

CSW 2009 Report - Australian Women's Coalition

According to the Australian Federation of Medical Women 'while sex identifies biological differences between men and women, gender refers to the array of socially constructed roles, attitudes, behaviours and values that determine in a large measure men's and women's access to resources and power. Gender roles and power relations vary across cultures and through time and thus are amenable to change'.

Australian people and the Australian Governments have worked in partnership to bring about social change in both attitudes and practice. Sometimes these changes have been the result of social pressure for change and at other times the changes have occurred as a direct result of Government initiatives.

The emphasis of this report will be on the priority theme listed below and while the review theme is not directly addressed the implications of the priority theme will have relevance for the review theme.

The two themes for CSW 2009 consideration

- ***Priority theme: the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including care giving in the context of HIV/AIDS.***
- ***Review theme: the equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels.***

The Aide Memoire provided by the United Nations as a guideline for the UN Expert Group Meeting has defined five major elements of the priority theme for discussion at CSW 2009. While these themes are uniquely different it would be inappropriate to discuss these issues in isolation without referring to the inter-connectedness between some, and in some cases, all of the situations that have been identified as the sub-themes. The sub-themes are listed below.

- 1. Gender stereotypes and unequal power relations;***
- 2. The unequal sharing of responsibilities between women and men at the household level;***
- 3. The unequal sharing of responsibilities between women and men in the public sphere;***
- 4. Equal sharing of care giving in the context of HIV/AIDS; and***
- 5. Legislative and policy responses to promote the equal sharing of responsibilities between men and women in all areas.***

Significant issues addressed

Some significant issues addressed in the report include access to education and the pay equity gap on graduation; the economic and social changes in the Australian lifestyle that perpetuate gender stereotypes and unequal sharing of responsibilities; that consideration be given to single parents in the formation of support for women in the household sphere; the need for attitudinal change and a whole of community approach to decision making in the public sphere; grandparenting as a childcare solution that disadvantages the caring grandparent (often women) through loss of opportunities to accumulate sufficient superannuation to minimise the risk of poverty in their retirement; and family friendly policies in government and business.

Within these sub-themes, what key issues are important for Australia?

1. *Are there policies or practices that have been effective in Australia that could also be beneficial to other nation states in addressing equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men? Why have these been effective?*

The thread of these questions is entwined with each of the topics. In most cases the policies and practices have *with modifications over time* proved beneficial to Australia and the **processes** adopted in achieving the current situations are worthy of sharing with other nation states. The equal sharing of responsibilities of women and men at the household level and in the public sphere is still a work in progress. Yet it would be inappropriate not to acknowledge the large amount of progress that has been achieved.

The factors that have brought us to this stage of progress towards equal sharing of responsibilities in the household level are complex and diverse. The success of the required attitude change in the sharing of responsibilities is the result of a 'whole of community' approach by all concerned parties to work together to achieve our mutual goals even if the approaches and preferences for process are different.

2. *Have there been policies or practices that have not had a positive impact in Australia which can be shared with other nation states to help inform their approach to improving shared responsibilities between women and men?*

The Government and the Community are concerned about the prevalence of domestic and/or family violence. Initially there was no such thought as equal sharing responsibilities at the household level! Fortunately through educative programs women and the wider community changed their attitudes to these social myths. Police have been empowered to take legal responsibility in determining further action in situations of DV and Sexual Abuse which are now recognised as crimes. This means victims can be supported without fear of retribution from the perpetrator.

Governments established and financially supported refuges for both women and youth. There is still a lot of work to be done in this area and recommendations are included.

The Commonwealth Government has initiated a number of policies and projects to educate both women and men and it pleasing to see the support of the White Ribbon campaign. The benefits of having men as ambassadors to speak against domestic violence is very commendable, as long as they are speaking to men and not to the already converted women's groups. This project could definitely be shared with other member states of the United Nations in New York in 2009.

The decision to sign the CEDAW Optional Protocol and issues being researched by the Productivity Commission that directly impact on the status of women are worthy examples of how decision making operates in Australia. Research issues under consideration are planned to meet some current and emerging needs of social change, such as, increased separation as a result of no blame divorce legislation, concerns for women who, because of caring responsibilities are not consistently in the workforce to obtain sufficient superannuation for their retirement, increased cost of housing, access to affordable childcare, no access to paid maternity leave for most women, and the emergence of depression as one of the major health concerns and the effect this has on gambling, family relationships that in some cases may lead to family violence. Some Government initiatives under consideration to address current emerging social issues include drought relief and support, paid parental leave, gambling and financial counselling, and a special public inquiry into minimising family violence.

It is the process of change as much as the change itself that reflects the unique 'whole of community approach' to decision making on social practices and policies. The Commonwealth Government of Australia is determined to have the support of all sectors of the community in decision making including the corporate, community and all levels of government and to carefully consider the potential flow-on effects to all levels of community prior to final decision making.

3. *What more, or what else, needs to be done?*

Australia needs to develop a greater awareness of the impact of the globalisation of world economies and to be in touch with the proposals and protocols developed by the United Nations. This awareness would put Australia in a strong position to respond to the emergence of new and urgent issues that need to be addressed. The primary step could indicate the essentiality of positive leadership by all levels of government which would include the need to have an organised infrastructure in place to identify/anticipate emerging issues, including issues identified by the community, and to provide effective leadership and cooperation with community organisations to find workable solutions through a whole of community approach to:

- achieve pay equity for both genders;
- educate employers on the mutual benefits of providing training and opportunities for promotion to middle and higher management for women; and,
- ensure that minority groups are not disadvantaged by policy decisions (for example single parents; rural and remote families, parents with disabilities and/or parents that have children with disabilities; or families on low incomes whose real income may be affected by choices they would need to make in relation to the productivity recommendation in relation to parental leave)

A major blot in our past was the treatment of Indigenous Australians. Many positive steps are being taken by Government to respect the needs, culture and life-style of these Australian citizens and in particular to empower women in rural and remote communities to be equal decision makers in their local and broader communities. More still needs to be done and some recommendations are in the report.

