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Sex, Gender, and Health

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Class Objectives

- Differentiate between sex and gender
- Consider the importance of sex and gender as health determinants
- Discuss various pathways through which gender and sex differences impact health outcomes

Why do you think public health should be concerned about sex and/or gender in relation to health?

Women's Health

- Women live longer than men, an average of 5 years longer, but they tend to be “sicker” than men (Apfel, 1982; Waldron, 1994)
- Longer life expectancy holds across ethnic groups and nations, but the gap is decreasing (Verbrugge, 1985; Walsh, et al., 1995)
- When social discrimination decreases, women's life expectancy increases (Waldron, 1983)

Men's Health

Compared to women:

- Men have higher rates of fatal illnesses
- Men have more toxic occupational exposure
- Men have higher rates of injuries (both intentional and non-intentional)

Source: Verbrugge, 1985; Walsh, et al., 1995

Major causes of death in US by gender

Age-Adjusted Death Rates for 10 Leading Causes of Death in the United States, by Gender, 2000

Deaths (per 100,000 people)

Male	Number of Deaths	Death Rate
All causes	1,177,578	1,043
Heart disease	344,807	315
Cancer	286,082	247
Stroke	64,769	61
Accidents	63,817	50
CLRD	60,004	55
Diabetes	31,602	28
Pneumonia	28,658	28
Suicide	23,618	18
Kidney disease	17,811	17
Cirrhosis of the liver	17,214	14

Female	Number of Deaths	Death Rate
All causes	1,225,773	739
Heart disease	385,953	213
Cancer	287,009	170
Stroke	102,892	60
CLRD	62,005	38
Diabetes	37,699	23
Pneumonia	36,655	21
Alzheimer's disease	35,120	20
Accidents	34,083	22
Kidney disease	19,440	12
Septicemia	17,687	11

Notes: CLRD refers to chronic lower respiratory diseases, which include chronic bronchitis and emphysema. Causes of death are ranked based on the number of deaths in 1999. Therefore, the age adjusted death rates may not be in rank order.

Source: A.M. Minino et al., "Deaths: Final Data for 2000," *National Vital Statistics Reports*, 50, no.15 (2002): Tables 12 and 16.

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Sex and Gender

- Sex and Gender are not interchangeable terms
- Sex is defined biologically & physiologically
- “Male” and “female” are sex categories, while “masculine” and “feminine” are gender categories.
- Gender roles are socially constructed and usually framed as an extension of biologically determined social functions

Sex and Health

- There are biological differences between men and women that lead to differential health outcomes
- Differences in perinatal mortality – female infants have a lower mortality rate than male infants
- The effect of sex differences is fairly stable across societies
- Our focus is on the impact of how risks/protective factors are different for men and women because of how society is organized.

What is Gender?

- A socially constructed term referring to roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given society *considers appropriate* for men and women.
- Encompasses physiology
- Culturally bound but historically persistent

Gender Divide & Health

- Experienced & measured gender encompasses both biological sex differences and social differences
- Health inequalities between men & women likely to reflect biological sex differences and societal gender differences – and the interplay

Source: Denton, Prus and Walters, 2004

Gender Inequality

Two conceptually distinct dimensions

- Biologically specific health needs that are not equally accommodated
- Inequalities in health and health care arising from unfair gender relations

Gender Inequalities and Health

- Gender inequalities = differences between men and women which systematically empower one group to the detriment of the other.
- Can lead to inequities between men and women in health status and provision of appropriate health services.
- Kawachi et al (1999) found that societies with high gender inequality are unhealthy for men & women

Gender Roles: Protective or Damaging to Health?

- In the U.S. (and most other countries), women earn significantly less money than men for similar work
- In Viet Nam, many more men than women smoke, as female smoking has not traditionally been considered appropriate
- In Saudi Arabia, men are allowed to drive cars while women are not

Source: World Health Organization

<http://www.who.int/gender/whatisgender/en/index.html>

Gender differences in society can influence both women's and men's:

- 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;
- Patterns of service use;
- Perceptions of quality of care.

Source: Women's Health Victoria

http://www.whv.org.au/health_policy/gender.htm

Alternative Accounts for the Health Gender Gap...

- Women are often the health care gatekeeper for the family
- Women seek healthcare more often for their children AND themselves
- Women may experience more symptoms and more pain
- Biological differences?
- Manifestations of culture

The Different “Lenses” Used to Examine Gender and Health

- Biomedical (genetic, hormone, anatomic)
- Psychosocial (personality, coping, self efficacy, etc.)
- Epidemiological (risk factors – behavioral and environmental)
- Socio-structural (large scale structured power differentials)

Source: Kawachi et al 1999

Gender & Health: Policy Issues

- Different needs of developing and industrialized nations
- Status improvement and empowerment will improve women's health
- Decreases in public expenditure hits women harder
- Focus on risk/dangerous behavior necessary (for both men & women) to reduce the gender gap in mortality

In Sum ...

- We know that biologically, one's sex influences health outcomes
- IN ADDITION: Social structures mean that one's gender also has important health implications in terms of:
 - Life position and power
 - Access to resources and services
 - Engagement in risk behaviors
 - Environmental exposures

Other resources

- <http://www.who.int/gender/documents/fact/en/index.html>