

Promoting gender equality for improved health and wellbeing

VicHealth position statement

May 2017

VicHealth's vision for its work in promoting gender equality is a Victoria where everyone can realise their full potential for health and wellbeing regardless of gender.

We aim to contribute to improved health and wellbeing for Victorian women and girls by building support and enabling action for gender equality in public and private life.

Gender equality is a key priority for VicHealth

VicHealth's [Action Agenda for Health Promotion](#) recognises that gender equality is a critical determinant of health and wellbeing and a fundamental human right that benefits our society as a whole.

VicHealth is committed to achieving gender equality for all. Because women and girls bear the major burden of negative health effects from gender-based social inequalities, our efforts to address gender inequalities currently focuses on improving outcomes for women and girls.

The [World Health Organization](#) defines **gender equality** as the 'equal chances or opportunities for groups of women and men to access and control social, economic and political resources, including protection under the law'.*

Gender inequalities experienced by women and girls are evidenced by their exclusion from decision-making and reduced access to economic and social resources,¹ including employment and equal pay,² when compared with men.

Reflecting [Fair Foundations: The VicHealth framework for health equity](#), we recognise the diversity of Victorian women and the significant social and economic disadvantage experienced by a number of groups of women. Gender inequality intersects with other social inequalities based on social class, ethnicity or race, sexuality, gender identity,* ability and age.³ Any action to address gender inequalities must explicitly consider the disadvantage and discrimination – and the potential related poor health outcomes – experienced by Aboriginal women, women with low incomes and/or education levels, women from culturally diverse communities, women with disabilities, lesbian, bisexual, trans and intersex women, and women living in rural and regional areas.

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Gender is one of the most powerful determinants of health outcomes. All Victorians – men, women, trans and gender diverse people – are affected by gendered health inequalities.”

Safe and strong: Victoria's gender equality strategy

Achieving gender equality

As [Safe and strong: Victoria's gender equality strategy](#) notes, gender equality cannot be achieved by government alone. Individuals, families, communities, workplaces, businesses, sporting associations, the media and the arts all hold responsibility 'to build a culture of respect and equality for all individuals'.⁴

Achieving gender equality benefits women and girls, and men, boys, businesses, the economy and society also stand to gain. Gendered social norms and structures can limit men's and boys' behaviour or roles in activities that are perceived as 'feminine' or 'a woman's job', including parenting, occupation, relationships, and accessing healthcare or social supports.⁵ At the societal level, research has found that societies with high levels of gender inequality also have higher rates of anti-social behaviour and violence.⁶ Conversely, where societies are more equal, there is greater social cohesion and improved health and wellbeing.⁷

For organisations, promoting gender equality in the workplace can improve performance and reduce staff turnover.⁸ There are economic benefits of gender equality too – achieving equal rates of employment would increase Australia's GDP by approximately 11 per cent.⁹ The economy would gain \$8 billion if women and men transitioned from higher education to employment at equal rates.¹⁰

* VicHealth recognises that some people's gender identities do not fit into binary categories of male or female, or do not reflect the biological sex they were assigned at birth. This position statement focuses on those people that identify as a woman or girl, while recognising that trans women, gender-diverse and intersex people may experience greater barriers to equality.

VicHealth's previous focus in gender equality

Over the last decade, VicHealth has used a public health approach to invest in the primary prevention of violence against women. We have worked with partners from a range of sectors to build policy, undertake research and implement programs that promote equal and respectful relationships between men and women.¹¹

We are now working to ensure that our collective body of knowledge is used to inform the work of a growing number of organisations committed to preventing violence against women, including new state and national agencies with a specific prevention mandate.

As the sector has grown and flourished, VicHealth has broadened its focus to consider the relationship between gender equality and health and wellbeing. Our Action Agenda has a clear ambition that one million more Victorians will have better health and wellbeing by 2023. Gender equality is vital to achieving this goal.

Policy context

Following the landmark Royal Commission into Family Violence, the Victorian Government announced a series of reforms to protect women and children from family violence and to bring about much needed cultural and social change so that women and girls are respected and treated equally.

Ending family violence: Victoria's plan for change sets out how the Victorian Government will implement all 227 recommendations of the Royal Commission over the next 10 years. Building on this, the Government released Safe and strong: Victoria's gender equality strategy in December 2016 with the vision that 'all Victorians live in a safe and equal society, have access to equal power, resources and opportunities, and are treated with dignity, respect and fairness'.¹² In May 2017, the Victorian Government released Free from violence: Victoria's strategy to prevent family violence and all forms of violence against women. As part of these strategies, the Victorian Government will establish a new Prevention Agency, and introduce legislation for a Gender Equality Act.

