

# **Gender Matters in Public Health Research**

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# Purpose of this presentation

- To understand why gender is important for public health work
- To demonstrate that gender makes a difference when conducting research
- To examine strategies to include gender in public health research

# Contemporary Public Health Environment

- Health no longer equated with the absence of disease
- Social factors influence health behaviours and trigger positive and negative health outcomes
- Focus must also lie on all factors that lead to the acquisition and maintenance of optimal health status
- Gender is an important social factor to consider in public health work

# International Context

- International attention to gender over past 20+ years
- Mexico City, Copenhagen, Nairobi, Beijing
- MDGs

# **Context in WHO**

## **Health for All**

*All* are not the same, nor possess the same rights  
and opportunities

# WHO Gender Policy

*To contribute to better health for women and men through the promotion of gender equity in health*

“...WHO will, as a matter of policy and good public health practice, **integrate gender considerations in all facets of its work**”

“...integration of gender considerations, that is gender mainstreaming, must become **standard practice in all policies and programmes**”

# WHO Gender Policy

“...all programmes will be expected to collect data disaggregated by sex, review and reflect on the gender aspects of their respective areas of work, and initiate work to develop content-specific materials”



Key Concepts

Gender-based analysis:  
Blindness

From Awareness  
to  
Action:  
GBA in health research

# What is sex? What is gender?

	Sex	Gender
Men are responsible for the financial welfare of the household.		
Most women are shorter than men.		
Only men can provide sperm for fertilization.		
Women are more loving and caring than men.		
Women tend to be poor managers.		
Women can menstruate while men cannot.		
Men think and act more rationally than women.		

# What is sex? What is gender?

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Most women are shorter than men.	✓	
Only men can provide sperm for fertilization.	✓	
Women are more loving and caring than men.		✓
Women tend to be poor managers.		✓
Women can menstruate while men cannot.	✓	
Men think and act more rationally than women.		✓

# Sex or Gender?

- **Gender** refers to what a society believes about the appropriate roles, duties, rights, responsibilities, accepted behaviours, opportunities and status of women and men in relation to one another --in other words, to what is considered “masculine” and “feminine” in a given time and place.

*Subject to change and evolution as society evolves*

- **Sex** refers to the biological and physiological characteristics of males and females : genitalia, reproductive organs, chromosomal complement, hormonal environment.

*Relatively fixed*

# Gender is...

- **Relational** – relationships between women and men
- **Hierarchical** – deals with power
- **Historical** – factors change over time & space
- **Contextually specific** – variations due to ethnicity, age, SES
- **Institutionally structured** – upheld by social systems, values, legislation

# **Gender equality means more than numbers**

## ● Gender equality means...

- Equal opportunities for women and men to access and control social goods and resources.

## ● It does not mean...

- Same treatment for different groups at all times
- Equal numbers of women and men

# **Equality is not the same as equity**

- Gender *equity* means fairness of treatment for women and men, according to their respective needs.
- In international health and development, a *gender equity* goal often requires built-in measures to compensate for the historical and social disadvantages of women.

# Women's Empowerment

- Developing a sense of self-worth, a belief in one's ability to secure desired changes and the right to control one's own life.
- Gaining the ability to generate choices and exercise bargaining power.
- Developing the ability to organize and influence the direction of social change.

(Source: UNIFEM)

# Why does work on gender focus on women?

- Gender inequalities yield a disproportionate burden on women.
- But! Social norms can also negatively impact upon men's health.
- Conclusion? Gender is an important determinant of health for BOTH women and men.



## From Awareness to Action: GBA in health research

### Gender based analysis Blindness

Sex & Gender  
are different concepts  
and  
Variables.

# **Gender Analysis in Health**

**What is a gender analysis?**

Examination of interactions between biological factors and social environments that lead to situations of relative disadvantage for one of the two sexes.

