

Australian Women's Health Policy: The need for a new Initiative

Representatives of key women's health organisations based in Melbourne; Australian Women's Health Network, Public Health Association of Australia, Women's Health Special Interest Group, the Key Centre for Women's Health, Women's Health Victoria and CASA House are seeking support for a new gender equity/equality approach to national women's health policy.

In the 15 years since the former National Women's Health Policy was developed there have been major shifts in health trends and priorities and new approaches to public health have emerged.

Recent national strategies that have focused on specific health issues, such as the national health priority areas, nutrition and physical activity, alcohol and tobacco strategies and others, are not well placed to effectively address needs of women. Furthermore significant changes to the health system are affecting women's access to essential health services.

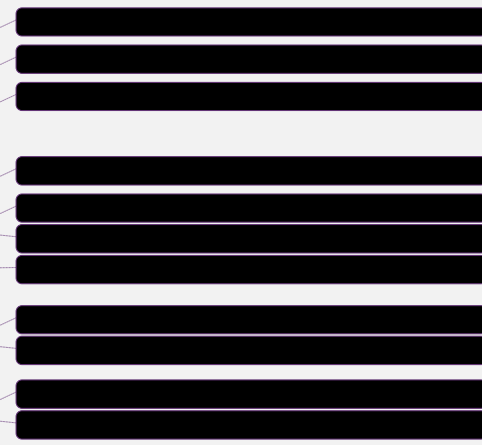
A key strength of the original National Women's Health Policy was its sustained level of support and recognition in the community over a long period. In part this was a result of the consultative processes used in its development.

New evidence about gender equity and health is emerging and new approaches are needed to address health inequalities and the needs of special population groups (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, refugees) in a coordinated way. A new approach would provide an opportunity, through the processes of its development, to engage a wide range of community groups and interests. Recognising the importance of a social view of health and the need to include a gendered perspective, especially

gender sensitive indicators across all health strategies and issues, could provide a unifying theme.

Major health issues such as tobacco, alcohol, violence, mental health and other priority areas are not isolated issues in the lives of women and a social view of health can underpin a successful and connected approach to prevention. Evidence of the current trends profiled below is often entangled in the same women's lives. They highlight the need for a coordinated, equity-focussed and gendered approach as a means of addressing the following issues in a coordinated way, focusing on the reality of women's lives.

- *Fertility and infertility (work/childbearing choices, falling fertility and rising infertility)*
- *Violence against women (evidence of adverse mental health, reproductive and substance misuse impact)*
- *Young Australian women's sexual and reproductive health (earlier 1st intercourse, rising STDs)*
- *Young women's rising substance misuse rates (especially tobacco and alcohol)*
- *Mental health (evidence of women's high rates of depression, eating disorders and suicidal ideation)*
- *Older women, poverty and caring (the intersections in older women's lives)*



Development of a gender equity approach would provide a means to invigorate current health policy, increase the effectiveness of strategic frameworks, and provide important linkages between the health sector and other initiatives in areas such as violence and women's safety, economic security, work and family balance and the status of women.