

The Guiding Principles Community Consultations Project*

There is increasing recognition of the importance of multi-disciplinary, multi-sectoral research in women's health. Linking theory, research, policy development and social change to improve women's health requires the integration of individuals from government, community, clinical settings and academia. However, these inter-sectoral partnerships, particularly academic-community collaborations in research, face unique challenges due to social and political differences such as power dynamics, workplace value systems, and the daily realities of individuals from each sector.

The Guiding Principles Project formed an integral part of the original proposal to Health Canada to establish the Maritime Centre of Excellence in Women's Health (MCEWH). The goal of the Centre is to support research, to influence policy and to promote action on the social factors that affect women's health and well being over the lifespan. The purpose of establishing Guiding Principles was to formulate meaningful, practical principles which can serve as a code of ethics for engaging in collaborative work, by drawing on community groups' advice and experiences. The ultimate goal is to foster an environment where individuals and organizations from community, academia, government and clinical settings who share common interests in women's health can work together in a meaningful way on a policy relevant agenda in women's health.

The Guiding Principles Project was designed to communicate and network with community-based organizations and groups interested in women's health. It encompasses three phases:

Phase I: compilation of a database of 566 organizations interested in women's health in Atlantic Canada; development of promotional materials about the Centre in consultation with the MCEWH's Action Working Group.

Phase II: a mail-out to these organizations with information on MCEWH and a brief survey about the organization; provision of contact information and the opportunity for organizations to indicate whether they would be interested in reviewing the Centre's Guiding Principles.

Phase III: sending the Guiding Principles to interested organizations for feedback; compilation and revision of the Guiding Principles after community consultations which took the form of "kitchen table discussions" with organization members; presentation of final version of the Guiding Principles to the MCEWH Steering Committee as principles that the Centre strives to uphold and value in collaborative work.

*** The Guiding Principles Consultations Project was conducted by Susan Kirkland, Stella Lord, Pam Rubin, Jane Farquharson, Maggie Cummings, Alison James and the Action Working Group. Over 105 organizations responded to the mail-out in Phase II and 75 of these organizations completed the baseline survey. Forty organizations participated in the Guiding Principles Consultations and 16 organizations from all four Atlantic provinces completed the kitchen table consultation.**

The Guiding Principles

Inclusiveness and Diversity

We welcome all women and value their contributions to the work of the Centre. We will continue to work to include the viewpoints of women of all ages and abilities from diverse racial, cultural, socio-economic and educational backgrounds who live in all parts of the Atlantic region.

Mutual Respect

We acknowledge and respect the unique experience, perspective, knowledge and expertise that each woman brings to the Centre. We will respect one another and work together in ways that recognize that all contributions are of equal importance and all persons of equal value.

Fairness

We will work with women in communities, women's groups, community and voluntary organizations, researchers and policy-makers to find ways to ensure that all voices are represented fairly.

Accountability

We will be accountable for basing our decisions on these principles and will develop mechanisms for monitoring research to ensure that it reflects these principles. We will develop decision-making processes that are transparent and accountable and include ways for interested parties to offer comments and feedback.

Woman-Centred Research

We support research that addresses the factors affecting women's health and well-being over their lifespan and is:

Holistic: Holistic research integrates a broad range of physical, emotional, spiritual, social, economic and environmental perspectives into our understanding of women's health. These can include factors not always taken into account in health research – for example, racism, poverty, sexism, violence and geographic isolation.

Cooperative, Collaborative and Participatory: We will encourage research that involves women from the community in making decisions about all aspects of the research. Women from the community will be respected as active participants and not confined to the role of “research subject.” Researchers will work with the community to determine what issues will be researched and to set priorities for research. Women and researchers will work together to decide what research methods will be used, what the research findings mean, and how the findings will be used and communicated.

Maritime Centre of Excellence for Women's Health

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