# Gender Analysis in Health

## Why is a gender analysis in health useful?

- exposure to risk and protective factors
- access to and use of resources (information, education, technology and services)
- health outcomes (prevalence, incidence, case fatality, social and economic consequences of ill health/disease)
- the response of health systems and services
- the roles of formal/informal health care providers (male or female)
- the right to protect oneself and have control over health

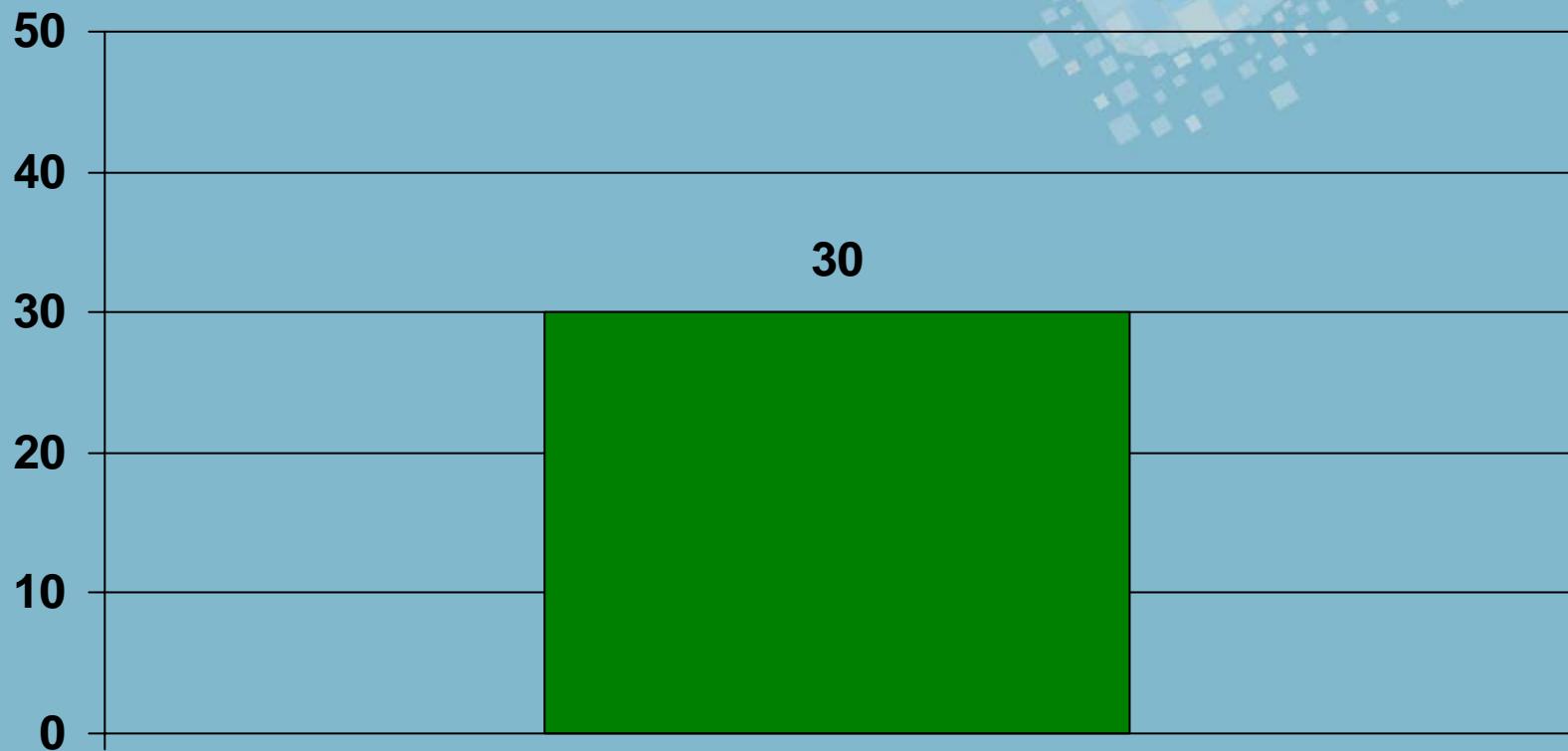


# Blindness

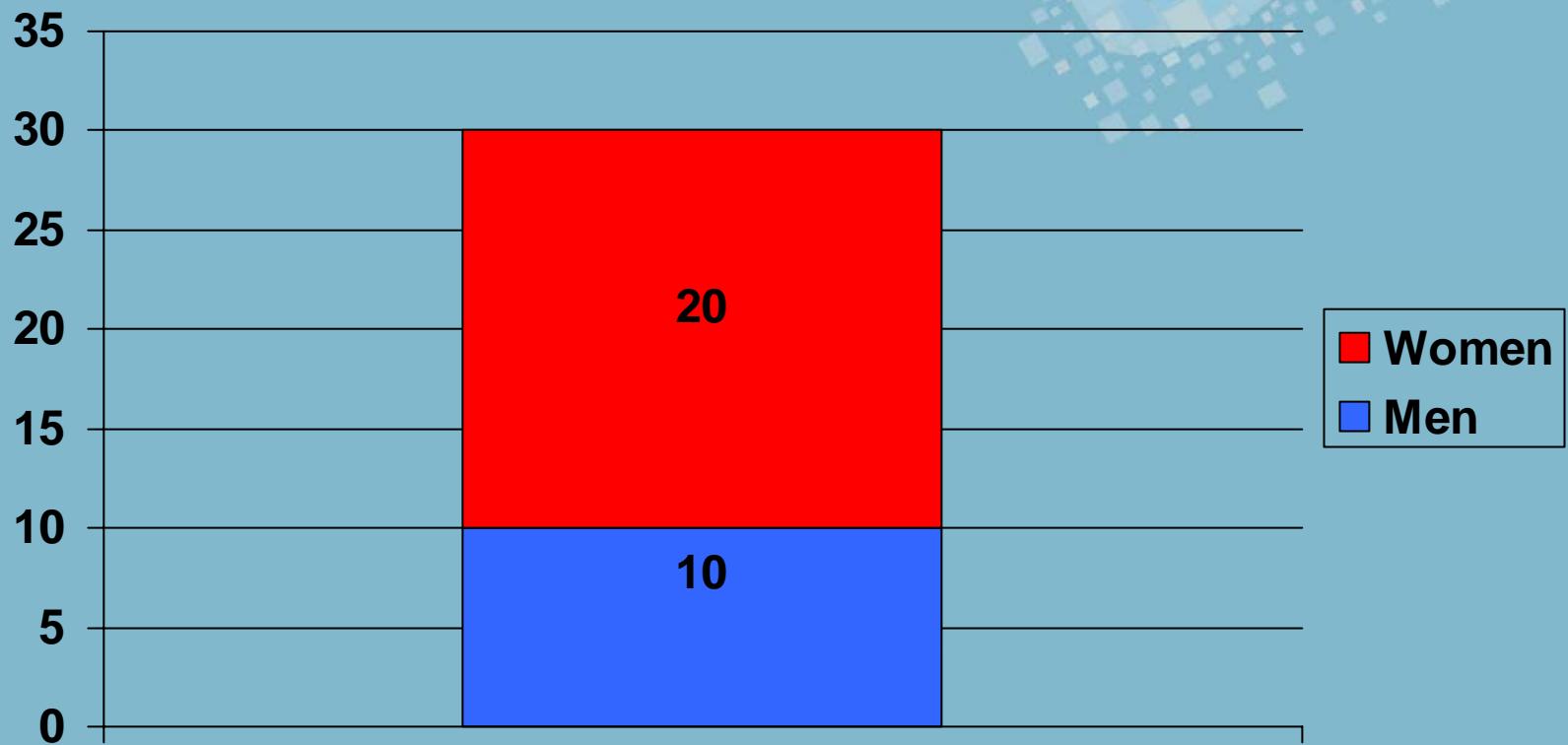
Source:

Abou-Gareeb, I., et al., “Gender and blindness: a meta-analysis of population-based prevalence surveys”, *Ophthalmic Epidemiology* 8(1), 2001, 39-56.

