

WOMEN

THE FEDERAL MINISTER
FOR THE STATUS OF
WOMEN STATED THE
FOLLOWING:¹

“Rural women make a very valuable contribution to the social and economic fabric of communities across the nation. They run businesses and farms, take on leadership roles, drive sustainability and innovation across primary industry sectors, ensure the wellbeing of families and communities, build strong networks and take part in everything from disaster response to volunteer work”.



OVERVIEW

Women continue to influence and shape society, their roles have evolved and changed in the past 40 years and their contribution to the success of Australia have been prominent. Women’s rights and gender equality has enabled many women to reach their potential.

The Bega Valley Shire has a strong network of women working in small business and other leadership positions. Women are also undertaking professional roles in areas such as the arts, health and education. Furthermore, as a result of the 2012 Local Government election, the Bega Valley Shire Council now has 44% female representation.

However, there are still poor social justice outcomes. Lack of choices in health, education, employment and housing still limits many women from reaching their potential. Women still face unequal access to the economic resources in the community. There is a need to recognise the ongoing disadvantage many women face today.



IN THE BEGA VALLEY

According to the Bega Valley Community Profile, women represent 50.9% of the population. Approximately 16,266 women live in the Bega Valley Shire and they are 49.1% of the workers in the area.²

In 2006, around 37% of NSW women lived in inner or outer regional areas, while less than 1% lived in remote or very remote areas of the state.³

The incomes of female residents in the Bega Valley Shire remain consistently lower than men's, resulting in a higher percentage of women living in poverty. These are factors that can contribute to mental health issues for women.

The lower income levels of women can be attributed to many factors. Women often continue in their traditional family role as the primary caregiver to children and

other family members. Women tend to be over-represented in lower paying jobs and under-represented in higher paying jobs. Women are also more likely than men to be employed on a part time or casual basis.

The female population of NSW in 2011 was 3.68 million or 50.4% of the State's population. Aboriginal women make up 2.1% of the female population. Over a third of women 65 years and over live alone. Nearly half the women in NSW (48%) are overweight or obese.⁵

Statistical data relating to Australian women in the national context shows that women in the Bega Valley Shire are more likely to be employed in retail, clerical, health care, education and community service roles.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) women in the Bega Valley Shire are likely to undertake a larger proportion of the family caring roles, and their families' domestic work, in addition to their roles in the paid workforce. 1340 families in the Bega Valley Shire are single parent families and women account for 78% or 1045 of these single parent households.

Bega Valley Shire scores 976.9 on the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA). The SEIFA measures socio-economic disadvantage and this score indicates that the Bega Valley Shire is generally more disadvantaged than the state average of 1000. This score has implications for women and their children in the Bega Valley Shire.

ACCORDING TO THE WOMEN IN NSW 2012 REPORT:

“Women continue to volunteer in the community more than men and are still doing the bulk of the housework.”⁴



THE CHANGES

The National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children 2010-2022 was the first plan from the Federal Government to coordinate action across jurisdictions and to focus strongly on prevention. This initiative looks at the long term, building respectful relationships and working to increase gender equality to prevent violence from occurring in the first place. It holds perpetrators accountable and encourages behaviour change.

A recent report to the Australian Government has advised that the cost of violence against women and their children in 2009 was around \$13.6 billion. Without appropriate action this is estimated to rise by another \$2 billion in the next ten years.⁶

A noteworthy change in Australia over the last 30 years has been in relation to women's participation in the workforce. In particular there has been a significant increase in the proportion of women with dependent children in the workforce from 41% to 63% over the last 30 years.⁷

Although the rates of smoking have declined over recent years, it still remains a significant health issue. Furthermore, there are a high number of women who smoke during pregnancy. It is significantly higher for pregnant teenagers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.⁸

THE SOCIAL ISSUES

ACCORDING TO THE WOMEN IN NSW 2012 REPORT:

“Social customs and expectations shape the roles and attitudes of each sex, and this is reflected in the burden of disease each experiences, as well as the health-related behaviours they engage in. Women and men's pattern of time use, their employment and working patterns, education and leisure activities, even their eating patterns, are different.”⁹

Isolation

In the course of the consultations held in 2012, several discussions highlighted a continuing concern of social, geographic and financial isolation for women in the Bega Valley Shire.

Social and financial isolation for women and children can be exacerbated by a lack of public transport and affordable private vehicle options. Public transport in the Bega Valley Shire is limited and expensive.

Transport options such as car-pooling are not always advisable for women and children for a number of reasons. Car-pooling can often result in women accepting rides with people who are more or less strangers, therefore increasing the potential for women and children to find themselves in vulnerable situations.

In NSW, 31% of women 65 years and over live alone and it increases to 42% for the 80-84 age group. These figures are more than double the numbers for men in the same age groups.¹⁰ Recent research has highlighted significant issues for isolated older women in the community.