VicHealth will contribute to statewide action by working with and supporting government and local communities to make real and sustained progress towards gender equality for women and girls.

These important changes align with the broader policy context. At the state level, the Victorian Health and Wellbeing Plan 2015–19 notes that gender equality is an important determinant of health and wellbeing.¹³ Globally, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals recognise that gender equality is a fundamental human right, with Goal 5 being 'Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls'.¹⁴

VicHealth's contribution to gender equality for improved health and wellbeing

VicHealth has been a pioneer in health promotion for 30 years. During that time we have built a strong network of partners in health, sport, business, research, education, media, the arts and the broader community. Our role is to push boundaries and develop new approaches and evidence to create better health for all Victorians.

VicHealth's contribution to the Victorian Government's action on gender equality leverages our leadership in health promotion and our track record in developing innovative and evidence-based practice in three major ways:

1. Invest in and support the adoption of emerging best practice global approaches to ensure Victoria leads the way in gender equality.

Key actions:

- Design trials and strategies to address gender inequality using behavioural insights approaches. This will be delivered through VicHealth's Leading Thinkers initiative, in which Professor Iris Bohnet and Dr Jeni Klugman – two of the world's foremost experts in behavioural insights and gender equality – are sharing their knowledge with VicHealth, the Victorian Government and other cross-sectoral partners. Through this initiative, we will:
 - work with a range of partners to invest in behavioural trials to build new evidence on what works to address unconscious gender bias, gender stereotyping, role modelling and social norms around gender. Current activity focuses on recruitment to private and public sector jobs, and analysis of media bias in the representation of women in sport.
 - convene a Leading Thinkers Taskforce to bring together other early adopters of behavioural insights in gender equality to facilitate knowledge exchange and identify potential future collaboration.
 - develop simple mechanisms to make cutting-edge global expertise generated through the Leading Thinkers initiative available and accessible to all organisations we fund, even the smallest of community groups.
- Create and disseminate a range of evidence to inform policy and practice that promotes gender equality as a key strategy for improving the health and wellbeing of women and girls. This work will involve strengthening our understanding of gender equality as a determinant of health, and building the capacity of a number of settings and sectors to take action on gender inequality.

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Regardless of where you live, gender equality is a fundamental human right. Advancing gender equality is critical to all areas of a healthy society, from reducing poverty to promoting the health, education, protection and the well-being of girls and boys.”

United Nations, *Why Gender Equality Matters*

2. Harness the collective influence of our sports partners and other non-health stakeholders to build cross-sector action and leadership to advance gender equality and create social change.

Key actions:

- Continue to work with key partners to drive support and viewership of female athletes, challenging gender stereotypes and changing attitudes towards women in the Victorian community. Drawing on strong partnerships with the sports sector, VicHealth is bringing together teams from the AFL Women's League, Women's Big Bash League and Women's National Basketball League to raise the profile of women's sport through the [#ChangeOurGame](#) campaign.
- Create new opportunities for female participation in sport and increase the profile of females in sport, while improving sports policy and practice to create inclusive environments for women and girls. We will deliver this via the new \$7 million [Changing Our Game – Advancing Gender Equality in Sport for Women and Girls Program 2017–2020](#).
- Continue to use our investment in local sporting clubs to get more women and girls involved in sport through our wide-reaching [Active Club Grants](#). VicHealth is supporting clubs to create new opportunities specifically for women and girls, by providing small grants to establish new teams, activities, programs or competitions.
- Work with other non-health sector partners with significant community reach, who have the potential to engage the public in conversation and debate around action for gender equality. This includes partnerships with the media, corporate organisations and small- and medium-sized workplaces.

3. Be an exemplar and model the organisational approaches and practices that we ask of others.

Key actions:

- Ensure our own workplace culture, policies, practice and programs demonstrate gender equality by increasing internal organisational capacity through training and other workforce development activities, gender self-assessments and our staff induction program.
- Wherever possible, VicHealth will also be a pilot site for the behavioural trials developed through the Leading Thinkers initiative. This includes the development of simple gender self-assessment tools for use by our funded organisations.

In addition to our work to advance gender equality for improved health and wellbeing of Victorian women and girls, VicHealth will **contribute to state and national action to prevent violence against women and their children**. We will do this by providing support and resources to governments and to state and national agencies working to prevent violence against women, including the new Prevention Agency that will be established by the Victorian Government in 2017. VicHealth's continued involvement in this work will help boost primary prevention activity and support evaluation and research in new and emerging areas of prevention practice.

VicHealth is currently developing a full Gender Equality and Health Strategy, which will further outline our contribution to statewide action. The Strategy will be released later in 2017.

For more information on our work visit www.vichealth.vic.gov.au

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