# **Approximate No of blind people -- developed countries, China, India, and Africa (millions)**



# **Approximate No of blind people -- developed countries, China, India, and Africa -- by sex (millions)**



# Higher prevalence of blindness among women: Why?

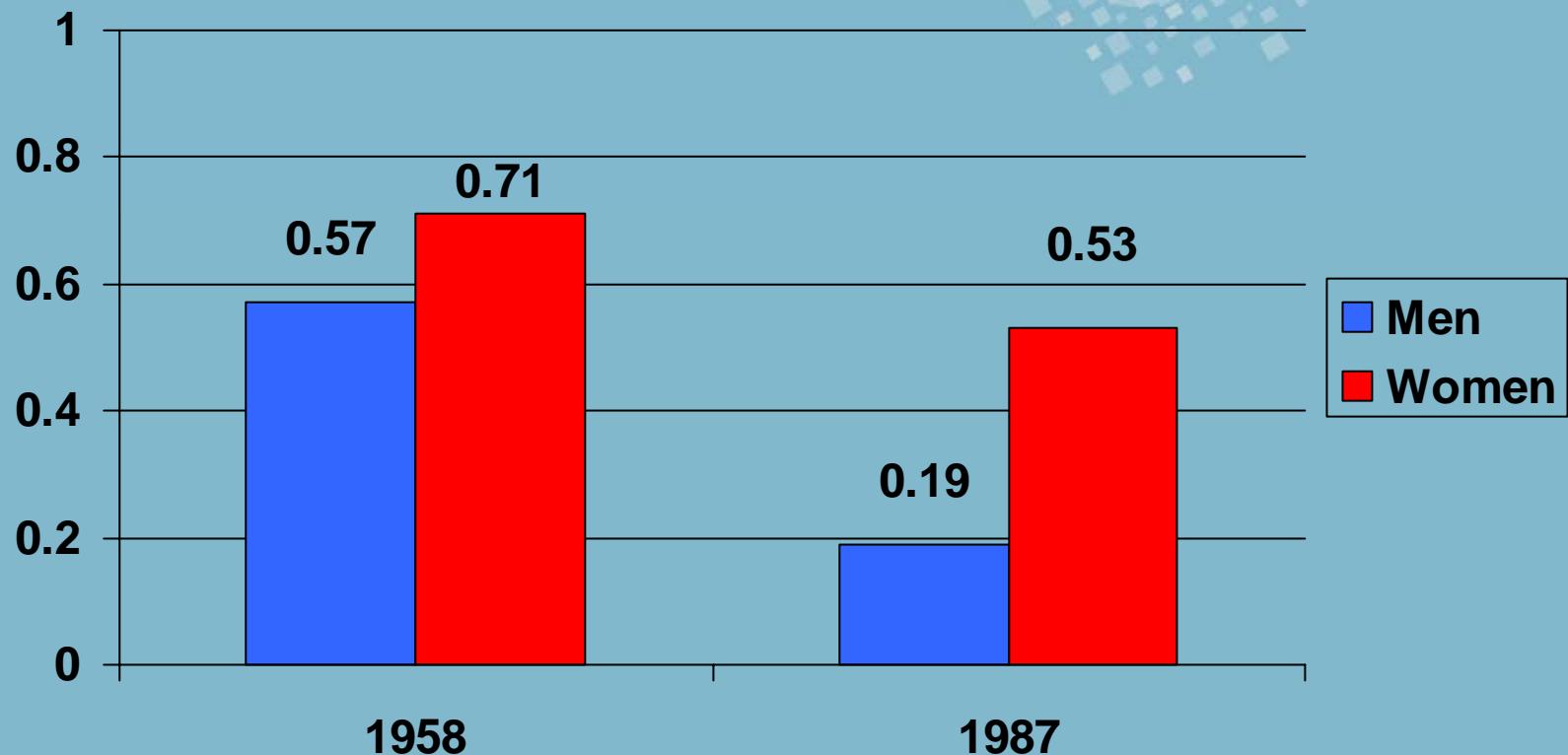
- ➊ Greater life spans of women → greater burden of degenerative blindness. But more women are blind at *all* ages. Must be another explanation.
- ➋ Differential mortality among blind men/women?  
No.

# **Higher prevalence of blindness among women: Why?**

- ➊ Women suffer from more trachoma than men, due to their gender-specific childcare activities -- but, again, the difference is too small to account for the overall difference in prevalence.
- ➋ Most likely explanation?

**Differential use of eye-care services due to differences in gender roles and behaviours.**

# Change in blindness prevalence (%) with improvements in eye care Guangdong, China





# So . . .

One of the quickest ways to reduce overall levels of blindness, and thus move toward Vision 2020 goals, may be to **increase women's access to and utilization of eye-care services** -- through projects that address the **gender realities of the intervention area**.