There are a large number of active retirees moving to the Bega Valley as part of the sea/tree change phenomenon. Feedback from consultations suggests that many older women were left socially and financially isolated following the death of, or separation from their partner. It is also understood that many women out-live their husbands. The problems of isolation for older women in the Bega Valley Shire are compounded by the increase in older women as the victims of domestic violence and the lack of affordable housing suited to older/single women.

Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is a significant issue for women and girls who remain to be the primary victims of domestic and family violence and sexual assault. Research undertaken in 2006 indicated that NSW

Aboriginal women were nearly six times more likely than non-Aboriginal women to be victims of domestic violence-related assault. Furthermore, Aboriginal women were ten times more likely to be the victims of homicide than the general female population.¹¹

According to the ABS, one in three Australian women have experienced physical violence since the age of 15, and almost one in five have experienced sexual violence. In 2005, over 350,000 women experienced physical violence and over 125,000 women experienced sexual violence.¹²

Indigenous women and girls are 35 times more likely to be hospitalised due to family violence related assaults than other Australian women and girls.¹³ However since 2003 there has been a decline in the rate of Aboriginal women who were victims of domestic violence.¹⁴

ACCORDING TO THE TIME FOR ACTION REPORT:

‘Every year an unacceptable number of Australian women and children have their lives and housing circumstances disrupted because of domestic and family violence. This is an intolerable situation with significant impacts on all involved, especially children. Women in this situation are, and remain, the ‘hidden’ homeless.’¹⁵

Rural communities experience higher rates of domestic and family violence

ACCORDING TO THE WOMEN IN NSW 2012 REPORT:

“The majority of violence against women and girls occurs in their homes.”

than metropolitan areas. Violence against women has increased 1.2% in the past 12 months in regional areas.¹⁶ This is a considerable increase and remains to be one of the most significant social problems facing women in rural areas.

Domestic and family violence in rural and remote areas is often more life threatening, less likely to be detected or prosecuted and more difficult to escape or end. There is a disproportionately high level of domestic homicides in rural and remote areas.

The causes of domestic violence are complex and there are a range of factors involved, including social, psychological and economical. The consequences for the victims, including children witnessing violence, are also complex and wide-ranging. It can have a negative impact on the victim's psychological, emotional and physical health.¹⁷

In rural areas, women and children escaping domestic and family violence face increased vulnerability. This can be due to isolation, the common involvement of firearms, a shortage of legal or support services and a lack of housing options.

Health

Specific health issues that have been identified for women are compounded by a lack of services and choices. In the Bega Valley there is a lack of women's health services and specialists, as a consequence there are minimal options for women to obtain a second opinion regarding their health concerns.

SIGNIFICANT HEALTH ISSUES THAT HAVE BEEN IDENTIFIED FOR WOMEN IN AUSTRALIA INCLUDE: ¹⁸

- *Anxiety and depression*
- *Ischaemic heart disease*
- *Stroke*
- *Type 2 Diabetes*
- *Dementia*
- *Breast Cancer*



Accessing bulk billing services is difficult, as many Doctors in the Bega Valley Shire do not bulk bill. As a consequence a number of women struggle to afford the cost of basic medical services.

Improving dental services for women has been identified in consultations undertaken by Council. Many disadvantaged women have missing teeth and this is a factor in lowered self-esteem.

The rate of young women smoking is higher in the Bega Valley than the NSW average. There are also a growing number of women who are at risk of developing chronic diseases due to poor diet and little or no physical activity.

Mental Health

Mental Health issues affect many women living in the Bega Valley Shire. A recent report

indicated that 11% of women in the Southern NSW Local Health District are suffering from high and very high psychological distress.¹⁹

The leading cause of burden of disease and injury for women in Australia is anxiety and depression.²⁰ Positive social relationships and networks can be an effective factor in combating mental health problems.²¹ A significant time of vulnerability for women is during pregnancy and the postnatal period. However, the highest prevalence of mental health issues for women is during mid-life.²²

There are a range of barriers to women accessing mental health services, particularly for women who face discrimination or disadvantage. Furthermore, in rural areas there is often less direct access to specialists and services.²³

High rates of anxiety and depression are influenced by a range of social issues. The following have been identified as the main factors influencing mental health in women, most of which have been identified as significant social issues in the Bega Valley:²⁴

- *higher levels of socioeconomic disadvantage and poverty*
- *lower income and lower participation in the paid workforce*
- *higher exposure to discrimination and harassment*
- *intimate partner and sexual violence*
- *the burden of caring responsibilities.*

Housing

A lack of affordable and appropriate housing has been raised during consultations as a particular concern for women, either living on their own or with children. There are large distances between the various towns within the Bega Valley Shire and minimal access to affordable housing in the main centres is a significant issue. Homelessness as a result of domestic violence is a problem for many women and their children, it also seriously affects older women in the community.

Consultations have specifically identified a need for more community housing. In particular a variety of housing stock that includes one to four bedroom houses is required.

