

Global Women's Health Issues: Sex and Gender Matter

Empowering women improves both productivity and health outcomes. Although the terms *sex* and *gender* are commonly used interchangeably they refer to two distinct constructs. Sex pertains to biological differences between men and women; whereas gender refers to socially defined roles, behaviors and expectations. Achieving clarity and distinction between these terms is important as the contribution to women's health of *sex* and *gender* are likely to be different and hence our solutions to reduce disparities. Sex differences are increasingly recognized to be important in conditions such as cardiovascular disease, (1) and whilst physiological differences in the coronary vasculature can contribute to different presentations and manifestations of disease, gender influences health behaviors, risks and access to health services. (2) We seek to argue why considering gender, as well as sex, is critical to improving health outcomes.

Gender inequality keeps women poor, makes them more vulnerable to violence as well as illness and limits their access to education, health care and social justice. (2) Globally, women and girls are more susceptible to poverty, violence and disability regardless of country of residence, Indigenous women across the world experience greater health disparities and Aboriginal and Torres Islander women are more at risk of accidents, homicides and intimate partner violence. (3) Women are disproportionately impacted by conflict and those who are refugees also experience substantial difficulties and challenges accessing health services and as a consequence inferior health outcomes. (4) (5) Over recent decades there has been improvement across several health indicators for women, including maternal and child mortality. (6) But much remains to be done to decrease health disparities. Women and girls are increasingly susceptible to HIV and AIDS in many countries across the world and there is a clear association between exposure to violence and infection. (5) In sub-Saharan Africa, women aged 15-24 are more likely than men to be HIV positive and carry the greatest burden of the disease. (7)

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide us with stretch targets to improve health and well-being and also seek to address the fundamental social, political and economic factors that contribute to inequity and health disparities. These 17 goals and 169 targets focus our attention on the critical issues impacting on global health and the well-being of our planet. Increasing the participation of women, particularly from minority groups, in decision making positions is an important strategy to achieve the goal of SDG 5. Although SDG 5, specifically targets gender equality, addressing the SDGs without a gender lens or recognition of the importance of sex differences will limit achieving targets. (8)

Meeting the targets of the SDGs will require approaching women's health from a socio-cultural perspective considering gender and shifting the focus from considering only sex based differences in women's health. Viewing women's health from a life course approach recognizing transitions, such as birth, girlhood, adolescence and aging as period of vulnerabilities is increasingly important. (2) The increased life expectancy of women is frequently associated with poverty, disability and isolation requiring additional health and social services. (9) (10) Achieving the SDGs will require structural transformations across the globe in local communities and also national and international governance. Ensuring women have access to education is integral to maximizing their participation in society and as a consequence their health. Gender inequalities are often thought to be solely the domain of low and middle income countries, but disparities are pervasive across all economies, including Australia. Gender based violence is widespread globally and there are more similarities than differences in addressing this issue across countries. This has fueled global collaborations in potential solutions such as *ehealth* allowing access to confidential resources. (11) (12) Developing integrated and coordinated strategies is required to advance women's health. The Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health, a nationally representative sample of more than 40 000 women in three age cohorts, is generating valuable information to guide women's health interventions across the lifespan, not just in Australia but across the globe. (13) This study casts the spotlight not just on sex based issues in

women's health but important factors pertaining to gender impacting on women's health, such as social circumstances and health seeking behaviors. This will be a valuable source for health planning for the future and provide a roadmap for important data items that consider the perspective of gender that should be considered in policy, practice, education and research.

In July 2010, the United Nations General Assembly created UN Women, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. UN Women has been successful in focusing on discrete country issues, cross jurisdiction activities as well as global efforts. Across the globe, eliminating violence against women, promoting economic empowerment, leadership and participation are crucial to improving health and achieving the SDGs. These structural issues are hard to achieve and even in Australia, gender inequities are evident. Developing and evaluating interventions, that consider both sex and gender, will be important in achieving the SDGs and the mission of UN Women. Strong, healthy women contribute to a just, cohesive and civil society. As health professionals it is important that we consider the need for tailored and targeted strategies to meet the needs of women and girls. Just as important we need a social, political and economic systems that values the presence of women and ensures their maximal participation at all levels of governance and government.

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