

# CORRECTED VERSION

## STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING

### REFERENCES COMMITTEE

#### Subcommittee

#### Inquiry into environmental design and public health

Melbourne — 7 September 2011

#### Members

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Mrs I. Peulich

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Chair: Ms G. Tierney

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Secretary: Mr K. Delaney

#### Witnesses

Ms R. Butera, executive director, and

Ms R. Durey, policy and health promotion manager, Women's Health Victoria.

**The CHAIR** — I formally welcome you to the committee hearing today, Rose and Rita. I need to advise you that you are covered by parliamentary privilege during the course of this hearing, but if you make exactly the same comments outside, you will not be covered by parliamentary privilege. You will receive a transcript in about 7 to 10 days. Please check and proof it, and then if there are some issues, liaise directly with Keir. That would be appreciated. Before you go into your 5 to 10-minute presentation I ask that you state your names, the organisation that you are representing and the address of that organisation. We are looking forward to a 5 to 10-minute presentation from you.

**Ms BUTERA** — My name is Rita Butera, and I am from Women's Health Victoria. The address of Women's Health Victoria is level 8, 255 Bourke Street, Melbourne.

**Ms DUREY** — My name is Rose Durey. I am the policy and health promotion manager at Women's Health Victoria, of the same address.

**Ms BUTERA** — We have just written a few things down, and then we would be happy to discuss them. Women's Health Victoria is a statewide women's health promotion organisation focusing on health promotion, information and advocacy services. Our vision is for a society that takes a proactive approach to health and wellbeing, is empowering and respectful to women and girls and takes into account diversity and life circumstances. We thank the committee for the opportunity to speak here today. Working within a social determinants model of health, we welcome a chance to discuss how where we live affects our lives.

Women's Health Victoria believes the natural and built environment can promote both physical and mental health and wellbeing. Good urban design ensures that residents have easy access to amenities and recreation facilities and can help to foster a sense of community and connectedness. It can promote active lifestyles by encouraging walking, cycling, public transport, physical activity and also aspects like access to healthier food choices. To do this, good urban design needs to be gender sensitive — that is, it needs to take account of how urban design can impact differently on women than it does on men. Let us take one example — say, physical activity. We know that physical activity helps to prevent key chronic diseases like type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, osteoporosis and some cancers. We know that for women the most popular form of physical activity is walking, but women face specific barriers to this and probably physical activity more broadly, which can have an impact in terms of its preventative health effects. The barriers can obviously be urban design and infrastructure, perceptions of safety in the community as well as other factors like caring responsibilities, issues associated with body image and lack of time. The built environment in which these barriers are addressed can improve women's health. Women's experiences really do need to be considered when looking at urban development.

**Ms DUREY** — I just want to touch on two of those barriers to physical activity for women, and they are perceptions of safety and caring responsibilities. Perceptions of safety influence how and how often people use their local environment. Fear of violence can alter women's behaviours, negatively affect their feelings of safety and autonomy and limit their ability to fully participate in society in the same way that men do. Women are more likely than men to modify their behaviour to avoid the risk of crime. Women are more fearful of some crimes and locations than others and feel less safe on public transport than in the general community, although they are in fact at lower risk. And women are more at risk of violence at the hands of someone they know, such as a partner or family member, in their own home, rather than at the hands of a stranger in public. We know that is a common myth.

In relation to urban design, fear of violence is more important to women than actual violence. These perceptions mean that women use public spaces less, which in turn impacts on their physical and mental health in terms of social connectedness. Some design elements to improve women's safety include locating bus stops in centres of activity rather than in more isolated locations, ensuring that there is adequate lighting on train platforms, at bus stops and in streets, and ensuring that waiting areas are visible to those in the surrounding area. In terms of walking, which was the example we used before, women's concerns about safety have a big influence on if and when they will walk. Footpaths in well-lit areas are more likely to encourage women to walk in their neighbourhoods. Safety concerns have a greater impact on women from lower socioeconomic groups and culturally and linguistically diverse women because they tend to live in neighbourhoods with higher levels of crime, work during non-business hours and typically have fewer transport options.

In terms of caring responsibilities and environmental design, access to public transport is one way of encouraging women to walk to increase daily physical activity levels, but it needs to be sensitive to the needs of women caring for small children. Poor pram accessibility is the most significant barrier to using public transport for mothers under 25. Buses and trams can be particularly difficult to board, and this may result in women being less physically active, limiting their access to services, social networks and community participation.

