



MEDIA RELEASE

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Putting women in the picture: Alliance urges gender focus in implementation of historic mental health reforms

MELBOURNE – 3 MARCH 2020

The Women's Mental Health Alliance today welcomed the final report of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, but expressed disappointment that it did not address the specific needs of women and girls.

'We commend the Commission for highlighting the role of inequality in shaping mental health and wellbeing,' said Mischa Barr, Policy & Health Promotion Manager at Women's Health Victoria and Chair of the Women's Mental Health Alliance. 'Yet we know women and girls experience higher rates of mental ill-health than men and boys – for a range of reasons – so we were surprised not to see this reflected in the Royal Commission's recommendations.'

The Alliance welcomed the Commission's strong position on the need for action to address gender-based violence in mental health facilities.

'Women's mental health advocates have been campaigning for decades to end the unacceptably high rates of sexual violence in mental health units,' said Professor Jayashri Kulkarni, Director of the Monash Alfred Psychiatry research centre and Professor of Psychiatry at Alfred Health and Monash University.

'Gender-separated units have been recommended by experts and inquiries multiple times, only to be relegated to the "too hard basket",' Professor Kulkarni said. 'This time, our hope is that women will finally be safe. Only when women are safe can they heal and recover from mental illness – mental illness which in many cases arises from previous experiences of violence, abuse and trauma.'

The Alliance also welcomed the strong focus on leadership by people with lived experience of mental illness. Dr Tricia Szirom from the Victorian Mental Illness Awareness Council highlighted the importance of recognising the diversity among people with lived experience. 'People with lived experience of mental ill health and lived experience as carers are not a homogeneous group, and the experiences of women, men and gender diverse people differ significantly,' said Dr Szirom.

Dr Adele Murdolo, CEO of the Multicultural Centre for Women's Health, agreed. 'I welcome the report's strong focus on equity and inclusion, but it doesn't overtly address the impacts of multiple and intersecting forms of inequality and discrimination. Experiences of racism, gender inequality, violence against women, settlement stress and trauma all play a role in influencing the mental health and wellbeing of women from migrant and refugee backgrounds.'

The Alliance welcomed the Commission's emphasis on mental health promotion and early intervention, particularly for young people. 'The Commission has recognised the challenges facing young women – who experience the highest rates of mental disorder of any population group. The



task now is to ensure the implementation of the report's youth-focused recommendations is gender-informed,' said Katherine Ellis, CEO of the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria.

Dr Rhian Parker from the University of Melbourne welcomed the Commission's recommendations for a new approach to addressing trauma. 'This is an important first step towards embedding a trauma-informed practice within the mental health system,' Dr Parker said. 'In implementing this approach and establishing the new Statewide Trauma Service, it will be critical to explore the intersections between gender, violence and trauma, and to strengthen cross-sector collaboration between the mental health and violence response sectors.'

'In implementing the Royal Commission's recommendations, the Victorian Government has an historic opportunity to build a new mental health system from the ground up,' said Dianne Hill, CEO of Women's Health Victoria. 'Women's mental health has been neglected for far too long. The Women's Mental Health Alliance is here to make sure these reforms respond to the needs and experiences of women and girls.'

– ENDS –

Media inquiries and interviews

For further information on the Women's Mental Health Alliance or media commentary from Alliance members, please contact Kylie Inserra, Communications Coordinator at Women's Health Victoria, in the first instance: kylie.inserra@whv.org.au, (03) 9664 9316 or 0409 119 101.

About the Women's Mental Health Alliance

The Women's Mental Health Alliance was established by Women's Health Victoria in 2019. The Alliance is made up of 33 organisations and individuals who provide expert advice to policy makers and health services on the mental health of women and girls, and undertake advocacy to ensure all women have access to evidence-based, gender-sensitive and trauma-informed mental health support. The Alliance works to ensure the voices of women with lived experience are centred in policy, advocacy and service delivery.

For more information, please visit our [webpage](#).

About Women's Health Victoria

Women's Health Victoria (WHV) is a not-for-profit, statewide women's health promotion, advocacy and support service, focused on improving the lives of Victorian women. WHV collaborates with women, health professionals, policy makers and community organisations to influence and inform health policy and service delivery for women. The work of WHV is underpinned by a social model of health and a commitment to reducing inequities in health which arise from social, economic and environmental determinants.

For more information, please visit whv.org.au

