

# Inquiry into Environmental Design and Public Health

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27 June 2011

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## Introduction

Women's Health Victoria is a statewide women's health promotion, information and advocacy service. We are a non government organisation with most of our funding coming from various parts of the Victorian Department of Health. We work with health professionals and policy makers to influence and inform health policy and service delivery for women.

Our work at Women's Health Victoria is underpinned by a social model of health. We are committed to reducing inequities in health which arise from the social, economic and environmental determinants of health. These determinants are experienced differently by women and men. By incorporating a gendered approach to health promotion work that focuses on women, interventions to reduce inequality and improve health outcomes will be more effective and equitable.

Women's Health Victoria's vision is for a society that takes a proactive approach to health and wellbeing, is empowering and respectful of women and girls and takes into account the diversity of their life circumstances.

Women's Health Victoria's ways of working are guided by four principles:

- We work from a feminist framework that incorporates a rights based approach.
- We acknowledge the critical importance of an understanding of all of the determinants of health and of illness to achieving better health outcomes.
- We understand that the complexities involved in achieving better health outcomes for women require well-considered, forward thinking, multi-faceted and sustainable solutions.
- We commit to 'doing our work well'; we understand that trust and credibility result from transparent and accountable behaviours.

**In response to:**

- (1) Review the evidence of the contribution of the natural and built environments to the promotion of health and well being; and**
- (2) Identify and report on those elements of environmental planning and design which provide the most promising opportunities for improving health outcomes in Victoria**
- (3) Assess the extent to which these factors are currently taken into account in environmental planning and design in both the public and private sectors, and their effectiveness, with particular reference to new growth areas**

Women's Health Victoria believes that the natural and built environments can promote both physical and mental health and wellbeing. It is important that Victorian women's experiences are considered in urban development. This is evident when considering the role of public space in promoting healthy behaviours, feelings of safety, and participation in employment.

**Promoting healthy behaviours**

The ability to move in and out of a community as well as the design of movement within a community can impact on the health of residents. Appropriate urban design ensures residents have easy access to amenities and recreation facilities, and can help foster a sense of community and connectedness<sup>1</sup>. Facilities such as seating along walking paths, well lit paths and clean public toilets can increase women's use of public spaces for physical activity<sup>2</sup>. Australian built environments do not often encourage active lifestyles, instead reinforcing sedentary behaviour and car dependence<sup>3</sup>. Natural and built environments should incorporate both passive and active open spaces, such as parks and outdoor sporting facilities. Careful design and people-friendly environments can promote active lifestyles by encouraging walking, cycling, public transport and active recreation<sup>4</sup>.

The importance of incorporating appropriate infrastructure and amenity is clear when considering how women's health and wellbeing can be hampered by the natural and built environments. For example, women in areas that are well serviced by public transport can use active transport as an effective way to increase daily physical activity levels. However, active transport is often not viable for women residing in areas with poor public transport links and few services within walking distance. This is the situation for many women living in new outer suburban communities as the growth of these areas has not been matched by the provision of public transport infrastructure.

Using active transport to increase physical activity can pose additional barriers for women caring for small children. Poor pram accessibility is the most significant barrier to using public transport for mothers under the age of 25 years<sup>64</sup>. 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.

## **Perceptions of violence and community safety**

Fear of violence alone can alter women's behaviours, negatively affect their feelings of personal safety and autonomy and limit their ability to fully participate in society in the same way men do. For example, in comparison to men, women report a significantly greater fear of crime and are more likely to feel unsafe walking alone or being in their homes alone at night<sup>5</sup>. This has the potential to impact on both mental health and wellbeing, and physical health through a reduction in physical activity.

Design elements that consider safety enable women to be more physically active and participate fully in their communities<sup>6</sup>. Some design elements to improve women's safety include locating bus stops in centres of activity rather than more isolated locations, ensuring adequate lighting on train platforms, bus stops and streets, and ensuring that waiting areas are visible to those in the surrounding area rather than blocked by advertising<sup>7</sup>.

Perceptions of safety influence the nature and the extent to which people use their local environment<sup>8</sup>. Design that aims to reduce crime, through better lighting and parklands that face house fronts, can enhance the physical, mental and social wellbeing in a community<sup>9</sup>. Women's concerns about personal safety, higher levels of traffic and crime have a great influence on their participation in walking<sup>10</sup>. Communities with footpaths in well lit areas are more conducive to women walking within their neighbourhoods.

Fear of victimisation and crime is widespread among women and this influences the travel patterns of women who use public transport<sup>11</sup>. Fear for personal safety leads women to use precautionary measures, for example, completely avoiding walking, bicycling and particular transit environments<sup>12</sup>. Safety concerns have greater impact on women from lower socioeconomic groups and CALD backgrounds who tend to live in higher crime neighbourhoods, work during non-business hours and typically have fewer transport options<sup>13</sup>.