Good urban design can increase food security. Women often take a primary role in feeding the family and purchasing and preparing food. Poor access to transport, particularly private transport like cars, is strongly associated with household food insecurity. Barriers to food security that can be overcome by good urban design include enabling active transport to and from food outlets — that is, walking, cycling or walking to catch public transport — and the even distribution of healthy food options rather than fast food outlets, particularly in urban fringe and rural areas.

Providing local employment opportunities close to where people live is also important. The separation of residential areas from centres of work, such as the CBD, perpetuates gender stereotypes, with many highly educated and skilled women forced to work in lower skilled jobs closer to home in order to be available to their children. At the same time, men are forced to trade time with their children and families for long commutes and long working hours. Local affordable child care can also act as an enabler, as can placing schools near where people live.

What Women's Health Victoria would like to see is: women's experiences considered in environmental design at a state and local level; the implementation of strategies that enable women to participate in work and leisure activities to improve health and wellbeing; and the adoption of principles and guidelines that support the development of healthy environmental design, like Healthy Spaces and Places, or in the UK like the NHS promoting and creating built or natural environments that encourage and support physical activity, which we have referred to in our written submission. We would also like to see a review of the departments of health and human services through a gender and diversity lens to ensure that gender is comprehensively considered in guidelines and other relevant policies.

**Mr ELSBURY** — My observation is that we are talking about having bus stops and waiting areas for public transport in well-lit and visible areas and the fact that people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds work at times when everyone else is either asleep or at home and they are at home when everyone else is at work. In my neighbourhood there are a heap of walking tracks. There are literally hundreds of walking tracks, and probably around 80 per cent of them are along back fences. They are not in public view, and it is only in the newer estates where you are starting to see walking trails being put in areas that would once have been public reserves but are now in the middle of the community rather than being at the back of the community.

Do you see any way we could possibly start to change the attitudes of people to almost re-orient the way they look at their neighbourhoods and at the reserves they have so that people feel safer being able to access those parks and walking trails?

**Ms DUREY** — Lighting is definitely one way of encouraging women in particular to walk at night time. I think on the whole most women would probably walk down those paths when it is light. Unless you had to get from a train station to where you live, you probably would not be walking down those back-fence types of places.

**Mr ELSBURY** — The thing is that you do have these areas in some of the 1980s-style suburbs where it is actually quite isolated. You are walking along back fences, and there is no-one around. You are trying to get back either from the shops or from dropping the kids off at school. I am wary of where I am when I am walking through those areas, even though I am a male.

**Ms BUTERA** — There are trends in urban design — for example, in our city streets there are blocks and the footpaths go around the blocks. You are in a public space, but the cities are probably more safe. Then there was a bit of a shift to some different kinds of developments where footpaths were, as you said, behind buildings and in reserves, hidden from view. It was seen as innovative at the time, but what has come with that are issues around perceptions of community safety. It is probably across the board in the population group that there might be some reluctance to use some of those footpaths because of their isolation and seclusion. I think some

communities do develop local solutions where they can. I have seen examples of local communities that have rostered community people to walk around.

**Mr ELSBURY** — Yes, I am aware of those.

**Ms BUTERA** — Those sorts of initiatives give a sense of security that there are other people around. The thing with a lot of these spaces is that if there are people around, they feel safer. So it is about how you get more people to use that space to make it feel safer. It could be about designing the space so that it attracts different activities at different times to sort of increase that. There could be some social solutions, and there could be some built solutions.

**The CHAIR** — Could you give some examples of any good built environments that incorporate the needs of women?

**Ms BUTERA** — Some of the key factors that were highlighted were about physical access and accessibility. In terms of women in their role as parents or family providers, the important issues were around walkability and the importance of footpaths.

**The CHAIR** — But are there concrete examples that you can point to?

**Ms BUTERA** — There are some communities that you could probably use as best-practice kind of examples. I cannot tell you exactly which ones they might be, but I think there are a lot of urban designers who try to incorporate some of these principles in new development, where it is not so much retrofitting but where they are looking at particular standards around how you build a healthy environment. I know that in some areas of Victoria Delfin developments are looking at some of those principles and how you bring health planning into the development of a community. There are some urban designers in the private sector who are also, through the planning institute, looking at how that could better incorporate some of those aspects.

