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Feedback to the Victorian Government Gender Equality Strategy

Women's Health Goulburn North East

WOMEN'S HEALTH
GOULBURN NORTH EAST



Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE) was established in July 2000. Previously known as NEWomen, Women's Health Goulburn North East is the government funded, specialist women's health service for the Goulburn Valley and North East Victoria.

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Feedback to the Victorian Gender Equality Strategy

Representatives from Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE) were unable to attend the Gender Equality Strategy consultations in Melbourne on Friday 9th of September. After reading the discussion paper, which was released post the regional consultations, we felt it was essential we provide written feedback to inform and assist in the development of the strategy. The discussion paper has provided the basis for our feedback.

Introduction

The primary focus of this feedback is to acknowledge, that it is critical the Gender Equality Consultations, and the Gender Equality Strategy addresses **Masculinity**. For a broader overview, please refer to our original submission submitted in March 2016.

Currently, masculinity and men are absent from the conversation, and only one side of the gender coin is being discussed. The Gender Equality consultations are centralised on women, specifically what women need to do, and what women need to change in order to achieve equality. If the Gender Equality Strategy is serious about achieving equality, then we need to be talking about both genders, ensuring the strategy is addressing the issues and needs of both men and women. It is imperative the gender equality strategy challenges the current paradigm of gender, and what is and isn't acceptable behaviour for men and women.

The current Gender Equality Strategy Discussion Paper explores the 6 themes outlines below;

- Theme 1: Education
- Theme 2: Workforce participation and economic security
- Theme 3: Leadership
- Theme 4: Health and wellbeing
- Theme 5: Violence against women and girls
- Theme 6: Culture, sport and innovation

Whilst the above themes are significant and essential to be discussed, they are only discussed in relation to women, and not in relation to men. If we're talking about a gender equality strategy, why are we only talking about women? Why are both genders not included in the conversation? Why is there no mention of challenging and addressing the stereotypes and barriers both men and women face in our community that reinforce gender inequality?

Given the current imbalance and disparity in health, social and economic outcomes between men and women, it is justifiable and crucial that there is continued investment and focus on women's needs and improved outcomes. However to be able to affect change for women, it is of utmost importance to involve both men and women in this conversation equally, and place the social construction of masculinity on the agenda.

This feedback outlines the role of men in the Gender Equality Strategy, and what needs to be addressed in order to challenge current notions of masculinity and patriarchy. The National Framework to Prevent Violence Against Women and their Children: Change the Story, acknowledges that every sector, institution, organisation, community and individual has a role to play in preventing violence against women, and to achieve the ultimate goal of social transformation. This requires, all stakeholders and communities, working together to ensure efforts are mutually reinforcing and address the drivers of social issues, such as masculinity, which are deeply entrenched in our societies, communities and daily lives.

Theme 1: Education

Current actions being considered

Implement initiatives that encourage girls and young women to study and become leaders in traditionally male dominated fields and professions.

Ensure gender is given active consideration throughout the development of early childhood and school education policy, programs and practices.

Other actions that need to be considered

Implement initiatives that encourage boys and young men to study and participate in traditionally female dominated fields and professions.

Ensure gender and **challenging gender stereotypes** is given active consideration throughout the development of early childhood and school education policy, programs and practices.

Ensure teachers are adequately resourced and supported to deliver and implement gender equity and respectful relationships initiatives within the classroom, and more broadly, within schools and education institutions, taking a whole of school approach.

Respectful Relationships education to be incorporated into all University education degrees for future teachers.

Theme 2: Workforce participation and economic security**Current actions being considered**

Addressing pregnancy and other forms of sex discrimination as well as stereotypes about working mothers' commitment to their careers must be a priority of our community.

Affordable child care: Victorian mothers may choose not to return to work as they will be financially worse off.

Women take on the responsibility of caring for aging parents

Over their life course, women experience economic disadvantage, lower graduate pay, lower lifetime earnings, lower superannuation and lower savings, which contribute to an overall reduction in the long term financial security of women.

Other actions that need to be considered

Address the workplace discrimination that fathers experience in relation to paternity leave and care giving. [The Australian Human Rights Commissions](#), Pregnancy and Return to Work Review, report heard employers were more reluctant to approve requests from men to take parental leave than from

women. In addition, men said that they faced additional obstacles with accessing parental leave entitlements, in comparison to their female colleagues.

