

Report

“Let’s Talk About Sex”

Young Women’s Gathering on Sexual and Reproductive Health

13-14th July, 2007

The Centre, Randwick

Hosted by: Australian Reproductive Health Alliance

Principle sponsors:

WomenSpeak

Family Planning NSW

Also supported by:

Wyeth

Present:

100 women, young and old, including:

- Aunty Beryl Timberry Beller – Aboriginal Elder
- Tanya Plibersek MP – Shadow Minister for Women
- Senator Kerry Nettle - Greens Spokesperson for Women and Youth
- Ann Brassil – CEO, Family Planning NSW
- Kathy Richards – WomenSpeak Network Coordinator
- Jane Singleton – CEO, Australian Reproductive Health Alliance
- Virginia Haussegger – ABC News Presenter and Journalist
- Dr Karen Brooks – Senior Lecturer in Communication and Cultural Studies, *Courier Mail* Columnist

Aims of the Young Women’s Gathering

The Young Women’s Gathering aimed to provide a forum in which young women could openly discuss sex, debating social, psychological and clinical aspects of sexual and reproductive health. It also aimed to achieve better sexual and reproductive health outcomes for young Australians, to generate new knowledge about rights-based approaches to sexual and reproductive health, and to foster a better understanding of current attitudes in young Australians. To this end, the gathering sought to produce a series of recommendations to be presented to the Parliamentary Group on Population and Development, with the intention of influencing sexual and reproductive health based policies on State and Federal levels.

Welcome

The Young Women’s Gathering began with Aunty Beryl Timberry Beller, an Aboriginal Elder and traditional owner and custodian of the local Gurrwall country, welcoming us to her land.

ARHA CEO Jane Singleton welcomed the women, coming from diverse backgrounds, to talk about sex. She noted “sex is a broad issue that goes way beyond copulation, encompassing sexuality, sexual and reproductive rights, fertility and parenthood.”

The gathering was officially opened by Tanya Plibersek, Shadow Minister for Women. Ms Plibersek commented that Generation ‘Y’ are often treated as selfish and useless. She expressed her confidence in youth, arguing that this gathering was further proof of the abilities of young people to engage in and understand important issues. She noted that it is often politicians that get it wrong when it comes to important youth issues, such as sexual and reproductive health, pointing to the Harradine family planning guidelines as evidence of this. Ms Plibersek stressed the importance of talking about sex in the context of healthy relationships, particularly in the face of increased exposure from a young age to sex and pornography on the internet. Ms Plibersek lamented the lack of a sexual health strategy in Australia, noting that sex education in schools is insufficient despite the rising prevalence of sexually active teenagers, and alarming rates of unwanted sex: up to 25% of sexually active teenagers have had unwanted sex.

The keynote address was given by Senator Kerry Nettle, Greens Spokesperson for Women and Youth. She stressed the importance of creating opportunities for having the voices of young women heard in parliament. Senator Nettle noted the effectiveness of women working together in parliament to improve women’s reproductive rights. Despite the successes of women politicians in the recent RU486 campaign and in the move to abolish the Harradine guidelines, there is much more to be done. Senator Nettle spoke of the pregnancy hotline as an example of the values of influential members of the Government being allowed to seep through to the detriment of the sexual and reproductive health and rights of Australian women.

Presentations

Throughout the two days, 23 presentations were made by women from a variety of organisations including university women’s collectives, youth services, family planning organisations, health clinics, rape and domestic violence centres, the public service and universities. Presentation topics included: sexuality, consent, rape, fertility, sex education, issues in multicultural communities, safe sex and STIs, peer education, access to information, sexual and reproductive health policy, violence, drink spiking, issues for women with disabilities, unplanned pregnancy, and safe sex marketing. Presentations took an interactive form, asking participants to be involved in discussion, games, debate and brainstorming.

Open Forums

Three open forums were run on the following subjects:

- Sex Education: What’s taught, what’s not, and what should be?
- Media: Representations of young women and sexuality
- Policy and Reforms: What could policy makers do to deliver better sexual and reproductive health outcomes for young people?

Each forum had a panel of three or four and proved an effective way to discuss issues from a variety of perspectives, and to generate discussion and debate. The media forum, which featured Virginia Haussegger and Dr Karen Brooks, emerged in evaluation forms as the most enjoyed session at the gathering.

Networking and opportunities

As well as allowing women the opportunity to hear about and discuss a variety of issues, the Young Women's Gathering created a fantastic forum for women to network. There was much exchanging of contact details, with organisations linking up with similar and complementary organisation from every state in the country. Because sexual and reproductive health organisations are often short on funding, such networking opportunities appear rare, and as such are highly valued. There was also the opportunity for the sharing of projects in which young women could become involved.

Recommendations

The final session at the gathering was a roundtable discussion of recommendations to be made to the PGPD. A series of recommendations was virtually unanimously agreed on, suggesting the need for Federal or State reproductive health strategies, that would encompass better sex and relationship education, transparency in advertising and access to resources.

Evaluation

The evaluation forms were very positive. The most common complaints related to the quality and location of the venue, rather than the actual content and format of the gathering. Considerations for the future include: a mixed gathering of men and women, a greater campaign to involve members of the general public (the majority of participants were involved in women's, youth or sexual and reproductive health organisations), and a greater focus on the organisations involved in sexual and reproductive health and rights in Australia. All evaluation forms responded 'yes' to holding another similar gathering in the future. The viability, need for, and value of the gathering was stressed throughout, in evaluation forms, and in follow up emails from participants and presenters.