Sub-theme 1. *Gender stereotypes and unequal power relations*

There is evidence that some of the early settlers in Australia were aware that two of the important issues that were emerging for the development of Australia were access to education and health services.

Unequal power relations and gender stereotypes have been evident in the political system of Australia despite the fact that Australia was the first country in the world to allow women to stand for election to parliament.

The fact that Australia currently has its first woman as Deputy Prime Minister, its first female Deputy Leader of the Federal Opposition and our first female Governor General; and there have been female Premiers in some Australian States; an increased number of women holding political office at all levels of Government and the number of women in the judicial system and specifically the recent appointment of a woman to the High Court are all indications of attitude change and the ongoing acceptance of women in public spheres.

This change in attitude is a great cutting edge of redressing the gender stereotypes and unequal power relations in Australia's political and legal system. Despite these gains some discrimination against women is still evident in many public spheres.

The role of Migration in Australia's social and economic development

Migration has always been part of the Australian development. Australia has grown and prospered through its migration policies adopted by the governments of the day to meet the need for more workers. This had led to Australia become a multi-cultural society which has many positive effects on our society but also brings with it issues and problems of different cultural practices both in the equal sharing of responsibilities in the household and the public sphere.

Access to Education and the Pay Equity Gap on Graduation

The Australian Government's role in Education

Federal Government funding for private schools continues to be strongly debated by the Unions and by Federal and State Governments, and the wider community

An issue generated in a multi-cultural society is the desire for specialist schools for multi-cultural groups – e.g. a recent issue in regard to the establishment and location of a Muslim school. This is an issue that all levels of Government and the wider community will need to work in partnership with the Federal Government to adopt a whole of community approach to find equitable solutions.

The Australian Government's priorities for schooling aim to deliver national consistency, high standards and values, and parent focused schooling. These conditions aim to provide choice and improve educational outcomes for all students, regardless of gender or the school they attend. The Federal Government is currently debating the School Funding Bill for all levels of education provision. In a move to ensure that no high school student is disadvantaged in gaining access to relevant information and more equitable career/employment opportunities and personal achievements, the Federal Government has announced their intention to provide every high school student in Australia with their own lap top computer.

Ms. Gillard (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education) says the Government is committed to implementing its education reforms - "The Government is determined to bring this new era to Australian schools," she recently told Fran Kelly on Radio National. Ms Gillard says "The new transparency measures will help the Government lift education standards across the board. We want to be in a situation to compare schools with similar populations and if we saw one going streets ahead, getting really great results, and one falling behind we would be able to ask what's the difference?"

Conclusion: Australia has a dual system of funding education for the government and non-government schools and there is no evidence that the decisions are gender based or that there is unequal power relations in the decision making. The Federal and State Governments continue to provide funding based on realistic needs and the debate continues to find a just pathway for all concerned.

Recommendation:

The way education is compulsory for all students in Australia may be something to offer to other member states at the UN, together with an explanation of how Australia manages an equitable choice of public and private systems. Decisions are not based on gender, different cultures or beliefs. Subsidies are given to all schools according to current education needs and standards.

University education

Some past reductions in government subsidies for students have resulted in universities seeking more 'full paying up-front international students'. This decision had led to overcrowding in some faculties and less accessible, affordable and effective education for Australian students.

There are two factors for concern for Federal and State Governments to address for all Australian students but in particular for female students. The first is the gender stereotype that still prevails in parts of Australian society that their sons will grow up to be 'heads of households' so they must be given the benefit of the best education a family can afford, or at times be prepared to financially support, even if this means they go into debt or pay the HECS for their sons during and after their tertiary education. The short-sighted and unrealistic view that educating their daughters is more of a choice than an actual need for the future requires a further attitudinal change!

The second is that despite government policy and wage reform women still only earn on average 84% of the male wage and yet they will earn the same debt in their tertiary education.

Recommendation/question for resolution

Our society spends very large sums of money to educate women to the highest levels of education and professional skills and yet denies women pay equity on graduation in many occupations. Notable exceptions to this practice are Universities and the Public Service. There is sufficient evidence worldwide 'that if you educate a woman you help to educate a family'. This situation indicates that there is sufficient evidence for a whole of community approach led by all levels of government to take action to reduce and eliminate the occurrence of the following three areas of concern: (1) some residual degree of gender stereotyping; (2) the pay equity gap on graduation between males and females; and, (3) the ongoing unequal power relations that still exist in the Australian culture.

Qualified professional women are needed to make their unique contribution and to take their place as equal sharers of responsibilities in the public sphere for ongoing economic and social development of the Australian society. Is it not a contradiction that certain attitudes and actions of Australian society seem intent to keep these highly educated women in the "traditional" role of child-bearing and care for the children? A question of justice, human rights and common sense arises that demonstrates the need for further extended attitudinal change in Australian society. Women with all levels of education have a right to ongoing professional development and a system of workplace practices that have legal backing that ensures pay equity, family friendly workplaces, and equal access to training and higher duties.

Sub-theme 2. The unequal sharing of responsibilities between women and men at the household level

The economic and social changes in the Australian lifestyle that perpetuate gender stereotypes and unequal sharing of responsibilities in both caring responsibilities in the household and the public sphere

Attitudes around responsibilities for caring and sharing between women and men at the household level

Australia has always had a strong delineation between 'what was a man's role' and 'what was a woman's role'. There have been great strides in recent years to change that perception.

The empowerment of women through education, emancipation, entering the workforce to fill the gaps left when men were called to engage in armed conflict during World Wars 1 and 11, the development of women's NGOs and the opportunity to participate in debates at the World Conferences and United Nations Commission on the Status of Women have raised not only the profile of women but their determination to minimise the unequal sharing of responsibilities in the household and the public sphere. In this context the fact that the wife of the present Prime Minister is a successful business woman is a good role model.