**Mrs PEULICH** — If I could just pick up on that point, in Europe there are promenades that are really popular. It is more densely populated there, and there are not huge and vast open spaces, so promenades are very popular. Often they are combined with being able to sit down for a coffee or something like that, which may be counterintuitive when we are talking about health and wellbeing. Especially in multicultural communities we know that it is really important.

**Ms BUTERA** — The social connections.

**Mrs PEULICH** — Yes. That could be one way of actually promoting safe walking. I have seen that in use in some areas of town. Coming back to your issue of fear of violence — —

**Ms DUREY** — Before we move on to that, there is one example of good gendered urban design in the city of Toronto, which is the only one that I know of. Since the early 1990s they have been working on this particular issue.

**Mrs PEULICH** — I have seen it. It is great.

**Ms DUREY** — That would be the only one I know of that is specifically about how to make urban design — —

**Mrs PEULICH** — It brings together numbers, it is safe, it is well constructed and it combines social — —

**Ms DUREY** — It has gender training for urban planners as well, so that was part of it.

**Mrs PEULICH** — On the issue of fear of violence, I would like to expand it a little bit further because when we talk about perceptions, as a mother I know exactly what they are talking about. Often it is not just fear for oneself; it is fear for one's children and other family members as well. I think when we talk about that we need to broaden our scope. A lot of people think it is just about traffic and congestion. Every time there is a story about a child who has been abducted or about a paedophile or anything like that, it throws many parents into a freeze. My mother would not have been exposed to that. She came from an authoritarian regime. Many of our multicultural communities have come from — —

**Mr ELSBURY** — Nine times out of 10 if you disappeared off the street, it was the government that took you.

**Mrs PEULICH** — That's right. So you do not hear about it, even though it may have been from the left or the right. Mass media and communication did not play as a big a role in our lives either. I guess that is something we are going to have to contend with.

**Ms BUTERA** — In terms of the gender lens and families, I think women play a significant role in terms of how their children access the community and issues around safety. I think it is less than 20 per cent of children who walk to school, and the rest are driven. That is quite significant. If you are looking at changing behaviours in terms of incidental physical activity to promote health and wellbeing, it goes right back to some of those strategies. There have been initiatives to try to promote safe walking to school. Some of those have been more successful than others. There are a lot of local councils that are continuing to try to address that challenge.

**Mrs PEULICH** — There are even little things you can do. Sorry, just to round it off — my apologies — I looked at children's playgrounds in New York. They have beautiful fences, not cyclone fences, and no strangers could approach from any other point except a single entry. When you entered into that space or into any parkland there was often a little plaque that outlined acceptable behaviour. I know that sounds almost trite, but those types of things create a sense of order and I think promote a sense of security.

**Ms DUREY** — I think older women in particular are the least likely to be a victim of crime, but they have the greatest fear of being the victim of a crime. A lot of that is because of the media. They may not be able to drive anymore, or they may fear falling over in the street. I think it is not just about making our urban environments safe for women or for families, it is also about thinking about older women who are in their homes and pretty much live alone.

**Mr TEE** — We have now received a body of material about health and urban design generally and about the importance of being able to walk to shops, the park and public transport. That is the overwhelming evidence that we have been given. Am I right in saying that the contribution you are making is to say that when we are looking at recommending those sorts of changes as a committee we should make sure that the decision-makers are sensitive to the needs of women? One of the things you have suggested in regard to lighting and paths is hardly the most expensive part of the program. It is just about saying that when you are putting plans those in place, you should make sure you are sensitive to the needs of women, otherwise a large proportion of women will be excluded. I mean, is that sort of — —

**Ms BUTERA** — Yes, it is. I would probably add to that the amenities that are important in the community and access to those amenities in the design phase, whether it is around shopping precincts, whether it is around public transport or whether it is around child care and school access. How far are schools now to walk? It is something to consider in terms of design and planning. Those sorts of things need to be thought about as well.

One of the things that has been highlighted in terms of community development and even communities recovering from disasters is that women play a very significant role. In addressing those health concerns of women you are actually addressing the community concerns. I think it is important to recognise the role that women play in communities, yet in terms of their gender needs they are probably not being looked at as carefully as they need to be looked at.

