

***Women's Health NSW***

***Principles of Women's Health Care***



*Women's Health NSW aims to provide a strong independent public voice on women's health and wellbeing from a feminist, holistic perspective that values women's safety and dignity*

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To find your local Women's Health Centre go to [www.whnsw.asn.au](http://www.whnsw.asn.au)

## **Women's Health NSW**

Women's Health NSW is an association of state-wide women's health centres and specialist women's centres.

All centres are non-government, community based, feminist services that provide choices for women to determine their individual health needs.

The centres have a common aim to improve the health status of women by providing a unique, holistic, women-centred approach to primary health care.

They blend medical and clinical services and a range of counselling, health promotion, education, self-help and consumer advocacy services. They also aim to provide women with the knowledge, skills and resources to enable them to take more responsibility over factors that adversely affect their lives.

Operating from a feminist perspective they link the cause of ill health in women to a multiplicity of factors including biological, social, cultural, environmental and economic. These factors influence women's health status, their need of health services and their ability to access appropriate services.

## **Association Objectives**

WHNSW is the peak organisation providing sector leadership, acting as a central contact base for information, advocacy, representation and support. WHNSW promotes a coordinated approach to policy and planning, staff development, training, education and consultation between members, NSW Health and other government and non-government agencies.

All women's health centres are non-government, community based, feminist services that provide choices for women to determine their individual health needs.

Services provided will be provided within a feminist context which:

- Recognises the social, environmental, economic, physical, emotional and cultural factors which influence women's health.
- Recognises and challenges the effects of sex-role stereotyping and gender discrimination on women's health and well-being.
- Reflects the whole of a woman's lifespan, their various and changing roles and responsibilities, not just their reproductive life.
- Recognises the importance of maintaining well-being by the focus on preventative practices.
- Actively encourages the empowerment of women in both the personal and social aspects of their lives.
- Values women's own knowledge and skills and their right to make informed decisions about their health.

## Principles of Women's Health Care

Community based feminist women's health services are based on principles of social justice and an understanding of a gendered approach to health or health within a social context, as endorsed by governments throughout Australia. This endorsement was originally expressed in the National Women's Health Policy (1989) *Advancing Women's Health in Australia*. NSW Health policy continues to support a gender view of health through documents such as *Gender Equity in Health (2000)*, *NSW Health and Equity Statement (2004)*, *Strategic Framework to Advance the Health of Women (2000)*, *NSW Health Framework for Women's Health (2013)* and *URBIS Mapping of Women's Health Centres – Final Report (2017)*

This view recognises that:

- health is determined by a broad range of social, environmental, economic and biological factors
- differences in health status and health objectives are linked to gender, age, socio-economic status, ethnicity, disability, location and environment, racism, sex-role stereotyping, gender inequality and discrimination, ageism, sexuality and sexual preferences
- health promotion, disease prevention, equity of access to appropriate and affordable services and strengthening the primary health care system are necessary, along with high quality illness treatment services
- information, consultation, advocacy and community development are important elements of the health process.

In accordance with these principles, feminist women's health centres provide a service which:

- encompasses all of women's lifespans, and reflects women's various roles in Australian society, not just their reproductive role
- promotes the participation of women in debate and decision making about health issues, their own health care, health service policy, planning, delivery and evaluation
- recognises women's rights, as health care consumers, to be treated with dignity, in an environment which provides for privacy, informed consent, confidentiality and safety
- acknowledges that informed decisions about health and health care require accessible information, which is appropriately targeted for different socio-economic, educational and cultural groups

- uses existing data, research and policy concerning women's health, as well as incorporating women's views about their own health and the best strategies to address their health needs, in service planning and development
- provides appropriate women's health care to women in local communities, within a state-wide, coordinated approach
- ensures equity and accessibility of services without financial, cultural, geographic and or other barriers.
- ensures effective community management and operation of women's health centres by women, for women
- provides a broad range of services and strategies within a preventive and holistic framework, which:
  - is provided by women, for women
  - values women's own knowledge and experience
  - facilitates the sharing of women's skills, knowledge and experience
  - links women's individual experience and health needs to the social and cultural context of women's lives
  - empowers women
  - challenges sex-role stereotyping, gender discrimination, racism and homophobia which affect health
  - increase the accessibility, sensitivity and acceptability of health services for women
  - relates to identified health priorities at the local and state level.

