

INTRODUCTION

Sexual and reproductive health is now widely understood to be a holistic concept that encompasses physical, mental and social well-being in all matters relating to sexuality and reproduction. This approach aims to enable men and women to make healthy, voluntary and safe sexual and reproductive choices. As such, it is framed by a commitment to human rights and gender equality.

Nevertheless, the burden of sexual and reproductive health remains considerable. Estimates suggest that sexual and reproductive conditions account for 18.4% of the global burden of disease and 32.0% of the burden of disease among women aged 15–44 years of age, although there is significant variation among regions. In many areas, young adults may be particularly vulnerable to sexual and reproductive ill health, while in other areas, ageing populations draw attention to how sexual and reproductive health concerns continue throughout the life cycle.

As evidence on the burden of sexual and reproductive ill-health mounts, it is becoming increasingly clear that poverty and gender inequality are important determinants of sexual and reproductive health. In the Western Pacific Region, the burden of sexual and reproductive ill-health, such as maternal mortality, HIV/AIDS and unplanned pregnancies, is higher in developing countries than in developed ones. Similarly, within countries, poor households and communities appear to experience greater mortality and morbidity related to sexual and reproductive conditions than those who are better off. Conversely, research shows that sexual and reproductive ill-health can lead to increased poverty and vulnerability.

Gender inequality has also been shown to determine the opportunity for good sexual and reproductive health among men and women of all ages. Most simply, men and women have different reproductive health systems. These biological differences interact with social norms that ascribe different roles, behaviour and expectations to men and women. These norms stratify the opportunities for good sexual and reproductive health that men and women enjoy, such as their exposure to the risk factors of sexual and reproductive ill-health and their access to appropriate quality health care.

The growing commitment to addressing sexual and reproductive health requires that health professionals at the community, provincial, national and international level have the knowledge, skills and tools to more effectively respond to the health needs of poor and marginalized people. Similar commitment to addressing gender inequality and the empowerment of women demands that health professionals respond to the different health needs of men and women. The need for such knowledge and skills among health professionals is even more necessary given the pledge to ensure universal access to reproductive health services in the Region. However, many health professionals in the Region are not adequately prepared to address these issues.

This module is designed to improve the awareness, knowledge and skills of health professionals on sexual and reproductive health. The module is divided into six sections:

Section 1 provides an overview of key concepts in sexual and reproductive health and reviews the global and regional burden of mortality and morbidity related to sexual and reproductive health.

Section 2 examines WHAT the links are between poverty, gender and sexual and reproductive health.

Section 3 discusses WHY it is important for health professionals to address poverty and gender concerns in sexual and reproductive health, from efficiency, equity and human rights perspectives.

Section 4 discusses HOW health professionals can address poverty and gender concerns in sexual and reproductive health policies, plans and programmes.

Section 5 provides notes for facilitators.

Section 6 is a collection of tools, resources and references to support health professionals in their work in this field.