## **Link to employment**

The geography of employment opportunities is also linked to urban development, and this in turn impacts on women's ability to actively participate in paid employment and experience the health benefits that are associated with it. For example:

The location of work in relation to residential areas affects who can engage in what types of work. The separation of residential areas from centres of work perpetuates gender stereotypes that constrain and disadvantage women. Instead of planning communities on the basis of gender equity (that is, providing equal opportunity for men and women to pursue both employment and care vocations), some of the communities... force a choice between one and the other. The result for families is a clear division of labour, with many highly educated and skilled women forced to abandon careers in the city and take lower skilled jobs close to home in order to be available to their children. At the same time, many family oriented men are forced to trade time with their children for long commutes and long working hours<sup>14</sup>.

**Recommendation:**

Consider women's experiences when evaluating what makes natural and built environments liveable and healthy, and develop strategies that strengthen local communities and support women to participate in work and leisure activities that improve their health and wellbeing.

**In response to:**

**(4) Provide recommendations for future planning and investment; and that the Committee will consider:**

**(d) the consistency of policy approaches across the Victorian Government to promote health through evidence based environmental planning and design measures**

**(e) the role of public open space in promoting health**

There is great potential to increase the consistency of policy approaches to promote health through evidence based environmental planning and design measures. Key policy documents do not offer a coordinated approach to this issue. Any policy approaches that are created to this end should be linked with the new *Victorian Health Priorities Framework*.

In acknowledgement of the role that the environment plays on the health of the population, the Federal Government has funded a partnership between the Australian Local Government Association, the National Heart Foundation of Australia and the Planning Institute of Australia<sup>22</sup>.

The collaboration has produced a web-based national planning guide that includes practical tools, case studies and guidelines, to assist planners and designers to incorporate active living principles into the built environment<sup>22</sup>.

Although the guide does not consider the needs of women when planning the built environment, it provides ten design principles that encourage the built environment to contribute to an individual's propensity to be physically active and result in improved health outcomes. These principles are:

- Active transport
- Aesthetics
- Connectivity
- Environments for all people
- Mixed density
- Mixed land use
- Parks and open space
- Safety and surveillance
- Social inclusion
- Supporting infrastructure

In the United Kingdom, the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence has developed a guidance on *Promoting and creating built or natural environments that encourage and support physical activity*<sup>15</sup>, which Victoria could also explore adopting or adapting. The guidance offers recommendations in relation to land use and transport planning to support physical activity.

The impact of gender should also be considered in the application of these principles. For example, consider how lighting and safety concerns impact on women's use of open space and transport.

**Recommendation:** Women's Health Victoria recommends the adoption of principles and guidelines that support the development of built and natural environments that promote physical and mental health and wellbeing. For example, *Healthy Spaces and Places* or the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence's *Promoting and creating built or natural environments that encourage and support physical activity*. Any new policies and practices should be linked with the new *Victorian Health Priorities Framework*, and should consider gender in their application.

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## References

<sup>1</sup> Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. Healthy spaces and places. 2009 [cited 23 June 2011]; Available from: <http://www.healthyspaces.gov.au/internet/healthyspaces/publishing.nsf/Content/healthy-spaces-index>.

<sup>2</sup> Loukaitou-Sideris A. How to ease women's fear of transportation environments: case studies and best practices. 2009 [cited 23 June 2011]; Available from: <http://apo.org.au/node/19940>.

<sup>3</sup> Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. Healthy spaces and places. 2009 [cited 23 June 2011]; Available from: <http://www.healthyspaces.gov.au/internet/healthyspaces/publishing.nsf/Content/healthy-spaces-index>.

<sup>4</sup> Planning Institute Australia. Healthy spaces and places. 2011 [cited 23 June 2011]; Available from: [www.healthyspaces.org.au](http://www.healthyspaces.org.au).

<sup>5</sup> Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs. Inquiry into crime in the community: victims, offenders, and fear of crime. 2004 [cited 23 June 2011]; Available from: <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/laca/crimeinthecommunity/report.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Loukaitou-Sideris A. How to ease women's fear of transportation environments: case studies and best practices. 2009 [cited 23 June 2011]; Available from: <http://apo.org.au/node/19940>.

<sup>7</sup> Loukaitou-Sideris A. How to ease women's fear of transportation environments: case studies and best practices. 2009 [cited 23 June 2011]; Available from: <http://apo.org.au/node/19940>.

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- <sup>13</sup> Loukaitou-Sideris A. How to ease women's fear of transportation environments: case studies and best practices. 2009 [cited 23 June 2011]; Available from: <http://apo.org.au/node/19940>.
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- <sup>15</sup> National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence. NICE public health guidance 8: promoting and creating built or natural environments that encourage and support physical activity. 2008 [cited 23 June 2011]; Available from: <http://guidance.nice.org.uk/PH8/Guidance/pdf/English>