Women recognised that if they were able to minimise the unequal sharing of responsibilities at the household level then they would create a pathway for reducing the unequal sharing of responsibilities in the public sphere. However, research indicates that working women still bear a greater burden in hours of domestic labour.

CEDAW and the Adoption of the Optional Protocol

An important milestone was the adoption by the General Assembly in December 1979 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (**CEDAW**), one of the most powerful instruments for women's equality. The Convention, which has been termed "the bill of rights for women", now legally binds 165 States, which obligates them to report within one year of ratification, and subsequently every four years, on the steps they have taken to remove obstacles they face in implementing the Convention.

An Optional Protocol to the Convention, enabling women victims of sex discrimination to submit complaints to an international treaty body, was opened for signature on Human Rights Day, 10 December 1999. The CEDAW convention put the rights of women on an equal footing with other international human rights instruments having individual complaints procedures.

There has been an ongoing campaign of advocacy from the female NGOs and other members of the Australian community to have the Federal Government sign the Optional Protocol. The announcement on Anti-violence Day (2008) or White Ribbon Day by Prime Minister Rudd that the Federal Government has agreed to sign the optional protocol was received in a very positive light and as further evidence that the Federal Government is genuinely determined to work towards the elimination of situations that support the unequal responsibilities between women and men in all spheres of Australian life.

This is further evidence of a Federal Government that listens to the people and is prepared and willing to respond to community pressure.

Changes in Australian Lifestyle that have put more demands on women and increased the need for equal sharing of responsibility in the household

Increased cost of housing both for ownership or rental of properties has created the need in a large number of households for both household carers to be in the workforce. This trend is a direct result of rising housing costs that have caused families to buy or rent homes in the outer suburbs in urban areas with increased travel time and with the consequence of less time in the household that puts pressure on at least one of the parents (more often the woman) to seek part-time employment at a local level and flexible employment hours, and this can often limit professional development and career opportunities for advancement to higher levels of management responsibility. These factors impact on training opportunities for women and the ability to provide an adequate superannuation fund for retirement.

One disturbing comment on Sydney men recently claimed that some men spend more time in commuting by train to work each week than they spend in caring for their children! One could wonder if this was meant to be an indictment about Sydney transport or an indictment on the lack of willingness or time restrictions of some male parents to take responsibility for sharing in the care of their children apart from taking responsibility for sharing other household duties.

Whatever the underlying cause, the result is more pressure on the family lifestyle. This puts pressure on the woman to become a 'superwoman' to maintain her 'traditional' household responsibilities while at the same time balancing her career responsibilities and aspirations. Attitude change is required by both parties in the relationship to redress the unequal balance of sharing responsibilities in the household. Some men are concerned with their 'manly image' while some women feel it is their duty to do all the household chores and are reluctant to share these household responsibilities including caring for the children and caring for the older parents or other extended family relations.

Strong government intervention is required to lead an attitudinal change in Australian society to offset the effects of inflation and interest rates that are creating pressures on middle and lower income families to maintain their loan repayments or find affordable and accessible rental properties and to address the benefits of flexible working hours for all employers and employees for sustainable economic growth and development. The downturn in the global economy is putting more pressure on employment opportunities for both genders.

Unequal sharing of responsibilities in households because both parents need to work for economic reasons or want to work for personal and professional development

It is important to be mindful of the fact that not all women with children work just for economic reasons. Many women value and enjoy the opportunity for personal and professional development. This aim is sometimes hindered by the unequal sharing of household responsibilities by their partner or by employers who are not prepared to consider the mutual benefits of family friendly workplaces. Some Government policies have been developed to encourage employers to change their attitudes to working hours and conditions that would in the long run be beneficial to both the employer and the employees, and would facilitate the opportunity for women to contribute to society and to extend their personal and professional fulfilment. However, there is growing concern that the changes to the 'work choices' laws currently under consideration do not go far enough to protect the rights of women, especially pregnant women or women on maternity leave from having their employment terminated without legal recourse.

There is evidence that a working mother spends on average 65 more hours per week in household responsibilities than a working woman without children. This statistic is evidence that there needs to be more equal sharing of household responsibilities between the partners. Without some attitudinal change there will be serious risks to the working mother's health and this may be one factor that could be related to an increase in mental health issues.

That consideration be given to single parents in the formation of support for women in the household level

There are an increasing number of single parents (mainly female and some male) in our society who have little or no support in the management of household responsibilities. This would seem to be an area for some creative problem solving by the community as well as all levels of Government.

Affordable and Accessible Child Care

One of the major concerns for single parents and their families is affordable and accessible child-care. The bulk of childcare provision is for children below school age but there is also provision of services to children in primary schools. There is a range of childcare facilities offered to families. These include: Long Day Care Centres, Family Day Care, Occasional Care, Pre-Schools, Multi-Functional Services in rural areas, Multi-functional Aboriginal Children's Centres, Childcare for School Aged Children, Registered Care, In-home care, and Flexible and Innovative Services.

As well as the formal types of childcare listed above there is also an informal sector which caters for nearly twice as many children as does the formal sector. Informal care is non-regulated care that usually occurs in a private home, is typically provided by relatives and friends and may be paid or unpaid. The ongoing issues surrounding affordable and accessible child care are current 'hot issues' in Australia. Before and after school care is also an issue for working parents (see page 18). Australia needs women in the work-force and their unique contribution.

The Australian Women's Coalition (AWC) as part of its major contract requirements produced a report on the impact of Grandparenting as a potential source of producing the new group of women facing poverty because they are leaving the work-force to care for their grandchildren because their own children cannot find or afford child-care. The majority of unpaid childcare is provided at home by grandparents (especially grandmothers) who had been unable to provide sufficient superannuation for their own retirement because of their own life transitions in and out of the work-force are sacrificing their ability to work and adequately prepare for their own retirement in order to help their children. This report was circulated to many Government Departments and was partially responsible for a carer's payment to Grandparents.

