

WOMEN AND SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

Women's Health Goulburn North East

Published by Women's Health Victoria
Level 1, 123 Lonsdale Street
Melbourne Victoria 3001, Australia
(GPO Box 1160 Melbourne, 3001)
T: 03 9662 3755
F: 03 9663 7955
E: whv@whv.org.au
<http://www.whv.org.au>

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Introduction

Social connectedness refers to the level of engagement and trust an individual has with others in their community and the community as a whole. People can feel part of and valued by their community through roles they take on, through friendships and through participation in activities¹.

Society has created differences in expectations of women and men, resulting in different kinds of community participation, different exposures to health risks, and differential treatment. Social connectedness should be considered through a gender lens because gender influences the roles women and men are encouraged to take on.

Gender influences roles – roles influence social connectedness – social connectedness influences health.

Gender Influences

- Childbearing and rearing is increasingly private, conducted in isolation with a lack of support^{2,3}
- Women are much more likely than men to be carers^{4,5}, to be a sole parent with unreliable housing⁶, and to live in poverty^{7,8}. The primary source of female financial disadvantage is child rearing.
- 83% of sole parents in Australia are women⁹; single mothers particularly express feelings of isolation and loneliness⁶.
- Violence against women affects community participation. The impacts of violence on social connectedness can range from women not wanting to go out alone or at night due to general safety concerns¹⁰, to women being restricted by a partner from leaving the house.
- The effect of isolating people with mental illness is worsened for women who have children and face enormous challenges without social support¹¹
- Women are more vulnerable than men to the effects of reduced social support¹².
- Because they live longer, women are more likely to survive partners which can result in social isolation and lead to poor health outcomes.

Women living in rural regions experience unique problems with social connectedness. Because rural regions tend to have lower population density, people here have more acquaintances. This can lead to emotional disconnection for women because there is less anonymity without more intimate relationships¹. Gossip can be perceived as a means of social control¹. There is a link between small town gossip, the expectation of conventional behaviour and social isolation¹. The 2005 figures from SANE Australia's national help-line, showed that almost half of the 16,000 calls came from rural/remote areas, where only 14% of the population live¹.

Implications for the Future

Social connectedness is experienced differently by men and women, by city and country people, and by different minority groups. Policy development, implementation and evaluation in the area of social connectedness must be based on an understanding of gender differences, rurality and diversity.

¹ Rice K & Tsianakas V (2005) *Gender Impact Assessment: Mental Health and Social Connectedness*. Women's Health Victoria, Melbourne.

² Wheeler E (2004) *You are the First Line of Support*. Women's Health Goulburn North East, Wangaratta.

³ Alston, et.al (2006) Brutal Neglect: Australian Rural Women's Access to Health Services in *Rural and Remote Health* 6:475. <http://rrh.deakin.edu.au/articles/subviewnew.asp?ArticleID=475> Accessed May 1, 2006.

⁴ Goward P. (2005) *Striking the Balance with Work and Family in Rural Australia*. Speech 14.10.2005 Wangaratta p. 17.

⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics. *Disability, Ageing and Carers: Summary of Findings 2003* Cat No 4430. <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/ProductsbyCatalogue/C258C88A7AA5A87ECA2568A9001393E8?OpenDocument> Accessed on 2/06/2006.

⁶ Coalition of Non-Government Workers (2004) *Report to UN Special Rapporteur on Housing: Women and the Right to Adequate Housing in Australia*. http://www.nswclc.org.au/Australian_Women_Housing.pdf Accessed May 9, 2006.

⁷ Weston R & Smyth B (2000) Financial Living Standards After Divorce, *Family Matters*; 55: 10-15.

⁸ Summers A (2003) *The End of Equality*. Sydney: Random House p. 3.

⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006) *Year Book Australia 2006*. <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/E37DC80931A35423CA2570DE0006C80F?opendocument> Accessed May 1, 2006.

¹⁰ Office of Women's Policy (2002) *Women's Safety Strategy: Policy Framework*. [http://www.women.vic.gov.au/web12/rwpgslib.nsf/Graphic+Files/Safety_Strategy_Policy_Framework/\\$file/Safety_Strategy_Policy_Framework.pdf](http://www.women.vic.gov.au/web12/rwpgslib.nsf/Graphic+Files/Safety_Strategy_Policy_Framework/$file/Safety_Strategy_Policy_Framework.pdf) Accessed on 2/06/2006.

¹¹ From focus group with women with a mental illness conducted by Women's Health Goulburn North East 2004.

¹² Kendler, K.S., Myers, J. & Prescott, C.A. (2005). Sex differences in the relationship between social support and risk for major depression: A longitudinal study of opposite sex twin pairs. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 162(2): 250-256.