

**WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY**



**Vice-Chancellor's
GENDER EQUALITY FUND
Final Report 2019**

Women Doing Well

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Background

For close to half a century, social and cultural analysts have cautioned against the ascendancy of popular wellness culture (Rosen, 1993; DeFrancisco, 1995; McGee, 2005; Hazleden, 2003). The scholarship has claimed – almost unanimously – that the modern preoccupation with regimes intended at improving self-understanding and enriching the human psyche (Santrock, Minnett & Campbell, 1994) – such as self-help books, makeover television, self-tracking apps and wearable technologies – has negative implications for women. They have argued that wellness culture represents a backlash against feminism (Faludi, 1991), a plot to pacify individuals (Bolotin, 1997), amplify self-indulgence (Rieff, 1991) and individualism new heights (Whippman, 2017), as well as mobilise a belabored self that is depoliticised (McGee, 2005) and easily governable (Rimke, 2000).

Today, the influencer economy – estimated to surge globally to US\$6.5 billion in 2020 (The State of Influencer Marketing 2019: Benchmark Report) – has driven wellness culture to new terrain. It has facilitated a surge in ‘uncertified’ individuals disseminating ‘expert’ health and wellness advice (Baker & Rojek, 2020) premised on personal experiences rather than science. With public trust in traditional experts at an all-time low, this has resulted in unmatched growth in the number of wellness products and services on the market – which remain problematically unregulated. Since wellness culture is a highly gendered space (Kapell, BM & McLean, S, 2014; Riley, S, Evans, A & Anderson, E, 2019) that commands an overwhelmingly, and growing, woman audience (Simonds, 1992), this phenomenon requires immediate scholarly attention.

My Contribution

Consistent across the scholarly critiques of wellness culture is the assumption popular wellness has a linear and homogenous effect on women, whom are reduced to the role of ‘docile subjects’ and ‘cultural dupes’, extinguished of any capacity to consume discriminatively or exercise agency (Simonds, 1992). What is critically overlooked here is *why* women are motivated to participate in wellness culture, and the enabling or ancillary possibilities that this might afford. For example, does women’s participation in wellness culture mark their rejection of conventional medical spaces which have for too long negated women as whole beings?

Following this way of thinking, *Women Doing Well*, was driven by an ethos not to discourage women to participate in wellness culture, but to build their capacity to critically engage in this space. Capacity-building included equipping women with new gender literacies to identify the ‘double entanglement’ that underpins this space (where feminist-friendly language is used to propagate normative gender codes). *Women Doing Well* is about meeting women where they are – politically and socially – to understand them, not to reproduce them as unintelligible members of our community (as much of the scholarly space had inadvertently done).

Using this framework, Women Doing Well delivered the following outputs:

1. **Women Doing Well: Episode 1** is a 8-minute cinematic breakdown of wellness culture, featuring commentary from Professor Jane Ussher, and Associate Professors Amanda Third and Philippa Collin. The purpose of the video was to speak to ‘everyday’ women about how their contemporary health and wellbeing practices are most likely consolidated through a wider culture. The video generated a total of 2,700 views across Facebook, Instagram and YouTube.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0saVg_sz3Eg

2. Following the positive public reception to the first video, a second video, **Women Doing Well: Episode 2** was produced. This 10-minute video offered a deeper drill-down into the phenomenon of wellness culture through an interview with Professor Jane Ussher. It also offered practical tips to do effective and safe self-care. The video generated a total of 800 views across Facebook, Instagram and YouTube.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3JrCV3_0yWA

3. A third video, **A Woman's Place? Women, Cities and Safety**, produced alongside panelists Association Professor Amanda Third, Winnie Dunn (Managing Director, Sweatshop) and Dr Gill Matthewson (Senior Research Fellow, Monash University) was produced. The panel sought to connect women’s individual choices – including those around leisure – in a broader context of public planning. At the support of the Office of the Vice-Chancellor, the panel was delivered at the University’s CatalystWest Forum before a live-audience of 350 people from government, industry and community. It also generated a digital audience of 750 viewers across Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pXT08J-4doY>

4. Helen Barcham was invited to present at the **Splendour in the Grass Science Tent** in July 2019. She presented on her Women Doing Well project, namely on ‘Body Image in an Age of Instagram’ which addressed our culture of wellness and its rendering of self-making through a pedagogy of defect. The presentation generated an audience of 200 young people, particularly young women. Costs associated with this presentation was kindly covered by the Office of the Vice-Chancellor.

<https://www.facebook.com/westsyduics/posts/our-phd-candidate-helen-barcham-was-invited-to-speak-at-the-splendour-in-the-gra/2443230969075123/>

5. Helen Barcham was invited to author an article in The Conversation entitled, **‘Do I need to shave my pubic hair before having sex?’** The article was based on the Women Doing Well project. As at March 2020, the article has been read 204,000 times and shared on Facebook more than 1,500 times – making it Western Sydney University’s third-most read The Conversation article.

6. Following the positive public reception of The Conversation article, Helen Barcham was interviewed by SBS on a story about women and beauty standards entitled, **‘A new generation of Australian beauty pageants are being driven by migrant communities’**.

<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/a-new-generation-of-australian-beauty-pageants-are-being-driven-by-migrant-communities>

7. On 4 March, Helen Barcham will be a keynote speaker at Western Sydney Community Forum’s **International Women’s Day Event**, alongside the NSW Minister for Women and Minister for Mental Health. Helen was invited to speak about her Women Doing Well research.

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