Supportive government policies that challenge current stereotypes of the male breadwinner and support men to take on board greater caring responsibility, providing women with an opportunity for greater workforce participation. This can be measured by the number of men and women in part time or flexible working arrangements.

The Victorian State Government and the community, to challenge stereotypes of men and women's roles in the workforce, and enable greater participation in female dominated industries such as childcare, retail and health care. This can be supported via workforce training, workplace policies and gender equity campaigns.

The Victorian State Government and community need to discuss ways in which we can support and enable men to take a greater responsibility for caring for aging parents. By challenging masculinity and the stereotype of women being the carers and nurturers, this may allow men to become more active in this space and reduce the burden on women.

- The discussion paper asks the question *“How can a state government assist women with the ‘juggle struggle’ of managing workforce participation while also bearing the greater burden for caring for children, households and aging parents?”*
- The answer is to enable greater participation of men in these activities to allow for a more equal and shared approach.

Theme 3: Leadership

Actions currently being considered

Women continue to be significantly underrepresented in senior leadership positions.

Under-representation in leadership roles is even more pronounced for women from CALD communities, women with disabilities, LGBTI Victorians, and women who are socio-economically disadvantaged.

Other actions that need to be considered

Men are underrepresented in part-time and flexible working arrangements – how can the Victorian Government and community support and enable greater participation of men in part-time and flexible working arrangements.

- Supporting men in part time and flexible working arrangements may allow for women to occupy and have further opportunity for career development. Supportive State Government and workplace policies and cultures can enhance the number of men in flexible and part time roles.

Workplaces participating in training professional development on the following topics – Unconscious Bias, Gender Equity and Preventing Violence Against Women, can enhance understanding of the barriers and stereotypes men and women experience in the workplace and the importance and value of gender equity initiatives.

- The Victorian Government can augment funding of the Women’s Health services across Victoria to support the delivery of training. Women’s Health Services are experienced in facilitating this training and have excellent understanding of the needs of workplaces in their communities

Greater equality and sharing of leadership roles in all aspects of the community e.g. sporting clubs, community groups and religious organisations

- Training in the above topics can build knowledge and understanding in these contexts, and enable these organisations to take ownership and action of the issue
- Further investment into organisations that can support these organisations such as Regional Sporting Assemblies, and Women’s Health services will allow for greater partnering in these settings and maximise up take of [resources](#) to assist and enable the organisation to become active in the promotion of gender equity.

Theme 4: Health and Wellbeing**Actions currently being considered**

Violence against women is the leading cause of ill-health and premature death for women aged 15-44.

Those women at significant risk of poorer health outcomes include: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women in rural and remote areas, women with a disability, economically disadvantaged women, LGBTI Victorians and women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The sexualisation and objectification of women can also impact negatively on women's health and wellbeing

Other actions that need to be considered

With alcohol fuelled violence and male suicide having strong connections to the pressures of masculinity it's crucial we address the underlying driver of these social issues, and address masculinity.

[Suicide is the leading cause of death for men under the age of 54](#). There are approximately 2,500 suicides each year. 75 per cent of suicides are by men – with an average of [6 men taking their lives](#) every single day in Australia.

Research and evidence demonstrate, [men tend to put off getting any kind of help](#) due to the belief and stereotype that men are supposed to be tough, self-reliant, manage pain and take charge of situations. There's a belief that the very idea of being a man is that you deal with issues and do not reach out or connect with others when issues arise. [ABS data shows only 27 per cent of men seek professional help](#), compared to 40 per cent of women. This notion of masculinity can make it difficult for men to acknowledge they have any health problems, let alone a mental health problem.

In many cases men turn to drugs or alcohol instead of getting assistance, this is especially so with men under 25. [Males are more likely than females to have been diagnosed with a substance use disorder](#), particularly an alcohol-related disorder.

