues) having the highest need. It is known that 489 per 10,000 Indigenous women are homeless when compared with 29 per 10 000 non Indigenous women.

In addition, each year 1 in 42 women aged 15-24 will access a specialist homelessness service and domestic violence and severe overcrowding are key issues affecting stable housing. In very remote areas of Australia, 21% of Indigenous women live in severely crowded accommodation. The main reason women report using homelessness services was domestic violence and family violence (34.3%). Furthermore, nearly a fifth of women (18.7%) who used homelessness services also reported financial reasons as the main reason housing support.

Economic and social participation of women with disabilities

Women with disability face additional challenges for labour force participation. In 2009, 49.0% of women with a disability were in the labour force which is significantly lower than the

proportion of men with disability (59.8%). Women with a disability are also less likely than men to use disability services. In 2010–11, 5.5% of women with disability and 8.7% of men used Employment Support Services and 31.2% of women and 37.8% of men accessed other disability support services.

Contribution of women as carers impacting economic participation and wellbeing

More primary carers are women, and they have lower workforce participation. There are nearly twice as many female primary carers of people with disability (523 200) as male (248 200). Among all carers of people with disability, 61.3% of women are in the workforce compared with 76.9% of men. Female primary carers are also more likely to experience negative impacts relating to their caring role such as feeling depressed, stressed and/or worried.

How do we address inequality among the most diverse and disadvantaged groups of women?

Improving equality for diverse and disadvantaged groups of women needs to be led by expert agencies such as the Multicultural Centre for Women's Health and ATSI agencies, who are best placed to build organisational and community capacity. In addition, best practice, incentive based policy will provide inducements which strengthen the development of targeted programs in the areas of: employment, training, education, leadership and social inclusion. In addition, it is imperative to build the capacity within diverse and disadvantaged groups of women in the areas of prevention of violence against women and sexual and reproductive rights.

Recommendations

- Increased funding and service availability for these population groups
- Intersectional lens and approach across all policies, procedures and practices by organisations
- Inclusive and tailored leadership programs for women from diverse and disadvantaged groups. Leadership programs should be both inclusive and tailored to specific groups of women to ensure equal access to appropriate and meaningful programs. Tailored, specific programs should be led by women who belong to these groups themselves, based on intersectional gender equitable principles and following a self-advocacy and empowerment model

How should Government partner with the community, corporate sector, non-profit sector and other stakeholders to advance gender equality?

The primary role of Government in relation to gender equity is in the development and implementation of policies that enable an integrated and coordinated approach to advance gender equality. The government is best placed to lead the work of community, corporate and not-for-profit organisations in advancing gender equality through adequate resourcing of specialist organisations to build cross-sectoral capacity. The existing women's health sector which is made up of nine regional and two state-wide services has the expertise, affiliations and reach to implement an integrated Victorian gender equality strategy. These women's health services and the women's health program within the state has gender equity as its core business, and these agencies play a fundamental role in leading regional action plans that ensure effective leadership of regional collaboration, integration and accountability for gender equity work. Through the provision of adequate and sustained funding for Victorian women's health services, the government would achieve its objective of a state wide gender equality strategy, which will contribute to the advancement of gender equality.

What is the role of business in addressing gender equality?

Organisations are a key setting to advocate and implement gender equality perspectives and strategies. Workplaces currently reflect and reinforce the broader structural and contextual environment which favours male progression and reinforces gender inequality. This experience contributes to women being marginalised within their working environments. As such, women experience disadvantage within the workplace at various contextual levels and therefore a systematic approach is required in order to eradicate these current barriers. Evidence suggests that gender bias' exists within workplace settings through disparities regarding resources, entitlements, promotion and leadership positions and remuneration (Sojo & Wood, 2012). It is understood that the workforce participation rate for women is currently 59.1% when compared to 71.1% for males and the financial disparities that exist reflect that the full time average weekly earnings for women are 17.9% less than men (Sojo & Wood, 2012). Similarly, one third of reporting organisations stated that they have no women within managerial positions and furthermore, 14% of ASX 200 companies do not have women on their board. Challenging the current systemic and structural systems within an organisation is required to occur through countering these experiences regarding women's recruitment, promotion, retention and leadership opportunities.

