

Gender in Public Health:

What does Gender have to do with our BPHS program?

This paper aims to clarify the importance of addressing gender issues in public health programs.

Definition of gender

Gender refers to the economic, social, political, and cultural attributes and opportunities associated with being male or female. The social definitions of what it means to be male or female vary among cultures and change over time. (*OECD, 1999*)

Misconception

Myth 1: Gender is only a woman's issue.

Fact: Gender issues affect both men's and women's lives. Since gender inequality most often impacts women negatively, gender issues highlight women's issues.

Myth 2: Gender is Western ideology.

Fact: Gender terminology may be new in Afghanistan, but gender issues exist in Afghanistan, just as they do in the rest of the world.

Why is gender important in public health?

In Afghanistan, most women are marginalized by their economic, social, and political status. These inequities make women more vulnerable to health risks than men. Here are some examples:

- Socio-cultural norms prevent women from being seen by a male healthcare provider; therefore, if a woman is given no other option, she may choose not to seek care at all.
- A woman's lack of education may contribute to a lack of self-esteem that limits her ability to make demands, to make decisions, etc.
- Men are generally seen as the breadwinners and controllers of money in the family. Therefore, they are most often the ones who make decisions that can affect the family's health. They need to be aware of key health messages on, for example, the need to educate both boys and girls, the importance of good nutrition for pregnant women, the danger signs of pregnancy, family planning choices, etc. so that they can support women's health.

Equity in health aims to increase fairness and justice for both sexes, thus reducing unfairness or disadvantage in the provision of health services. To realize gender equity, women need to be empowered to have joint decision-making power with their male partners, which will benefit the well-being of all the family members, including that of women themselves.

What is gender mainstreaming and how is it done?

Gender considerations are incorporated into the analysis, formulation, and monitoring of strategies and activities that can address and help reduce inequities between

women and men. Mainstreaming addresses gender issues in all aspects of development, including decision-making structures and planning processes such as policy making, budgeting, and programming. (*The Manager, Fall/Winter 2000/01*)

How will gender be "mainstreamed" in our BPHS program?

There are five steps your program can take to prepare for successful gender mainstreaming:

Step 1. Introduce gender awareness and concepts at every level of the program.

- Do you and your colleagues know how gender influences and impacts your service delivery?

Step 2. Conduct a gender analysis of your program.

- What are the different constraints experienced by women and men in accessing health care?

Step 3. Assess your program's readiness for gender mainstreaming.

- Is your organization ready to adopt a gender-sensitive approach in your leadership, mission, structure, and management systems?

Step 4. Determine the desired gender-related goals and objectives, both short- and long-term.

- Are your gender-related goals and objectives consistent with your organizational goals?
- Are they realistic and attainable?

Step 5. Identify the strategies and activities to help you meet those goals and objectives.

- In addition to the strategies and activities, what are the indicators of success and the data sources for those indicators? Have they been budgeted?

After you have completed these steps, you and your staff will be ready to deliver gender-sensitive services that will benefit all of your clients—women and men alike. (*The Manager, Fall/Winter 2000/01*)

What kind of Technical Assistance (TA) will USAID/REACH provide?

USAID/REACH can do the following for your organization:

- Organize gender awareness training
- Help design a gender analysis of your project that your organization can then conduct itself
- Monitor how your organization mainstreams gender in the BPHS program
- Provide additional TA as needed

USAID/REACH is ready to assist you in mainstreaming gender approaches in the BPHS program. For questions, further information, and technical assistance, please ask your Grants Officer, or contact Miho Sato, Gender Specialist at email:

msato@msh.org, mobile: 070-278-092.

References

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Annex

Gender Terms and Concepts (The Manager, Fall/Winter 2000/01)

Sex: The genetic, physiological, and biological characteristics that determine whether a person is female or male.

Gender: The social roles that men and women play, because of the way their society is organized. Gender is expressed in the kinds of relations between sexes that arise from those roles, and in assumptions about "appropriate" behaviors. The gender "mindset" is learned and can change from generation to generation, from culture to culture, and from one social, ethnic, or racial group to another, within the same culture. Gender roles may evolve through changes in education, technology, and economics, and crises like war or famine.

Sexuality: Feelings, desires, behavior, choices, and values pertaining to sexual relationships.

Gender sensitivity/awareness/perspective: The understanding of socially determined differences between women and men that lead to inequities in their respective access to and control of resources. Gender sensitivity includes the willingness to address these inequities through strategies and actions for social and economic development.

Gender needs—practical and strategic: Practical gender needs are immediate, often being concerned with shortcomings in living conditions, health care, and employment. Addressing practical gender needs helps both sexes to fulfill their roles and responsibilities. It does not change the social status of either women or men.

Strategic gender needs relate to achieving equal treatment for both sexes over the long term. They encompass the sexual division of labor, and of power and control, and include such issues as legal rights, domestic violence, access to resources, wage differentials, and women's control over their own bodies. Addressing strategic gender needs helps women to challenge their subordinate status vis-à-vis men, and to reduce the inequality between the sexes.