Education and Employment

Employment opportunities for women in the Bega Valley may be impacted by a number of issues, these include:

- *lack of training opportunities*
- *access and equity*
- *limited transport options*
- *availability of childcare (including after school care)*
- *unsuitability of the required hours of work on offer*
- *the location of the place of work*

When women undertake education and/or employment a number of factors need to be considered. In particular, access to suitable childcare arrangements is crucial. After school hours and school holiday care in the Bega Valley Shire is often challenging to access and unaffordable for some women.

“The NSW government recognises the need to increase gender equality in the workforce.”²⁵

Other barriers to participation and employment for women are transport and the vast distances between major centres in the Bega Valley Shire. On the whole, women in the Bega Valley Shire are less able than men to commute long distances for work.

Consultations in the Bega Valley Shire have identified a need to offer bridging courses for women. This would encourage women back to employment and/or education and at the same time help develop women’s self-confidence. Some women in the Bega Valley Shire have reported a need for support in keeping their children at school and interested in learning.

Sexuality

There are a number of women in same sex relationships in the Bega Valley Shire and several of these women are parenting children. The biggest challenge these women face in Australia is the lack of marriage equality and legal recognition of same sex relationships. At a local level the lack of access to specific services, homophobia and the extraordinary pressures on young women coming out in a rural area are key issues.

Whilst sexuality is a defining factor for many lesbians they also face similar issues as other women, parents, people with disabilities and young people. It is recognised that the local area offers limited specialised support services for lesbians.

STRENGTHS IN THE BEGA VALLEY

The Bega Valley has a strong network of women working in small business and other leadership positions. The promotion of women in these types of roles across the Bega Valley Shire is vital and can be a valuable mechanism in addressing some of the barriers to participation.

There are several community groups focussed on the strengths, emotional resilience and progress of women in the Bega Valley Shire, such as the VIEW Clubs, Probus and CWA. Most surf clubs, exercise groups, art/music groups, craft events, gardening and church groups are generously supported by women who value community connections and social relationships. According to Volunteering Australia, of all the volunteer hours given by the people surveyed, 60% were given by women.²⁶

There is a strong network of services in the Bega Valley Shire for those who have experienced domestic/family violence. Council has a leadership role in the Bega Valley community and works with local organisations to reduce violence against women and children.



The Bega Valley was one of the first communities to pilot the Staying Home Leaving Violence (SHLV) service, which is auspiced by the South East Women and Children's Services. Some women accessing SHLV have recently participated in a study to assess their experiences of the service and their feedback has been positive.²⁷ A further 22 SHLV Programs have now been rolled out across NSW.

THE CONSTRAINTS

As outlined in this paper, there are a limited number and variety of health and community services in the Bega Valley. Consultations undertaken by Council have identified the need for an expansion of information and education services and programs for women.

It is recognised that many of the existing services for women and children are under resourced, as most of these positions are only funded for two to three days per week and funding for programs is limited.

Supervised access services are often a part of access arrangements for vulnerable women who have left violent partners. This type of service is needed in the Bega Valley to enable a safe changeover of children from one parent to another. Public venues are currently being utilised, however these are not always appropriate and are unlikely to provide a supportive environment for women on an ongoing basis.

It is essential for women to have a voice in regional NSW to shape policy responses that affect them, and to promote women's participation in decision making and leadership which is a key to change. However, the evidence indicates that leadership roles are more likely to be undertaken by men.

- *“51% of local government employees are women;*
- *yet only 20% of senior managers are women;*
- *only 7% of chief executives or general managers are women; and*
- *30% of elected representatives in local government are women.”²⁸*

THE OPPORTUNITIES

There is an opportunity for an innovative approach to service delivery to assist in enabling a range of community and health services to be offered in the Bega Valley Shire. An option worth consideration is the development of a large community services centre that would allow services to co-locate, therefore enabling shared resources. This model is similar to how some services are operating in Cooma and the Eurobodalla.

The co-location of services in a multi service model would provide an opportunity to share resources and allow women a single point of access. Most of the services in the Bega Valley Shire operate as standalone services and while cooperation exists it is difficult for people to navigate the system.

Programs that break down the walls of silence around domestic violence have been implemented and this type of community education and awareness should be increased. Options to build on the networks and services currently operating in the Bega Valley Shire, that address issues around domestic violence should be considered.

There are strong links between employment, economic development and lifelong learning programs. development of a range of strategies towards improving and enhancing women's access to employment opportunities in the Bega Valley Shire is required.

Strategies include education, training and return to work programs, as well as better access to, and availability of transport. In particular, the expansion of after school hours care and vacation care opportunities are viewed as a critical ingredient to a successful return to work.

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SOCIAL ISSUES PAPERS

This document is part of a broader Social Issues Paper produced by the Bega Valley Shire Council. To read the document in its' entirety go to www.begavalley.nsw.gov.au

CONTACT

Community Services
Bega Valley Shire Council
02 6499 2222
council@begavalley.nsw.gov.au