Furthermore, women experience conscious and unconscious bias within their working environment due to the broader contextual and structural influences. Current organisations reflect societal norms, attitudes and perspective regarding sexism and discrimination and

therefore are more tolerant of gender inequality due to these influential factors. Evidence suggests that there is a strong relationship between gendered organisational culture and violence against women within the working environment. In 2014, 25% of women had experienced violence within their work environment within the last five years. Furthermore, 45% of women are understood to experience workplace discrimination during pregnancy and whilst returning back into the workplace. As a result, women have higher levels of absenteeism, reduced morale and lack of supportive structures within their workplace and women often feel pressured to minimise or ignore their discriminatory experience within the working environment (Sojo & Wood, 2012), due to the evident power dynamics and disparities that exist and the social interactions and processes that occur within a workplace.

Businesses have an obligation to implement supportive environments that advocate gender equity. As a result, organisations are required to reorient their working environment to redress these current marginalised organisational fit, functioning and growth experienced by women as longitudinal research found that women experienced ongoing work and family conflict due to the influence of their gendered working environment (Sojo & Wood, 2012). Providing balanced working environments increases the health and wellbeing of women within organisations and has an impact regarding increased workplace satisfaction and employee morale, whilst also redressing women's experience regarding social and economic disadvantage. This therefore, increases an organisation's productivity and outcomes regarding their goals.

Recommendations

- Mandatory gender audits in organisations of their internal and external processes. A gender audit should be completed in all organisations to assess their current policies, practices and procedures regarding gendered disparities, risk management, discrimination and harassment
- Revising of organisation's policies and procedures to include equal participation and shared parental responsibilities. These policies are reflected in the Workshop Gender Equality Act 2012 and would hope to improve the organisational culture of gender equality.
- Build organisational capacity through workforce development strategies such as Women's Health Service's specialist gender equity training and the development of organisational toolkits to reflect best-practice evidence that challenges gendered attitudes and norms

What are the barriers to creating more flexible workplaces?

Key barriers to creating more flexible workplace include: lack of a systematic approaches, societal perceptions that addressing the needs of women are more costly and negatively impact the work output. However, evidence indicates that greater flexibility improves attraction and retention rates, improves work performance and organisational productivity and reduces infrastructure costs, absenteeism, reduces stress and improves work satisfaction levels. In a recent global study, 43% of respondents indicated they would prefer flexibility over a pay rise (UnifyCo, 2014), while research from Diversity Council Australia shows that flexibility is one of the top five employment drivers for men. In a recent study conducted by Stanford University, employees working from home achieved a 13% productivity improvement over their office-based counterparts. Deloitte and Google (2013) found that large organisations can save \$350,000 per annum on hiring costs alone through flexible workplace technology policy. Other cost benefits may be achieved by reduced workplace requirements.

What strategies do we need to ease the strain of balancing work and caring responsibilities?

In order to ease the strain of balancing work and caring responsibilities, a whole societal and community approach is required to challenge current parental norms. Evidence indicates that shared parental responsibilities leads to greater levels of life satisfaction for both partners and better psychosocial outcomes for their children. As a result, governmental and organisational policies are required to support equal parental leave for all parents.

Furthermore, the current barriers women experience regarding societal attitudes, workplace and skill development opportunities need to be addressed to advocate shared parenting and challenge the current sociocultural norms regarding child-bearing and parental roles. It was found that Victoria currently has the lowest labour force participation by female carers at 59.1%. Advocating shared responsibility is paramount to minimise the current strain women experience by balancing these socioculturally assumed responsibilities.

Recommendations

- Government and organisational policies that support equal paid parental leave
- Organisational policies and practices that orientate cultural shifts towards the recognition that family and community care are equally shared between women and men
- All workplaces should have flexible workplace arrangements written in their policies and promote this opportunity to their staff. Evidence shows that where family friendly

workplace arrangements are available for both women and men, it makes the workplace more attractive to new applicants, increases productivity, helps retain valued workers and women are more likely to move into leadership positions.

How do we get women to participate in non-traditional careers, in particular STEM?

The current structural and contextual environment reflects gendered professions, contributing to poor participation by girls and women within STEM education and employment. Currently women are significantly under-represented within STEM fields. It was found that only 28% of STEM qualified individuals aged over 15 years were female, and this figure is 14% within engineering. Furthermore, only 33% of tertiary qualifications in STEM industry areas were awarded to women.