**Mr TEE** — I suppose it is particularly important when you think about them walking to school, because it might be one of the few times the mother who is also working can get exercise. It has that time constraint thing, so it has the double benefit.

**Ms BUTERA** — I used to run the walking school bus program at VicHealth for many years, so I knew all about the walking school bus. There are many challenges for parents who are working and the whole concept of walking to school, but in terms of creating local neighbourhood community solutions, you provide the vehicle for that. You see some wonderful stuff that comes from that too. There are social and cultural aspects that need to be thought about, not just infrastructure. It is really a combination of all those.

**Mr SCHEFFER** — You talked a bit before about women and work in the workplace. I think it is the case that if the home is a site of violence and danger for women and family members, the second most dangerous

place is the workplace. Have you done any work on that? You talked about distance from the home, but have you done any work on the health impacts of workplaces on women as part of design at all?

**Ms BUTERA** — I do not think we have done anything specifically in terms of — —

**Ms DUREY** — In terms of OHS risks or sedentary behaviour?

**Mr SCHEFFER** — I know there are very broad terms of reference. When we are talking about urban design, we generally focus on spatial stuff. I guess that the dangers of assault and so forth in the workplace is really a relationship, industrial, organisational issue, which is not exactly what we are doing, but nonetheless I might ask you to open that up if you could.

**Ms DUREY** — We run a domestic violence prevention program in workplaces, but again that is not about urban design.

**Ms BUTERA** — In terms of getting a better understanding of the particular industries that have a high population of women working in those industries — for example, hospitality — I was going to say there are not many manufacturing industries left. However, there are certain industries where you get a large number of women who work in them. It is mostly the lower paid kind of work as well. There are probably broader occupational health and safety and design issues which impact on those communities. With the hospitality industry, in terms of young people getting to and from workplaces and safety in workplaces I think there is some major work that needs to be done there, but that is probably outside this scope. I think that is an area that needs to be looked at a bit more carefully.

**Mr SCHEFFER** — Then there are issues like 24-hour public transport for shift workers in the hospitality industry. It is one of those questions there.

**Ms BUTERA** — Yes, absolutely. There are access issues.

**Mr ELSBURY** — Along many walking tracks you will find exercise equipment or what they call ‘adult play areas’. Given the explosion of Fernwood, Contours and other women-only gyms around the place, how realistic is the expectation that those sorts of pieces of equipment will actually be used by women out in the open, considering anyone is walking past?

**Ms DUREY** — I think it is important to have them, because not everyone can afford a gym membership. It is just one more way of having active open space. A passive open space would be just a park, but if it is active, you have got a tennis court or those kind of facilities there. Body image is probably a big issue for a lot of women, and whether they would want to use those facilities — —

**Mr ELSBURY** — In such an exposed way?

**Ms BUTERA** — Yes. Then there is the safety issue, depending on where they are.

**Mr ELSBURY** — Again, on back fences.

**Ms BUTERA** — Yes, exactly. But there are places that give it a bit more thought — for example, along the peninsula there are some nice paths. It is along the road, so there is visibility. It is the same with the whole concept around when a community decides where to put a skate park. The sorts of things that need to be considered include visibility, because with visibility comes an increased sense of safety and less violence, even in terms of vandalism. Those sorts of things are important to think about. If there is a sense you can be seen in a public space, it actually can reduce the sense of risk.

**Ms BUTERA** — I have seen them in Albert Park. I have seen people using them there.

**Mrs PEULICH** — Around parks they can create stations and constructions, and they are good stuff because even if it is for rehabilitation, people can use it for no cost.

**Ms DUREY** — I have never used them.

**Ms BUTERA** — I have.

**Mr ELSBURY** — I have looked at them, and I think they are fantastic. On another point, and my colleagues will roll their eyes because they have heard this said a thousand times, when my wife drops the kids off at kinder, she walks because we have a community centre not that far from where we live.

**Ms BUTERA** — Fantastic. That is important.

**Mr ELSBURY** — On numerous occasions she has had other women say to her, ‘Oh dear, do you need a lift?’, because everyone else tends to drive. She is probably one of only three women who actually walk the distance. She is walking further than a lot of these other ladies. How do we break down that idea that to move the family around, you throw them in the car instead of putting the youngest one in a pusher and letting the other one ride their trike or scooter? That imprints a desire for kids to also do that instead of jumping in the car later on in life, which is improving — —

**Ms BUTERA** — Because they are used to being driven.

**Mr ELSBURY** — As you can see, I am the model of health myself.

**Ms BUTERA** — Some children’s experience of the community is from the car seat, and they have no other experience of their local community. They get to a certain age and they actually have not got a clue what their community is about and have no sense of belonging to that community, so it is a bigger issue. It is a much bigger issue.

