

Women's Services for Women & Children Policy

Women's services are pro-women; this has sometimes been misconstrued as meaning "anti-men" but this is not the case.

Women's services, run by women for women, provide a safe and sensitive place for women to gain a feeling of control over their lives. They enable women to be a part of the movement for social change in the attitudes about women and children, which lead to violence and homelessness. Women's services recognise the reality of violence against women and seek to challenge and eliminate that violence, and whilst providing services directly to women and children, many of our community education programs and community development programs are also accessible to men.

How did women's services develop?

Women's services, specifically refuges and support services for women and children escaping male violence, were established in the 1970s as a direct result of the women's liberation movement's identification of the nature and extent of violence against women. Domestic violence and rape were found to have been experienced by many women.

Mainstream welfare, legal and social services had failed to recognise the reality of many women's lives and thus had failed to alleviate the hardships experienced by women and children living with and / or escaping violence. Existing agencies and structures did not provide adequate protection and support to women and children, and certainly did nothing to challenge the continuation of violence against women and the silence surrounding it. Women's experiences were largely invisible and ignored.

At the instigation of women's activists and survivors of violence, women's services were established. Their aim: to provide support and services which meet the specific needs of the women and children who have experienced violence.

Safety and Security

The knowledge gained from the experiences of women and children escaping violence led to an understanding of violence against women; a crime that results from the inequality in economic and social power between men and women in society. Therefore women's and children's homelessness - a common result of violence against women and children - is also significantly related to gender.

WESNET Policy

1. WESNET supports services which focus on the needs of homeless women and children and those facing violence, and which employ women to work with and support them.

Emotional and physical safety and security are often the immediate needs of women and children escaping violence, and for women seeking accommodation for other reasons, such as mental health problems, drug and alcohol problems and poverty.

WESNET believes women in these situations feel safer and more secure where they share accommodation or communal space with other women and are supported by women workers. This is also true of medium-term and halfway houses, which offer special services to women leaving fully supported accommodation. In these services, women workers provide a high level of understanding, support and power sharing which enables women to make their own decisions; the workers assist them, and, where appropriate, advocate for them and their children in dealing

with bureaucratic and social institutions, such as the law and police.

Women's services enable women to come together to share their experiences, to overcome isolation, to explore feelings and options, to support each other and to help each other make positive changes in their lives.

WESNET believes there is ample anecdotal evidence of the value that women clients of SAAP women's services place on these services, due to their focus on women and children and their use of women workers.

WESNET would support research into the service models that can best meet users' needs into the next century.

2. Equal Opportunities in Employment

Women's services have continued to develop and implement equal employment opportunity processes - employing women from diverse backgrounds and with diverse skills and qualifications - some workers in these services are former service users themselves. This greatly enhances the quality of service provision to women, particularly indigenous women, NESB women and those with specific needs. Women working in women's services have contributed to the development of the skills and knowledge utilised in the provision of all human services.

3. WESNET supports the need for confidentiality of service location and of personal information regarding clients obtained by the service.

Confidentiality is a critical aspect of women's services - it assists women and children to feel secure in their use of such services. There is an expectation from women's services that other agencies and people will maintain the confidentiality of location and client information. Women's services also expect other agencies to respect the women only nature of our services - by sending women workers/officers where possible to those women's services premises whose location is confidential.

4. WESNET supports women only management committees as most appropriate to women and children focussed services and to services employing women only.

This gives women the opportunity to explore management styles that develop women-and-children-friendly processes, a new experience for many women and children. It ensures that the focus of the service remains on the women who access it. It also enhances the general scrutiny of women's services.

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