[Men are more likely to drink](#), consume more alcohol, and cause more problems by doing so. This is a consistent trend across the globe. The 2013 National Drug Strategy Household Survey found that [males were far more likely than females to drink](#)

[alcohol](#) in quantities that placed them at risk from a single occasion of drinking (47% compared with 27% for women). It also found that males were likely to consume alcohol in quantities that exceeded the guidelines more often than women, with 20% of men consuming these quantities at least weekly.

In 2010, there were 157,132 [hospitalisations attributable to alcohol, of which 101,425 were males](#). For males, injuries were responsible for the highest proportion of alcohol-related deaths (36%), followed by cancers (25%) and digestive diseases (16%).

Alcohol has the effect of disinhibiting and triggering impulsive behaviour and exacerbates feelings of hopelessness and depression. Alcohol abuse and especially increased usage are common warning signs in suicidal men.

[Heavy drinking has often been associated with displays of masculinity or male camaraderie](#). This may encourage male drinkers to deny or minimize problems resulting from their drinking, or to regard drunken behavior as normal or permissible.

A common hypothesis to explain why men and women differ in their drinking behavior is that [alcohol consumption both symbolizes and enhances men's greater power](#) relative to women. Alcohol consumption, particularly in large quantities, has been an emblem of male superiority. The ability to consume large amounts of alcohol without apparent impairment may help to [demonstrate that the drinker is manly](#).

Alcohol may seem to [enhance power over others by facilitating aggressive behavior](#). Much research, particularly in studies of college students, has established that drinking leads to increased aggression toward other people, more by men than by women

Many Australians consider drinking to be part of our national identity. Much public debate in recent years has centred on the 'coward punch' and alcohol fuelled violence, which is a highly gendered public health issue, with the overwhelming majority of victims and perpetrators being male. The [coward punch has caused 91 deaths in Australia since 2000](#) according

to research by Monash University.

Sex disaggregated data at the national, state and local government level is crucial to assist identifying the differing issues for men and women, and to address their differing needs. Legislation to ensure all government data collected is sex-disaggregated will be greatly beneficial and assist all planners, government departments and health workers to understand and our communities and dedicating resources to where it is most needed.

Theme 5: Violence against women and girls

Current actions being considered

The significant evidence linking gender inequality and violence against women. The national framework, Change the Story highlights the need to address the gendered drivers of violence against women as a priority

Other actions that need to be considered

The Victorian Government supporting workplaces to participate in training and professional development on the following topics – Unconscious Bias, Gender Equity and Preventing Violence Against Women

The need to increase understanding and public conversation of how intersectionality and disadvantage places additional risk on the most vulnerable populations of women in our community e.g. disabled women, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) women

- Greater investment into organisations representing these populations such as the Disability sector, Multicultural groups and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sector will allow these organisations to have the opportunity to partner and support the Victorian community to better understand and meet the needs of these vulnerable populations.

Theme 6: Culture, sport and innovation

Current actions being considered

More men and boys participate in sport than women and girls. Media coverage is predominantly focused on male sports, and there is a significant disparity in the economic rewards available for sportsmen as opposed to sportswomen.

Other actions that need to be considered

The role of the Victorian Government and Victorian community in challenging current stereotypes that associate masculinity with sport and aggression. There needs to be community consultation and discussion on how can we promote a more fluid and whole concept of masculinity that allows males to freely participate in activities free from bias.

The need to enable greater participation in sport from vulnerable and marginalised populations, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Disability and Multicultural communities. These groups experience greater barriers to participation and are marginalised from the community. The Victorian Government and Victorian community needs to examine creative and holistic practices to be more inclusive and welcoming to these populations. Consulting with these sectors and peak bodies will assist in identifying strategies to enhance participation.

Conclusion

As stated in the introduction of the Gender Equality Strategy Discussion Paper, “According to the World Economic Forum, the world will not reach gender parity for another 117 years. We’re not prepared to wait that long. We think Victoria can do better”.

Until we discuss and address masculinity in our society, then we will not see any substantial change in gender equality, and will continue on the path of glacial change towards equity. For the reasons discussed above, our society needs to seriously discuss and confront the social construction of masculinity and the impact it is having not only on boys and men, but women and girls and our communities more broadly.

If the two biggest killers of men and women under the age of 45 (male suicide and male violence against women) have root

causes in **masculinity**, why aren't we doing more to address this in the Victorian strategy?