The Women’s Mental Health Network Victoria (WMHNV) is:

- An independent, network of women consumers, carers, workers and women who have an interest in women’s mental health, working together to ensure the voice of women consumers of mental health services is heard.
- Recognised as the primary voice in Victoria for women who experience mental illness and is the only service specifically addressing the needs of these women.
- A collaborative body working in partnership with many community organisations and government bodies.

Achievements to date

The lived experience of women consumers forms the basis of the WMHNV role in the promotion of the need for gender sensitive and safe care for women through consultation, training, presentations and advocacy across the mental health, community and disability sectors.

The WMHNV has been a key element in the development and implementation of the Department of Health Mental Health and Drugs Division response to the gender and safety needs of women.

- Gender sensitivity and safety project (2008)
- Chief Psychiatrist guidelines to promoting sexual safety, responding to sexual activity, and managing allegations of sexual assault in adult acute inpatient units (2009)
- Service Guidelines on Gender Sensitivity and Safety (July 2011)
- The creation of separate areas for women in Adult Acute Psychiatric In-Patient Units. A majority of units now have women only areas or corridors.
- Government provision of $4 million to establish gender specific mental health spaces in existing mental health services
- Commitment by State Government to a Women’s Only PARC

FURTHER READING ON TOPIC OF GENDER SENSITIVE CARE FOR WOMEN

NETWORK PUBLICATIONS

- Julie Dempsey (2011) Outrage to Determination...Real Women Right On!!! VWMHN Action for Change
- Victorian Women and Mental Health Network (2009) Increasing Safety and Gender Sensitivity in mixed sex psychiatric units
- Victorian Women and Mental Health Network (2007) Nowhere to be safe – Women’s Experiences of mixed-sex psychiatric wards

AUSTRALIAN PUBLICATIONS

- Clark Hailey and Fileborn Bianca (2011) Responding to Women’s experience of Sexual Assault in institutional and care settings, Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault.

THE EXPERIENCE FROM ENGLAND’S PERSPECTIVE

- A report by the Mental Health Act Commissioner (March 2009) Women Detained in Hospital

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Women’s Mental Health Network Victoria Inc.
As media reports highlight, women continue to experience a lack of safety when admitted to acute in-patient psychiatric units.

Studies conducted by Women’s Mental Health Network Victoria and others show:

- 61% of women experience harassment or abuse while inpatients. Male patients are responsible for the majority of these assaults. There are some incidents involving male staff.
- 43% of staff working in inpatient units identified significant safety concerns for women consumers

In Victoria
- there are 26 Adult Acute Psychiatric In-Patient Units with an average of 25-30 beds in each unit
- at any one time 40-50% of patients in these units will be women.

The Victorian Adult Acute Mental Health System – an overview from a women’s perspective

Women in adult acute mental health units are significantly more likely to
- have experienced physical, sexual or psychological abuse as children or adults (research indicates up to 70% of women in a mental health facility will have a history of sexual abuse)
- be socio-economically disadvantaged (16% to 9% of general population) and experience homelessness (11 - 20% of people experiencing a mental illness)
- be socially isolated

Vulnerable women, when acutely ill, are
- admitted to mixed gender mental health units
- may have to share bathroom facilities with men (on older units)
- often not able to lock bathroom doors and have showers without curtains (frequently shower curtains are not available as they are perceived to be a hanging risk)
- will often be required to sleep in rooms located in mixed gender corridors
- bedroom doors may have locks which may be left unlocked

PROMOTING SAFETY AND GENDER SENSITIVITY FOR WOMEN CONSUMERS IN MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

The aim of Women’s Mental Health Network Victoria (WMHNV) is to embed a culture of safer gender sensitive care into our mental health services, promoting a healing environment for women.

WMHNV is a unique service which ensures that the voice of women consumers of mental health services is heard.

WMHNV is an independent collaboration between consumers, carers and workers.

For over 25 years WMHNV has advocated for cultural and structural change to promote safe and gender sensitive environments. Much has been achieved in terms of policy development.

Unfortunately, we have learnt from experience that it is essential to maintain a focus on the safety needs of women in the mental health service system to sustain a gender sensitive and safe service system.

WMHNV is a proven catalyst for change and will continue to do so.