Recommendations

- A co-ordinated national and community response regarding policy agenda and legislation associated with discrimination through gender mainstreaming
- Community approach to challenge gendered professions and school based initiatives that advocate cultural change approaches regarding the pursuit of STEM education and employment of girls and women
- STEM education and employment providers to provide scholarships and financial remuneration for girls and women and Government to provide funding and support to the Science in Australia Gender Equity (SAGE) Initiative

How do we address the pay and superannuation gap for women in Victoria?

The pay and superannuation gap experienced by women is the result of current structural inequities that are maintained within society. As previously discussed, gendered financial and remuneration pay disparities is a prominent concern in all workplace participation, which is reinforcing and maintaining societal disadvantages of women. Furthermore, it is known that disadvantaged women are more likely to move in and out of paid work to care for family members, and this is a significant factor that is contributing to the superannuation gap experienced by women, due to this remuneration being linked with paid employment. It is known that the 'stagnation impacts' on superannuation for women due to the non-payment of parental and carer duties can result in a difference of \$80,000 or 46.6% in retirement balances between women and men, causing more women to live in poverty in later life. To address these inequities, a whole of government policy approach is required to influence industry practice.

Recommendations

- Paid employment parity and awards for women in all industry areas and an increase in paid parity for women in female dominated industries
- The adoption of organisational systems which support the identification of salary disparities between men and women. In addition the adoption of a gender lens approach across policy, processes and practice within all organisations
- Superannuation Guarantee payments should be included in the Australian Government's paid parental leave scheme, as recommended by the Productivity Commission, to ensure women's superannuation contributions continue while they are engaged in parental work

Industry Super Australia has also made a number of recommendations to address systemic structural unfairness resulting in the gender based super inequity.

These are:

- Reinststate the Low-Income Super Contribution (LISC). The LISC is a rebate of up to \$500 for part-time and low income earners who pay more tax on super than their personal income. However, in 2017 the LISC is due to be abolished. This will hurt the retirement savings of 45% of all working women who receive the LISC, further reducing their super balances by around 10%
- Recalibrate tax concessions on superannuation to benefit the lowest paid. Currently, tax concessions on superannuation flow are given to the highest income earners, who are primarily men. The lowest paid employees, who are predominately women, currently receive no tax break, which contributes to lower overall superannuation savings. Super tax concessions must be rebalanced to support the lowest paid as they build their retirement funds
- Introduce a 'Super Seed' contribution for those on lower to middle incomes. The Super Seed is a one-off contribution of \$5000 to those who are at risk of having lower super balances when they come to retire. The Super Seed would boost retirement savings and leverage compounding interest to maximum effect. It would target lower and middle income Australians aged 27-36 and particularly women, allowing for their superannuation to continuously grow, despite being on a lower income or having fragmented work patterns
- Raise the compulsory superannuation guarantee to at least 12%. Under Australia's superannuation law, The Super Guarantee Scheme maintains that an individual's

employer must pay the equivalent of 9.5% of an employees' salary into a superannuation fund. Combined with properly targeted tax concessions and other measures such as Super Seed, an increase in the Superannuation Guarantee would help build women's the retirement savings. Nevertheless, the increase in the Super Guarantee from 9.5% to 12% has been delayed until 2025

- Age pension reform. Superannuation and pensions are fundamental for a comfortable retirement for women. Recent changes to the age pension have created a disincentive for people to save more superannuation and will leave millions of middle and lower income earners short-changed in retirement. These changes should be reversed.

How should we celebrate and recognise women's achievements?

Current societal structures minimise, dismiss and do not effectively reflect the successes and achievements of women. This marginalisation of women's achievements is undermined within this public forum and due to this, minimise women's engagement with public participation. Challenging and eradicating the current structural and socio-political environment that marginalises women is needed in order to recognise the resiliency and capabilities that women attain within an individual's every day context.

Female achievement requires ongoing celebration in order to advocate for gender equity and female empowerment to encourage younger girls and women to maintain motivation and strive for their potential. Women's achievements are required to be recognised through the development and achievement of gender equity within organisational contexts and public leadership. Furthermore, public recognition and media coverage regarding women's achievements is fundamental. More specifically, professional women's sporting leagues currently maintain little coverage and awareness due to the male dominated sporting culture that is reflected through mainstream media.

Recommendations

- Systemic level advocacy and policy development regarding women's achievements and public recognition
- Government sponsorship deals with businesses regarding the broadcasting of women's sporting leagues
- Collective celebration of International Women's Day

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