**Mr ELSBURY** — I do not know how many snails my daughter has brought home. I love them, but — —

**Ms BUTERA** — There are some shires that were trying to look at how you change the behaviour of communities and how you get more families walking to school. In some areas they stopped running the program. They just could not get the cultural shift they needed in some communities, and in others it was extraordinary how you got people involved. There are characteristics within certain communities that can work for you or not.

**Ms DUREY** — I wonder whether it is about schools. I know there are some health-promoting schools, and they could perhaps be a kind of conduit for encouraging. A health-promoting school is about the parents and it is about the family; it is not just about the students.

**Mrs PEULICH** — Horses for courses. I went to a school recently and quite a few children were obviously overweight. There was a particular demographic, and how they had made the breakthrough was introducing zumba to their PE classes. There were quite overweight boys doing zumba and loving it. The program had not been going for that long.

**Ms BUTERA** — I saw an initiative of a principal out in Springvale with a high new arrival population group of Vietnamese who was able to get that community walking to school because she would go out to the beginning of locations in the suburb and walk herself with groups of kids and families and then run an English class program for parents in the school. So the commitment and initiative of the principal or of teachers can influence how something can change, whereas in another school area that is not designed with easy access, such as those cul de sac kind of communities, you just cannot get around. It takes you 2 hours to get somewhere. They do not promote walking to schools in those areas. They struggle so hard. You may not have leadership coming from the school, and you have communities that are highly dependent on cars. It is very hard to shift — —

**Mrs PEULICH** — I know a lot of older women who are perhaps not as mobile due to illness or who may not drive, and the bane of their life is getting to the cemetery. At the moment we do have a review — or there will be a review — of the way in which various green wedge spaces are used. In some spaces they are not particularly high quality. Would you see that such spaces could be combined with, say, the establishment of cemeteries that are closer to the community so you do not need to traverse across half the town or wait for your daughter, your daughter-in-law or your son to drive you in order to visit a loved one? Are there creative ways in which we can use poor-quality land that could enhance the wellbeing of the community?

**Ms BUTERA** — I think that what you have highlighted is the challenge for women. A large percentage of our older population who are living alone are women, and they are very isolated. I think that is an important

thing to take into account in terms of urban design and types of housing that is built in communities so that women can age in place or have the choice or ability to downsize within the community that they know. Those sorts of things are important, but I have not thought — —

**Mrs PEULICH** — The reason I ask is that my mother comes from a multicultural background, obviously, and does happen to drive, but a lot of her friends do not. She does so many favours driving them to the cemetery, and they are quite significant distances. It is amazing how much of her time is spent driving her friends to cemeteries.

**Ms DUREY** — I am sure there are regulations around where cemeteries can be, but I have no idea about where they are and the type of space.

**Ms BUTERA** — That is an important aspect of your own mental health — to feel that you can go somewhere to a place where there is a lost person and pay your respects or whatever. It is an important function for a person to be able to achieve, and some of the solutions might be around what are some of the volunteer networks that can be developed to support that person to be able to do that as well. There may be other ways to look at how you keep that engagement or that ability to meet that part of the person's spiritual needs. I think that is very important to do. I know that the Department of Transport in conjunction with a couple of other departments piloted some programs to look at what happens to older people once they lose their licence. How do they stay connected, and how can a local council work in a way to promote social connection to ensure that people still have the ability to participate? There were, I think, three initiatives piloted in that program. I do not know what came of it, but it did highlight that there is an understanding that people become more isolated in their homes as they get older.

**Mrs PEULICH** — Especially women who may have been reliant on their partner or husband, who has since passed away, and may not know how to use technology to withdraw money or do all of those things that you and I probably take for granted.

**The CHAIR** — Our time has now expired, so I thank you for being with us today and for putting a very salient case to us in terms of the specific needs of women and how they need to be addressed when we think about urban and regional design.

**Witnesses withdrew.**