

Brisbane, Australia: Women of Non English Speaking Background (NESB) Speak Out

Although Australia is classified as a developed country, and its population has a very high standard of health, pockets of inequality still exist. Women of non English speaking backgrounds (NESB) are doubly disadvantaged because of their gender and ethnic background. However, they have not remained a silent minority. Through activities such as the Speakout, they are being heard.

The Association of NESB Women in Queensland held a Speakout on the 9th and 12th of October 1991. The Speakout aimed to give grassroots NESB women an opportunity to share their experiences, raise issues of concern, provide ideas to the Association and produce recommendations to the relevant government bodies.

The major problems the women identified are those having to do with language difficulties, especially in relation to health and legal services and information. English classes are often not suited to NESB women. For example, some women are refugees who are traumatised and cannot relate to or learn within a formal education environment. Unemployment as the result of factors such as language difficulties and racial discrimination is a great stress on these women. In addition, women identified problems with isolation due to inadequate public transport and lack of multilingual information on existing transport services. Also, there is a lack of ethnic child care services and information on the ones which are operating.

Women at the Speakout made a number of suggestions for tackling these problems. First, there needs to be

a greater outreach to women in isolated areas so that they may be informed about such events as the Speakout. The majority of women who attended the Speakout were attending English classes or working at community centres and appeared to be from relatively secure economic backgrounds. One venue through which contact may be made is through the Factory Project.

Another way outreach work may be done is through travelling vans with multilingual information and interpreters who can visit isolated areas, shopping centres, and schools with high percentages of NESB women. Stalls could be set up in shopping centres with needed information and multilingual posters could be put up in shops and schools. Other strategies include holding workshops on issues such as health, legal issues and domestic violence and running talks and information sessions at community centres. More English classes should be held in the inner city and isolated areas, and questionnaires can be distributed to appropriate services to better identify needs and resources. In addition, women may lobby government for improved services. This can be done through letter writing to newspapers, visiting local and state parliamentarians and government officials and having stories run on current affairs shows and in newspapers. ☾

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Women and AIDS

Geraldine Bailey, a Canadian feminist working on women and health issues, was guest speaker in a video film showing and discussion at the WomanHealth office in Manila last March 6, 1992. Isis International Manila workers participated in the lively exchange which started with explaining what part of the body you like and why, followed by videos on rape and prostitution and the vulva, and the main discussion on AIDS and safe sex and the use of condoms. ☾