



Rethinking mental health promotion

A Gender Transformative Approach

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Why is a gender lens over mental wellbeing important?

To truly promote mental wellbeing, we need to consider it as a precondition to health in all areas. This involves working at the community, societal and systemic level to link the social determinants of health – such as education, socioeconomic position, and housing, to mental wellbeing.

A gender transformative approach is crucial for improving mental wellbeing outcomes because it addresses the root causes of gender inequalities and intersectional disadvantage, and their impacts on mental health (see Fig 1).

Rigid gender norms and mental health - an overview

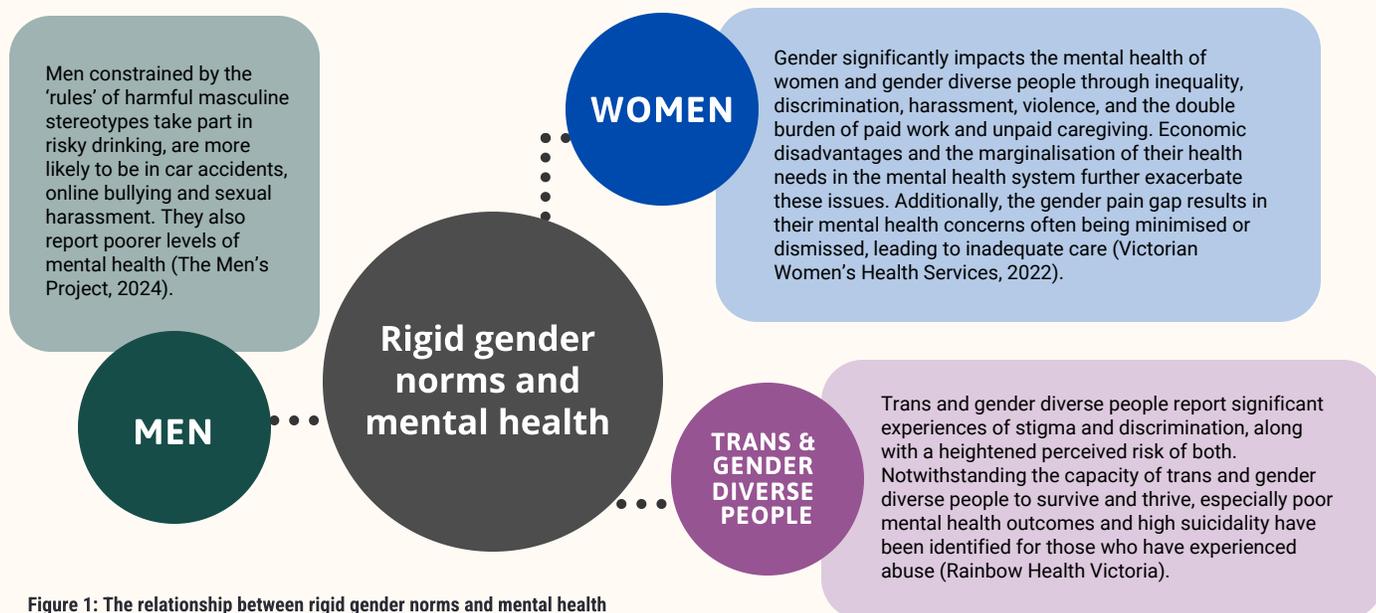


Figure 1: The relationship between rigid gender norms and mental health

Gender transformative practice seeks to challenge the causes of gender inequality and strengthen actions that support gender equality within a given context. This approach is not a prescriptive set of actions, but rather a way of conceptualising how the problems of gender inequality and intersectional disadvantage are identified and addressed at the systems level. A gender transformative approach is possible in every situation, though its application will vary depending on the context. Approaches may either exploit, accommodate or transform gender norms, practices and structures.

The continuum (shown in Fig 2) can help us to understand what approach we, and the organisations we work for, are currently utilising in our work. To do this, it is useful to start by thinking about the intentions of the work. Consider:

Is my aim solely to address the needs created by existing gender inequalities without addressing the causes of the problem?

Or do I seek to both address current needs and transform the gender norms, practices and structures that create this inequality so that the problem is addressed at the source?