The following year AWC considered the "sandwich generation" which focussed on the unequal caring responsibilities of women who were expected to care for their ageing relatives, their own partners if there was ill health, their children and their grandchildren.

The third topic of research was an analysis of the issues around Life/Work Balance. AWC has been actively working with the Office for Women and the Minister for Women to understand and give voice to the needs of women in the unequal responsibilities of caring and sharing at the household level. The most recent project on Preparing for Future Ageing-Health, Social Inclusion and Financial Security also made some recommendations to the Office for Women for future initiatives.

Indigenous Communities

In 2007 AWC was involved in a development project with the Indigenous women in Oodnadatta, South Australia. The learning outcomes for AWC were that Indigenous women know what is needed in their communities but that they lack skills and training to implement changes. AWC also learned that the women want and need independence to manage their own families and communities. The women also expressed concern about lack of internet connections and the importance of training in technology, plumbing, building repairs and driving heavy vehicles. Training would need to be cost free. These skills would keep their young men and women in the community, and give them dignity. If Indigenous women are to eliminate the unequal sharing of responsibilities at the household level and in the public sphere action will need to be taken by Commonwealth and State Governments to facilitate and accelerate that change

Recommendation

AWC strongly recommends that the Commonwealth Government takes a leading role in educating Indigenous women in remote areas in business administration, management, decision making, financial security, mentoring, and communication and negotiations skills. It is essential that these women are skilled to negotiate with all levels of Government, the elders of their own communities and the wider community. This could be achieved in a variety of ways. A recommendation suggested as a starting point is that: (1) a large number of Indigenous women are selected from their local communities to be trained as workers in these skills and then paid to work in one of their own local communities for 3-5 days each week for a 6 -12 month period, and: (2) the Indigenous worker could then move to another community to repeat the process but be available for mentoring as required for the original group.

Sub-theme 3. The unequal sharing of responsibilities between women and men in the public sphere

There is a need for attitudinal change and a whole of community approach to decision making in the public sphere

Statistics quoted by Federal Minister Tanya Plibersek in her speech to The Sydney Institute on 6 November 2008 were drawn from the Economist Magazine. "In Australia the increased participation of women in the workforce – from 43% in 1976 to 57% in 2008 – has been one of our most significant social trends." Access Economics has predicted that boosting women's participation even further could realise an increased national output to \$98.4 billion by 2040.

Many of the issues raised in examining unequal sharing in households are relevant for unequal sharing in the public sphere, such as:

- Women given the right to borrow money in their own right and to own property
- Women given the right to determine health issues and continuation of pregnancies
- Factors that have increased women's participation in the workforce can be directly attributed to World War 1 when women entered the workforce;
- World War 2 when women were not only in the workforce but also members of the armed forces. Women took responsibility for much of the administration work and even drove supply trucks;
- The post-war boom for Australian agricultural products meant that there were sufficient jobs for women to stay in work force. The Australian economy was very viable and required a huge labour force so the participation of women was welcomed;
- Although the situation has improved in many professions and occupations the objective for equal pay for equal work has not yet been fully achieved, despite legislation for equity. Female doctors and many other female professionals in workforce are subject to differences in remuneration in relation to their male counterparts

Recommendation: Stronger government intervention is required

Finding a solution for the differential in the amount of Superannuation between males and females and the adequacy of superannuation available for females on retirement are real challenges in Australian society today. The belief that it was appropriate for men to stay permanently in the workforce while the women either remained at home or did casual work is no longer viable, if it ever was. The changes in divorce laws, increased separations of couples and second marriages with additional children to support, longer life expectancy, or death of a spouse have drastically changed the expectation that women did not need to provide for their old age into one of concern that many mature women could become the new 'poor' in Australian society.

In addition the cost and availability of housing is an issue for the majority of Australian families and is especially difficult for the disadvantaged members of our society. The provision of a First Home Buyers assistance and other Governments charges and concessions are positive steps for Australian householders. Possible issues are restraints on inflation and consequential rising interest rates, taxation concessions on interest charges on home purchases, etc.

One major area of concern is the decreasing number of women in senior management positions or on boards in the public sphere. It would appear that because women of child bearing age need to take some time out of the workforce, that employers are reluctant to give women equal opportunities as their male counterparts to professional training or to act in positions of higher duties to gain management experience.

This short-sighted approach has resulted in many women leaving larger companies to open their own small businesses so this potential resource of professional women is being lost to larger business and the community. The Public Service has taken a more proactive standpoint and as a consequence more and more women are gaining senior positions within all levels of Government and the Public Service.

Many professional women serve on community boards as volunteers and are able to extend their expertise in management situations. The Federal Government is trying to lead the way by example but perhaps a more direct approach is required.

It is interesting to note that Government Honours awards reflect the same imbalance e.g. in 2008, 255 Honours went to men and only 45 to women. Minister Plibersek is overtly encouraging women to nominate other women for honours recognition in 2009.

The professional needs of women in rural and remote areas of Australia

Most of the discussion has focussed on women in urban areas who despite the difficulties raised can at least exercise some choice in entering the workforce. Unfortunately, women in rural and remote areas do not have the same range of choice even though they have the same risk of limited professional development; cost of education for their children; access to tertiary education through external studies at universities, TAFE and Community Colleges; access to affordable childcare, to meet the increased cost of transport; and, minimal opportunities to accumulate superannuation for their retirement. In these days when Australia is part of a global community and people no longer need to sit in an office, the need to have access to internet connection is paramount in opening up emerging employment opportunities.

Recommendation

That Federal, State and Local Governments lead a campaign to engage a 'whole of community' approach to find creative problem solving solutions to meet the needs of women and their families in rural and remote areas.

