

## Fourth Australian Women's Health Conference: Politics, Action and Renewal, 19-20 February, 2001, Adelaide

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The Fourth Australian Women's Health Conference, *Politics, Action & Renewal*, organised by the Australian Women's Health Network, was held in Adelaide between 19 and 21 February, 2001. Conference organisers were delighted with an attendance of more than 500 delegates from a diverse range of service sectors and occupational groups, geographic areas and cultural backgrounds. The Conference was targeted at a wide audience of consumers, health practitioners, academics, government workers, politicians, community organisations and women's health activists.

The Conference attracted international speakers and a range of well-known and informative Australian speakers. An extensive range of papers and interactive sessions provided the stimulus for what were exciting and rigorous discussions about many of the fundamental health issues faced by women.

Specific keynote addresses were on areas that included the topics of Indigenous women's health; gender, disability and health; citizenship and cultural difference; reframing mindsets; and bullying. The diversity of women's experiences and needs were emphasised throughout the Conference, highlighting that health, and cultural and social inequities affected different women differently and that this point must be central in a strategic policy agenda. Issues for groups such as women with disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, immigrant, non-English speaking background, and refugee women, women from rural and remote areas, young women, older women and mothers in paid employment, were highlighted throughout the conference.

International speakers Nomfundo Walaza, Director of the Trauma Centre for Survivors of Violence in Cape Town, South Africa and Beatrix Campbell, journalist, feminist and social commentator, from the UK, presented excellent papers raising controversial and provocative issues, and helping to situate Australian women's health issues in a broader global context. Walaza, spoke on *Women's Health Issues in South Africa*, and Campbell's paper was titled *The Third Way: Women, their Bodies and Well-being*.

Emerging from the desire to refocus on the importance of a social model of health the conference had its roots in previous national women's health conferences held in 1975, 1985 and 1995. The Conference was held this year because it was argued by the Australian Women's Health Network that to wait another five years would delay the urgent need to re-examine the social health concerns of women. Helen Keleher, National Convenor of the

Australian Women's Health Network, reemphasised the urgency for reclaiming a women's health focus in Australian policy.

One particularly strong view throughout the Conference was the perception that the federal government was moving away from any serious commitment to addressing women's health issues resulting from social, political and economic inequalities. At the same time it is devolving more responsibility to the states and territories, with the potential for further rationalisation of services.

As the first country in the world to have a national women's health policy, and 12 years later still to be the only country in the world to have one, Australia is in the position to be an international leader on women's health, and outcomes of this Conference will have international repercussions. Concern was voiced throughout the conference, however, that the Commonwealth government had moved away from this commitment to women. As Keleher stated, this provided a policy vacuum where "there is no longer an infrastructure in the Commonwealth for broad-based women's health policy that addresses the health, social and economic determinants of health".

A key Plenary Forum *Politics and Political Agendas* aimed at challenging speakers to outline how they, and their organisations would progress a women's health agenda and a gendered approach to health brought a variety of responses. Members of the panel included Jenny Macklin, ALP shadow Minister for Health; and Meg Lees, then leader of the Australian Democrats. However, the federal Coalition government failed to send a ministerial representative to the conference causing many delegates to question openly the Commonwealth's genuine commitment to these very important issues.

The format of the conference, which had a strong Art focus to highlight the role of arts in promoting health, wellbeing and healing, was structured over three days with the overlapping themes of Politics/Earth, Action/Fire, and Renewal/Water. Throughout the Conference talking was interspersed with rich performances by groups such as the Indigenous Group, the Tal-kin-jeri Performance Group; Vitalstatistix; The Fairy Goodmothers; The Stiff Gins, and the Restless Dance Group. Conference participants could also participate in numerous workshops, such as Women's Circus Skills, basket weaving from the Ngarrendjeri culture, and Yoga classes. A visual highlight was the *Pebble Labyrinth: Pathway of Renewal* created by South Australian artist, Helen Pinter, with

conference delegates able to participate in this creation. Participants were also able to participate in numerous "Talking Circles" on various issues and themes throughout the Conference.

The Conference provided many opportunities for participants to be involved in interactive sessions on a wide range of subjects. These included health and young women, older women, women with disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues, eating disorders, and the politics of fat, abortion, transsexuals, lesbians, sport and media images, domestic violence and the construction of women as victim, sexual violence, contraception, motherhood, depression, pregnancy and birth, and prenatal screening for domestic violence.

The Conference was an outstanding success. Many of the health issues which women had been grappling with

for the past decade were addressed with renewed vision and focus. The issue of gender as a health determinant was central throughout the Conference. The promotion of participation and inclusion of health minority groups of women was emphasised. The strong participation from women with disabilities, from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, and migrant women was one of the highlights of the Conference.

With 530 participants from widely differing social and cultural backgrounds from all over Australia, and with a spirit of participation and genuine cooperation the Conference should provide a renewed impetus to redress many of the health disadvantages which have become central to the lives of women. What is immediately apparent however, is the need for a re-invigoration of a national women's health policy.

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