Figure 2: The continuum of approaches to action on gender and health, from most exploitative to accommodative to transformative

What does a gender lens over mental wellbeing look like?

Within the frame of gender transformative practice, mental health promotion recognises that social determinants, including gender inequities, impact mental wellbeing. We work to develop inclusive and supportive environments that recognise and accommodate diverse needs and strengths.

Figure 3 shows a proposed gender transformative model of mental health promotion:

A Gender Transformative Model of Mental Health Promotion

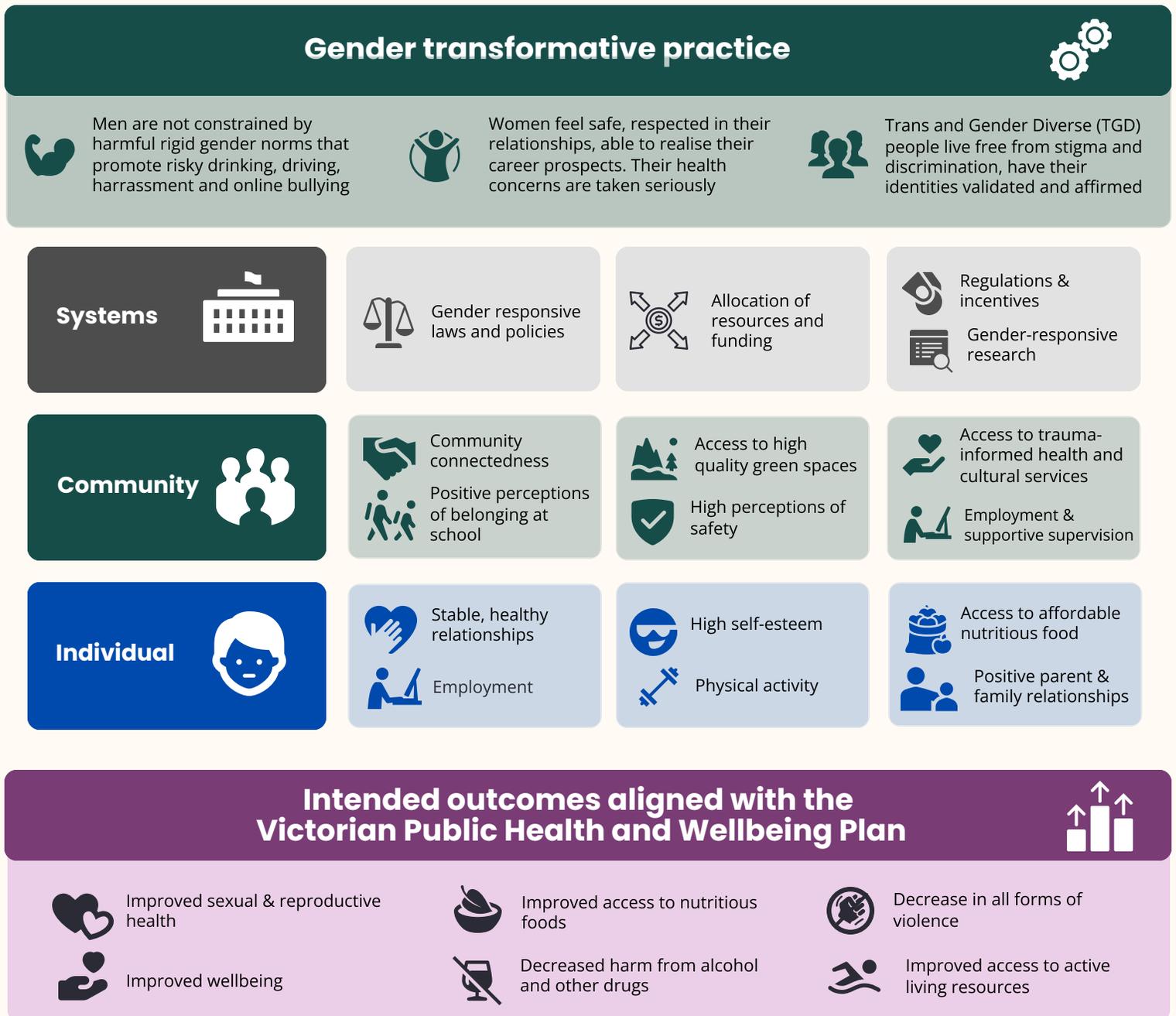


Figure 3: A gender transformative model of mental health promotion

System

- **Gender-responsive laws and policies** addresses issues such as gender-based violence, reproductive rights, and workplace discrimination, which significantly impact mental wellbeing. **Example:** Implementing policies that provide paid parental leave for parents promotes gender equity and challenges gendered expectations in caregiving roles.
- **Allocation of resources and funding** considers the unique mental health needs of women, men and gender diverse people. **Example:** Funding community-based mental health programs that specifically cater to women and/or lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, intersex or asexual communities.
- **Regulations and incentives** encourage agencies to consider gender impacts in their programs and collaborations. **Example:** Legislated under the Gender Equality Act 2020, defined entities in Victoria are required to conduct Gender Impact Assessments and develop Gender Equality Action Plans.
- **Research** explores how gender intersects with other factors such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation to impact mental wellbeing. **Example:** The Liptember Foundation report: [Uncovering the Reality - Examining Multi-Dimensional Aspects of Women's Mental Health in Australia 2024](#)

Community

- **Community connectedness:** The degree to which we feel involved, connected and supported in our community. **Example:** an online group, a local hobby club, a work network or otherwise – is an important aspect of our wellbeing (Australian Unity Wellbeing Index).
- **Schools:** Positive relationships with teachers and peers, positive perceptions of school safety, and positive perceptions of belonging and connectedness are associated with positive mental wellbeing (Aldridge and McChesney, 2018). **Example:** students feel safe and supported to challenge gender stereotypes and promote respectful relationships.