The cost of domestic violence to productivity in the public sphere

When Ms Pru Goward was in charge of the Office for Women she introduced a program ‘Business Against Domestic Violence’ and Ms Goward worked in partnership with some NGO’s to build relationships with the Business sector. It was evident that domestic or family violence was a great cost to organisations both in absenteeism and productivity of staff members. It was well received and many large organisations initiated training in violence in both the workforce and the home. Staff were offered support and counselling services. Unfortunately once Ms Goward moved to a new job the program was dropped.

Recommendation:

That the Government revisit this cost effective initiative and update it to fit in with the current policies being developed in workplace policies to include some reference to the economic costs of family violence because it is not only absenteeism that creates hardship for employers but the growing concern for presenteeism (where staff are present in the workplace and appear to be working but because of depression and poor morale their actual work output is below potential or in some cases even not satisfactory)

Sub-theme 4. Equal sharing of care giving in the context of HIV/AIDS

Australia is one of the leading countries in containing the levels of HIV/Aids infection. Organisations working in the field accredit the actions of Australian Governments in introducing initiatives to minimise and manage the spread of the infection as positive and beneficial. The model used in Australia has been copied by other nations. These initiatives included an Australia wide TV advertising campaign (The Grim Reaper Commercial), the establishment of needle exchange units and supervised injection places. These three cost-effective initiatives are certainly worthy of recommending to other member states where HIV/Aids is still prevalent.

One very important factor in caring for persons with positive HIV/Aids is to provide holistic care to keep them in their local communities. Medical Practitioners are trained to care for their patients at a local level. This service prevents patients from being separated from the care and support of family and friends in their local community.

HIV/AIDS Positive Women

HIV affects women in ways that are quite different to most men. These include: Shock that an HIV diagnosis is even a possibility; Looking after children while being positive; Undergoing menopause; Becoming pregnant; Differing treatment doses; Caring for infected partners; A different level of stigma around HIV; Settling in to a new environment for women from overseas and Reproductive health. It is essential to understand that these issues are real and can be worked through in an environment of support where women feel they can discuss their needs.

The total HIV/Aids proportion of the Australian population (0.1%) is comparatively small in relation to other countries facing a pandemic of HIV/Aids. However there are communities in Australia where women infected by aids are not receiving equal sharing of care giving in the context of HIV/Aids. In the case of the female population in Australia the Indigenous Community has 20% of the HIV/Aids population and the non-Indigenous Community has 13%.

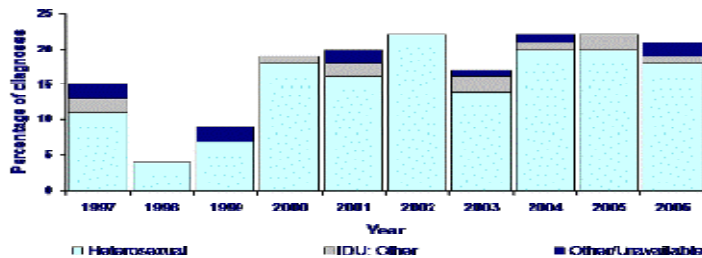
The most important aspect of the 2009 CSW in relation to HIV/Aids is to explore the equal sharing of care giving. Positive Women is an organisation in Victoria that works solely with women who are HIV positive

Why is there a need for an organisation that works solely with HIV Positive Women?

*"How did you get it?"
is the question most often asked of HIV/AIDS positive women*

This is mostly due to the assumptions people make that if a woman is HIV positive then she is a drug user or a sex worker. The latest statistics (as per the graph below) in Victoria show that most women are infected by a male who is classified as heterosexual.

Exposure category, females, Victoria, 1997 to 2006



Positive Women reports that many positive women never thought they were at risk of being infected with HIV, until they were diagnosed. This leads to a number of additional issues including commencing treatment further into their illness. Many women need to understand the context of their relationship with the person who infected them. This can be a very difficult time including negotiations around the future of the relationship. All this at the same time as understanding the ramifications of being HIV positive

Peer Support

The challenges of living with HIV/AIDS, and the associated stigma can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness which can reduce a person's quality of life and cause difficulty in accessing information. Women have additional challenges, being a minority group within the HIV sector and having the challenges of managing pregnancy and/or family life. Research suggests that peer support, which includes the sharing of experiences, can be beneficial for emotional well being. Increased information sharing and relaxation are all important factors in staying well for women living with HIV/AIDS; and, ensuring privacy and confidentiality is a core part of support for HIV-positive women. As well as being a basic human right it builds trust between women and their carers. People living with HIV/Aids in urban areas have easier access to ongoing support not only from their family and friends but they also have easier access to health and welfare services than people living with HIV/Aids in regional, rural and remote areas. The gap in accessing equal care giving needs to be addressed by adopting a whole of community approach to review and make the necessary changes for equity.

New Australians

AWC is fortunate to have a number of our member organisations whose members were not born in Australia and who migrated as adults. It is not possible to gain entrance to Australia without strict health investigations and people with positive HIV/AIDS are screened out of migration. The research of the diverse cultural backgrounds has been quite enlightening. These member organisations related to Muslim, Bosnian and Hindu citizens and the organisations stated that they had no knowledge of people with positive HIV/Aids in the Australian community. However, if there were any occurrences of HIV/Aids they would be supported and cared for by their own family, friends and members of their own community.

Aboriginal Communities

The focus in Aboriginal communities is on the family relationships. The caring for family members and children in particular is paramount in their society. In Aboriginal Communities the philosophy of equal sharing of responsibilities is based on Aboriginal Laws (customs, traditions and culture). These 'laws' will differ in the way they are followed by different tribes but the basic underlying concept is that there is 'men's business' and 'women's business' and each gender knows its areas of responsibility. Caring for people who are sick falls into women's business and the responsibility for providing care follows the maternal relationship of grandmother, sisters, and special aunts. These practices include caring for women, their children and their spouses who are HIV positive. Once a mother is deemed unfit or unable to care for her child, the family member who assumes that care then assumes parental responsibilities. The paternal relations have no rights or responsibilities to care for the wives or children of their sons.