# **From Awareness to Action**

# **Gender Analysis of a Health Problem**

Differences between women and men on:

- ✓ Risk factors
- ✓ Access to, and use of, services
- ✓ Prevention and treatment options
- ✓ Health outcomes
- ✓ Consequences



# **Gender Analysis of a Health Problem: Using a matrix**

- Men and women may suffer at different rates, in different ways, and with different outcomes from a particular disease condition due to:
  - Biological differences between male and female bodies
  - Gender norms, values, roles, and activities
  - Differential access to and control over resources

# **Gender Analysis of a Health Problem: Using a matrix**

- Biological differences:
  - Sex organs, hormonal environment, response to pathogens, response to medicines, women subject to pregnancy/men not – etc.

# Gender Analysis of a Health Problem: Using a matrix

- Gender norms, values, roles, and activities:
  - The beliefs of a given society at a given time about what behaviours are appropriate for men and women, and what men and women “should be like”
  - Examples: “Men should work on cars”; “Women should clean house”; “Men should be tough”; “Women should be quiet and deferential”; “Men should handle money”; “Women should not leave the house alone”.

# Gender Analysis of a Health Problem: Using a matrix

- Access to and control over resources:
  - Resources: time, money, land, information, education, social power, political power, access to decision-makers, self-esteem, confidence – etc.
  - Access: Having a resource ready at hand.
  - Control: The ability to make binding decisions about resources.

# Gender Bias in the Research Process

- Treating sex like any other variable
- Assumptions about gender neutrality
- Treating sex and gender as the same thing
- Failing to disaggregate data based on sex
- Failing to analyze and report sex-disaggregated data
- Relegation of qualitative data to a supplementary role.

# Gender in the Research Process

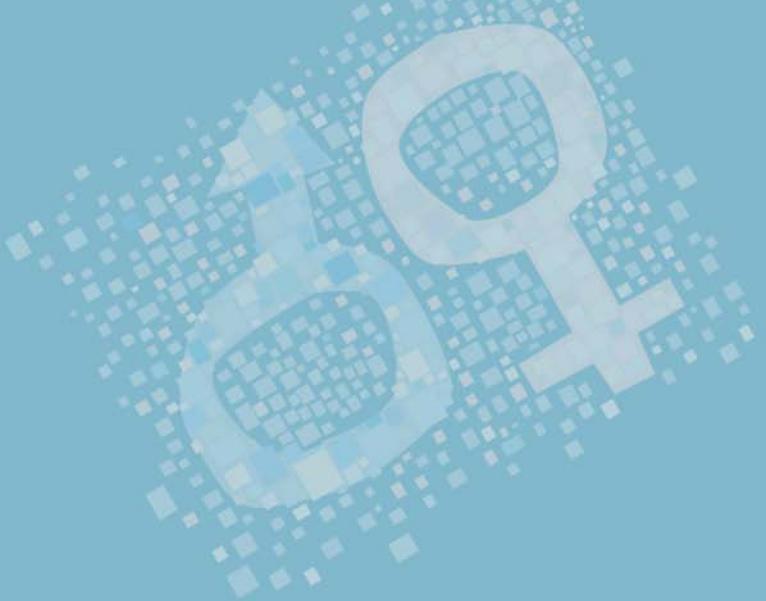
Ask the right questions!

- Formulate research questions
- Literature review
- Research design
- Research methods and data gathering
- Data analysis and interpretation
- Language of research reporting and research proposals
- Visual representations

Sex & Gender  
are distinct concepts  
and  
Variables.

Gender bias leads  
to unequal health  
outcomes  
for women and men

Gender matters  
when conducting  
public health research!



# Conclusions

# **Gender analysis adds value to public health work**

- Describe and identify **distinct health needs** of women and men
- **Teach us** about factors that give rise to and sustain disease and disability – **factors that we might not otherwise notice;**
- **Help us** to better address disease and disability;
- **Inform policies, programmes and responses** that take account of differences between women and men, boys and girls.
- Contribute to **good public health policy-making** through evidence that reflects actual populations.



**Good public health  
research includes  
gender!**

# Contact us

<http://www.who.int/gender/>