***These principles are informed by the Australian National Women's Health Policy and NGO Women's Health Centres.***

## Women's Health Status

A multiplicity of factors including biological, social, cultural, environmental and economic, influence women's health status, their need of health services and their ability to access appropriate services. In particular women's health needs stem from the fact that:

- Women are more socially disadvantaged than men in terms of poverty, education and power. Socially disadvantaged people are more likely to become ill
- Women are more likely to use health services because of their social role as carers of children, older people, or people with disabilities and the extra strain this places on their health
- Women have particular sexual and reproductive health needs, for example, menses, pregnancy, childbirth and menopause
- Women are treated differently from men in society generally because of gender inequality resulting in, for example, violence against women and sexual assault. The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (2013) Agreed Conclusions: Eliminating and preventing violence against women and girls shows that few countries worldwide have undertaken the multi-sectoral and sustained approaches deemed necessary for effective prevention.
- Evidence suggests women in Australia experience the social determinants of health in unique ways, as well as face distinct health issues across their life span (NSW Ministry of Health, 2013). For example, a 2013 report found 1 in 8 women reported high/very high levels psychological distress (12.8%) compared to 1 in 11 men (8.8%), and a significantly high proportion of women deferred access to a GP due to cost (8.7%) compared to men (5.4%) (COAG Reform Council, 2013).
- Women are also treated differently within the health system. For example, Heart Foundation research presentation (2017), "Women receive lesser treatment in emergency departments in relation to presenting with heart attack symptoms than men with the same symptomology which has resulted in a higher number of deaths for women." (*Effect of patient sex on triage for ischaemic heart disease and treatment onset times: A retrospective analysis of Australian emergency department data and, Gender difference in treatment and mortality of patients with ST-segment elevation myocardial infarction admitted to Victorian public hospitals: A retrospective database study Lisa Kuhn.*)
- Women have frequently been excluded from being health and medical research participants leading to major gaps in knowledge about women's health. Even when women are included in "people" research the results are often not analysed in terms of gender so differences between men and

women are often not known, or an assumption is made that women are affected the same as men. This can lead to prevention, intervention and policy decisions that adversely affect women.

It was because of these and other factors that women in the community, feminist women, applied for and received funding from the Australian Commonwealth Community Health Program in 1974. Services were also developed using a socio-political, feminist analysis that highlighted the patriarchal nature of society and the oppression of women. For many years, women have argued for an understanding of a social view of health, highlighting the links between health status and the social position of women in society.

There are now 20 community managed women's health services funded by the NSW Health Department. They are complemented by various projects funded under other women's health initiatives. While the services vary in focus and size, their core principles remain consistent with those expressed in this document.

The following definition of women's health was endorsed by the Australian Health Minister's Advisory Council in 1993:

"The advancement of women's health requires the promotion of physical, mental and social well-being, following the broad definition of health adopted by the World Health Organisation. Women's Health issues are defined as social conditions, illnesses and disorders unique to, more prevalent among, or more serious in women, or for which there are different risk factors, interventions or strategies for women than for men."

At the state level, the NSW Government is also committed to improving the health status of women. In 2013, it established the NSW Health Framework for Women's Health 2013, which seeks to deliver services that are responsive to the needs of women and allow them to fulfil their potential (NSW Government, 2013). Adopting a life course approach, the framework outlines key priorities across women's lifespan and includes a broad range of strategies, such as addressing domestic and family violence, promoting access to health services and providing reproductive and health prevention, screening , treatment and education (NSW Government, 2013).