Other Australian non-Indigenous Communities

Many cases of positive HIV/Aids occur between same sex relationships. In these cases it is most likely that the partner will assume the caring role. In heterosexual relationships the caring is usually shared amongst family members and health workers. In urban areas access to care is well organised. In rural and remote areas support comes from the local community but there is more likely to still be some stigma attached to the patient and their families. This can lead to isolation and separation from families.

Conclusion- the way forward in the context of equal responsibility for care giving

It would seem that regardless of background and ethnicity that the responsibility for care lies with the family and local community members with increased support from government health agencies where and as required. The future challenge for Australia is to develop a culture of education, understanding and acceptance that the only way for positive HIV/Aids members of the Australian society to live as normal a life as possible is for an attitude shift that recognises that 'a whole of community approach' is needed to move towards equal sharing of responsibility for the care of the positive HIV/Aids members of our population.

Engagement Opportunities with the Pacific- Focus is on family relationships

(Prepared by Major Eliana Cristi-Salvation Army)

CSW 2009 Themes

- Priority: Equal sharing of responsibilities between men and women, including care giving in the context of HIV/AIDS
- Review: Equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels.

Setting the Scene

More than half the world's population live in the Asia Pacific Region. Asia Pacific women make up just over half the region's number. Yet, despite their strong presence and contribution to society, they still suffer a disproportionate amount of discrimination and barriers to equal participation, facing many serious human right abuses, such as domestic violence, exploitation and trafficking. Despite decades of growing economy in the region, far too many lack access to basic health services, education and proper housing.

The absence of regional inter-governmental systems, including regional courts and commissions, creates difficulty in monitoring and protecting human rights among women, particularly in the Pacific Rim. Thus, initiatives by regional governments, UN agencies, NGO's and CSO's play a major part in the advancement of women.

Recent research revealed that 40 percent of the 25 countries with the lowest percentage of women in parliament are in the Pacific region: Kiribati, Vanuatu, Tonga, Marshall Islands, Papua New Guinea, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, Solomon Islands and Tuvalu. Women comprise less than five per cent of parliamentarians in the Pacific region – amongst the lowest in the world.

Insufficient representation of women from Pacific countries at CSW denotes difficulty in country engagement. In 2007, only Australia, New Zealand and Tuvalu sent delegation to CSW 51.

Non government and civil society women's representation has also been low at CSW. However, through the auspices of UNDP Pacific Centre, four NGO's originating from Cook Islands, Solomon Islands and Pacific Islands were funded to attend CSW52, where they raised issues about the absence of disaggregated data to measure progress in Pacific Islands and proposed the addition of a climate change clause.

There is great concern for the increasing vulnerability of women to HIV/AIDS in the presence of gender inequality, compounded by social roles and expectations deeply embedded in culture, tradition and religion, which put women at greater risk. The impact of HIV/AIDS is increasingly visible, destroying human capital and greatly damaging the social fabric of Pacific communities. In the last two years, the number of new infections doubled – from 7,000 cases a year to 14,000.

In addressing the role of culture, tradition and religion in the Pacific region, religious organizations have the potential to play a significant part in recognizing the equal roles of men and women.

Advancement

1. Greater Pacific country engagement. Pacific region representation at CSW has increased. Participation at CSW52 included government delegations from: Cook Islands; Fiji; Kiribati; Samoa; Solomon Islands; as well as Australia; New Zealand and Tuvalu

2. Capacity building for greater Pacific NGO and CSO involvement at CSW53. Building on the experiences of the earlier four participants, 40 potential candidates for attendance at CSW53rd Session attended the Pacific Regional NGO/CSO Training and Strategy Session organized by UNDP Pacific Centre; NGO participants working in the area of gender, HIV and disability represented 12 Pacific Island countries: Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu. This will allow the NGO/CSO Pacific delegation to double in 2009, as 8 representatives from the Pacific Islands will be funded by UNDP to attend CSW 53rd Session.

3. Governance Leadership – training for women. In 2008, a capacity building initiative was funded by the Office for Women in coordination with the Women’s Leadership and Development Programme Grant – Pacific Region, and the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat. Its aim was to promote women’s participation in government and decision making, and the Pacific nations’ ratification and implementation of the Convention of the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The package included two booklets: *A Guide to Campaigning for Pacific Women*, developed by Pacific women, and *CEDAW: A pocket guide for Pacific Parliamentarians*.

In addition, a two-year training program, the *Bottom-up Governance Leadership Program for Women in the Pacific* has been funded by the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF) and implemented by the Foundation for Development Cooperation, to train emerging female leaders from PNG, the Solomon Islands, Fiji and Tonga in leadership and governance skills.

4. Rights-based HIV response. At the 2008 Conference on the Pacific Parliamentary Assembly on Population and Development (PPAPD), *Taking Action Against HIV: A Handbook for Parliamentarians* was launched through the collaboration of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, UNAIDS and UNDP. Its purpose is to provide a tool to elected leaders who have a mandate and the public trust to debate these sensitive issues in the context of culture and tradition, and initiate a rights-based HIV response to achieve universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support for all, especially women.

Challenges

Gender-based violence, including sexual violence, remains an everyday threat for women and girls in many parts of the Pacific Rim, as alleged perpetrators, including policemen and others in powerful positions, escape justice. In many countries, women reporting rape faced serious obstacles. In Papua New Guinea, violence against women is seen as a key reason for the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which in turn, fuelled further abuses against women (Amnesty.org)

While HIV/AIDS is a health issue, to prevent the spread of the disease there is a need to address systemic issues as well. Alcohol abuse, cultural and gender inequalities, including insufficient understanding of HIV/AIDS, the prevalence of violence and sexual violence against women, social and economic inequality make women more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS.

