

Why Women's Health: An Overview

Why Women's Health?

Because women are different from men.

Sex refers to the biological differences between females and males¹. In health this has traditionally focused on reproductive differences. However, anatomy, physiology and genetics present a broader range of issues in which differences in men and women can be identified¹.

Gender refers to the different social and cultural roles, attitudes, behaviours, expectations and constraints placed upon women and men by virtue of their sex¹. It affects all aspects of the lives of women and men and is an important determinant of health and well-being.

The many aspects of women's and men's health and wellbeing influenced by gender include¹:

- exposure to risk factors
- access to and understanding of information about disease management, prevention and control
- subjective experience of illness and its social significance
- attitudes towards the maintenance of one's own health and that of other family members
- the use of available services
- perceptions of quality of care.

Gender roles and responsibilities are rarely evenly balanced in any society and Australia is no exception. Focusing on women's health addresses past and current gender imbalances, and in the process, by addressing issues through a gendered approach, improves the health of both women and men.

What is a Gendered Approach?

Applying a gendered approach, or a gendered lens:

- is a way of looking at information
- identifies and analyses the similarities and differences in conditions, situations, needs and priorities between women and men
- takes into account such variables as biology, genetics, socio-economic circumstances, culture, behaviour and gender.

Why Take a Gendered Approach?

A gendered approach²:

- recognises the need for the full participation of women and men in decision-making
- gives equal weight to the knowledge, values and experiences of women and men
- ensures that both women and men identify their health needs and priorities and acknowledges that certain health problems are unique to, or have more serious implications, for men and women
- leads to a better understanding of the causes of ill-health
- results in more effective interventions to improve health
- contributes to the attainment of greater equity in health and health care.

Implications for the Future

There are many ways in which a gender lens can be applied to policy analysis, and program and service planning, implementation and evaluation. Information and tools are accessible to help utilise a gendered approach in health policy, planning and program delivery.

In an era of evidence based health policy and practice, it makes sense to use all evidence including that which is gendered.

¹ Women's Health Association of Victoria (2001). Women's Health Association of Victoria: Position Paper on Gender & Practice.
http://www.whv.org.au/Articles/WHAV_gender_sensitivity.pdf Accessed on 05/06/2006

² World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe (1999). *Health 21: The Health for All Policy Framework for the WHO European Region: European Health for All Series; No.6.* World Health Organisation, Denmark.