- **Access to high quality green spaces:** Access to high quality and quantity of green space is associated with positive mental wellbeing for children and adolescents (McCormick, 2017). **Example:** community open spaces with trees for both shade and contributing to aesthetics and a sense of calm.
- **Perceptions of safety:** From physical safety to psychological and financial safety, feeling safe and secure in our lives allows us to focus on the other factors that support our wellbeing. (Australian Unity Wellbeing Index). **Example:** CrowdSpot and Monash University's XYX Lab partnered to develop YourGround, a digital platform that advances knowledge of safety in public space for women, girls and gender-diverse people.
- **Access to trauma-informed health and cultural services** helps prevent re-traumatisation by ensuring care is sensitive and informed. **Example:** Sharing pronouns during introductions is a critical part of creating spaces which are safe and welcoming for people of all genders.

Individual

- **Employment:** People who are employed have more positive psychological wellbeing and lower rates of depression and anxiety (Hergenrather et al., 2015), than those not in paid employment. Having supportive supervision at work was also found, in a moderate-quality study, to be associated with reduced levels of anxiety and depression (Modini et al., 2016).
- **High quality relationships** are vital for mental well-being, boosting self-esteem, and fostering empathy, trust, and cooperation (Leigh Hunt et al., 2017).
- **High self-esteem, high distress tolerance, low aggression and low expressive suppression** were found to be resilience factors associated with low anxiety and depression symptoms, for children who had faced childhood adversity (Fritz et al., 2018).
- **Physical activity** is positively associated with psychosocial well-being and reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety across various age groups and settings, with outdoor and nature-based activities particularly beneficial (Chan et al, 2019)
- **Nutrition:** Physical, social and economic access at all times, for all people, is essential to equitable opportunities for nutrition intake. Higher fruit and vegetable intake protects against depression (Saghafian et al., 2018). During COVID-19, increased Job Seeker payments allowed 93% of survey respondents to buy more fresh produce, highlighting the importance of economic access in discussions about nutrition (Australian Council of Social Service).
- **Positive parent and family relationships:** Characterised by family support, cohesion, positive climate, parental involvement, warmth, autonomy granting, monitoring, and positive parenting practices, are key factors that contribute to resilience and are associated with lower levels of depression and anxiety across various age groups and contexts (Meng et al., 2018).