Thus, the spread of the virus raise gender issues and call for the intervention of PICT governments, international organizations and civil society to work with religious and traditional leaders to identify cultural and religious practices which impact on gender relations and increase the vulnerability of women and children to HIV/AIDS.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen efforts to promote greater participation of NGO's and CSO's in the debate to reduce gender inequality in the Pacific region.
2. Work collaboratively with pro-women NGOs, such as The International Women's Medical Association, International Council of Women, Soroptimists, Zonta International and UNIFEM International; and religious organisations such as The Salvation Army, The International Catholic League and International NGO's from the Jewish and the Muslim faiths to empower and resource women in the Pacific and advocate with religious leaders in the Pacific community on issues of equality and HIV/AIDS.
3. Increase support for capacity building among women in the Pacific region.

Sub-theme 5. Legislative and policy responses to promote the equal sharing of responsibilities between men and women in all areas

Government policies to eliminate violence against women

Successive Governments have worked with NGO organisations to develop programs to reduce violence against women and children. It is certainly an indictment against progress when in 2008 we know that the most dangerous place for a man is within 200 metres of a 'pub' while the most dangerous place for a woman and her children is their own home!

There has been a concerted effort by the hierarchy in the police force to change the attitude of police officers in dealing with domestic or family violence. These changes in police attitudes towards managing domestic violence and sexual assault are having a beneficial effect on the safety of women.

Police recognise that violence against women and sexual assault is a crime and police are now empowered to assume the responsibility for taking action in such situations. This shift in responsibility for legal procedures is expected to minimise the reluctance of women to report incidents for fear of retribution by the perpetrator. The women of Australia applaud this initiative as an important step forward to make women and their children safe in their own homes!

Human Rights Issues- Women's Refuges for Women escaping Domestic Violence

Minister Tanya Plibersek is well aware and has expressed her concern for the plight of the increasing number of homeless people. Minister Plibersek has the dual responsibility of Housing and Women in her portfolio and is already involved in processes aimed to reduce the incidence of violence against women in Australia. Womens' Refuges and ongoing support for women escaping DV are still areas of concern for Workers in refuges who on a daily basis need to deal with the fallout of short comings in the current system. All women living in Australia who are escaping DV have a complex range of issues to be addressed.

Government funding helps crisis care refugees to be of assistance for a 2 month period and in the majority of situations a satisfactory solution can be found especially if the woman is working, earning money and has some family or social networks.

The situations that need special intervention are for women who come to Australia from countries where English is not their first language and at this stage do not hold Australian citizenship or permanent residency. If they seek refuge in a DV situation often only the husband has permanent residency and this is often used as a power control over the women. To ensure they remain dependent on the male they are refused permission to attend English classes.

So a woman may present at a refuge having been injured by her spouse, with no permanent residency, no money to pay for a rent bond (4weeks bond + 2 weeks rent in advance on a Government allowance of \$220 per week) or personal possessions or furniture, no ability to communicate in English, no qualifications or skills for employment and often with no employment experience if their country of origin is one in which females are educated but they are not permitted to be part of the workforce, and with no extended family support. The refuge worker is faced with the unenviable task of trying to address each of these issues in the 2 month time-frame that a resident may stay in a crisis centre refuge.

The extreme shortage of Government and Community housing is another issue because vacancies rarely occur and if they do there could be over 50 applicants for one available piece of accommodation. Often these women end up as homeless and are faced with living on the street or returning to the perpetrator to start the cycle of violence again.

One very strong recommendation for this area where Government policy is not meeting the specific and unique needs of these women:

It is strongly recommended that the Federal Minister for Housing acquires some residences that could be used as Half-way Houses for 6 months where the women would be safe, pay minimal rent, while they acquire permanent residency, learn to speak English and receive some basic training in skills so they can enter the workforce, and become independent to gain confidence to start their life again. AWC is supported by a number of passionate refuge workers who feel depressed by the enormity of the situation the DV women face and frustration of the system that seems powerless to bring about an equitable solution for these victims of our community. These residents of women's refuges want opportunities to enter the workforce and to be citizens of Australia. They need the Federal and State Governments to show compassion and make a difference in their lives.

The recent agreement between Federal and State Governments to take substantial action to significantly reduce the extent of the housing shortage problem especially for under-privileged families and individuals in the Australian community is strongly supported and commended

Child care issues and need for growth to meet increasing demands of women entering the workforce

Many women who would like to work either part-time or full-time find the costs and accessibility of child-care are prohibitive in realising their preferences. The difficulty for both parents to share the responsibilities of taking and collecting children from care makes the concept of balancing work and life style a myth rather than a reality.

The details shown on page 8 in regard to the range of, and need for, childcare facilities for equity in household burden also apply to women in the workforce or wanting to be in the workforce.

The collapse of ABC Learning Centres and the downturn in the world economy are causing grave concern for parents and a strong response from the Commonwealth Government is expected and required to secure confidence for parents and businesses in the system.

The impact of changes to Divorce and other family laws on equal sharing of responsibilities between men and women

The Productivity Commission

The Productivity Commission states that its role is to act in the following capacity. ‘The Productivity Commission is the Australian Government's independent research and advisory body on a range of economic, social and environmental issues affecting the welfare of Australians. Its role, expressed simply, is to help governments make better policies in the long term interest of the Australian community.’

Commissioned Projects

Current inquiries that are relevant for Australian Women

All of the current inquiries are relevant directly, and indirectly for Australian families, and some of the stated inquiries are relevant for the topics under consideration at CSW 2009 -especially unequal sharing of responsibilities at the household level and in the public sphere. The relevant inquiries include Gambling, Government Drought Support, Paid Maternity, Paternity and Parental Leave, and Annual Review of Regulatory Burdens on Business. The 2009 review will consider Social and Infrastructure Services and considering the current global economy this review will be timely and informative for the future of Australian families and is significant for the CSW 2009 emphasis on unequal sharing or responsibilities in the public sphere.

Gambling

Following a decision by the Council of Australian Governments, the Australian Government has asked the Productivity Commission to undertake a public inquiry into gambling.

The Australian Women’s Coalition welcomes this inquiry. Gambling itself is an area of concern for all women and men in Australia. Apart from the economic hardships that families can suffer it is the hidden impacts such as absenteeism that can lead to job loss, domestic violence and assault, separation and deprivation for children, and in some cases suicide. There is a need for more funding from State and Federal Governments for Gambling, Drug and Alcohol, Suicide and Bereavement Counselling. Many community organisations have trained counsellors, both paid and unpaid, but with reduced funding they are unable to provide the level of service for the current needs and demands.

Government Drought Support

Public inquiry

The current drought situation in regional and rural Australia has the potential for severe impact on all families in Australia. AWC commends the Government for initiating this inquiry. The Productivity Commission has been asked to undertake a public inquiry into the current government drought support arrangements in Australia. The Commission has been asked to identify the most appropriate way for governments to assist farmers, farm businesses and farm dependent rural small businesses improve their self-reliance and preparedness for drought events.

Paid Maternity, Paternity and Parental Leave

Public inquiry

The Australian Government has asked the Productivity Commission to undertake a public inquiry into paid maternity, paternity and paternal leave. The inquiry will concentrate on support for parents of newborn children up to the age of two years. The inquiry will:

consider the economic, productivity and social costs and benefits of providing paid maternity, paternity and parental leave; assess the current extent of employer-provided paid maternity, paternity and parental leave in Australia; identify the models that could be used to provide such parental support and assess these against a number of criteria.

These include their cost effectiveness; impacts on business; labour market consequences; work/family preferences of parents; child and parental welfare; taxation implications for single parents and married couples earning minimum wages; and interactions with the Social Security, Family Assistance and Taxation Systems; assess the impacts and applicability of the various models across the full range of employment forms (such as the self-employed, farmers, and shift workers) and, assess the efficiency and effectiveness of Government policies that would facilitate the provision and take-up of these models.

If the outcome is positive and 18 weeks of parental leave is granted to all Australian families then not only the outcome but the **process of achieving** that outcome is something that Minister Tanya Plibersek can announce and offer as an example of joint decision making between Governments and the Community as part of the Australian statement at CSW 2009.

The majority of Non-Government Organisations that focus on women's issues have made submissions to the Productivity Commission. This inquiry has the support of those organisations and it is one among many of the positive actions of the Federal Government since taking office.

A newspaper article in the Sun-Herald dated 11th January 2009 written by Kerry-Anne Walsh encapsulates the concerns of the women of Australia

“Pensioners have received a rock solid guarantee they will have their incomes lifted in the May budget but another government promise of a paid maternity scheme which would ease the path to the workforce for many working mums, is wilting.

The final Productivity Commission Report on parental leave will be delivered to the Government next month. It will form the basis of their budget deliberations about the introduction of a leave scheme. It would be ironic indeed if, after the advancements made by the Rudd Government to improve the position of women in power, it was responsible for delaying a scheme that could help get them more.”

However, there are some aspects of taxation and benefits currently applicable to families in Australia that need to be addressed so that members of lower income families will not be disadvantaged, e.g the potential loss of \$5000 means tested baby bonus and an adverse effect on income tax. One possibility is to make the payments to all parents eligible for parental leave to be tax exempt. In this way no family would be disadvantaged and the cost savings for government in managing the complexities of eligibility for parental leave, baby bonuses and tax savings could offset the lost taxation revenue.

Future legislative and policy developments in progress

The Australian Women's Coalition Report for the CSW 2009 in New York
28 December 2008

The present Federal Government has a number of positive initiatives in progress that will redress many of the issues that are barriers to equal sharing of responsibilities in the household and the public sphere. These are:

- Getting more women into all levels of elected Government
- Initiatives in mental health issues
- National Rural Women Summit
- Review of Tax Laws
- 20-20 National Summit
- Review of the Commonwealth Government Industrial Relations Work Choices Legislation

AWC welcomes the current review of the Work Choices Legislation and has an expectation that some of the elements that caused hardship to disadvantaged women and persons with disabilities will be addressed. Positive actions in these areas will, without doubt, be helpful in creating an environment to minimise the unequal sharing responsibilities in the public sphere.

Other issues that the Government is aware that need to be addressed and equitable solutions found

Superannuation and poverty in older women; Financial security and Social Inclusion; and Indigenous Communities in Rural Australia

Some identified barriers to implementing changes in Government policy

- Lack of training opportunities for upwardly mobile women is still a barrier to get women on Boards and into Executive positions in corporate and government areas
- The loss of professional women from large corporations to forming their own small business because of the real or perceived 'glass ceiling'
- Lack of sufficient child care facilities that are affordable and accessible
- Transport in rural areas
- Resistance of male attitudes to seeing women as equal partners and equal sharing of caring responsibilities in the home and the workplace
- Some women are reluctant to give up some of the household responsibilities
- Parents who condition their children by giving them gender specific toys to play with as babies and toddlers.

The Four Alliances (Secretariats) met together to discuss the preparations of our reports. The four Alliances agreed to collectively support some common recommendations. These recommendations have been integrated into the AWC report.

This is a summary of those agreements from the Four Alliances to the Commonwealth Government:

- Promote the adoption of strong anti-discrimination and equality frameworks, particularly measures to support workers with family responsibilities
- Promote the adoption of paid parental leave schemes
- Recognise the detrimental impact of violence against women on the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men
- Recognise the importance of an intersectional discrimination analysis in addressing the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men
- GFC
- 50-50 representation in decision making (AWC interpreted this as equal sharing of responsibilities which cannot be analysed as strictly 50-50)

- Promote strong mechanisms to achieve the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including through reference to Australian agencies and procedures such as the Australian Human Rights Commission and the Equal Opportunities at Work Agency
- Promote the accreditation of national human rights institutions to the CSW
- Promote the establishment of a new UN Agency for Women (AWC still needs to have this concept more clearly defined before giving complete support)