



World Health
Organization

Western Pacific

Gender equality makes everyone healthier: WHO

5 March 2017 | News release | Manila, Philippines



WHO/Y. Shimizu

On International Women's Day (8 March), the World Health Organization (WHO) will focus on the powerful link between gender equality and health and well-being.

Public health efforts for women used to focus mainly on pregnancy and childbirth. Now gender, equity and human rights concerns are woven into every aspect of WHO's work in the Western Pacific Region.

"International Women's Day is a great opportunity to challenge the unequal systems and practices that perpetuate health inequalities," said Dr Shin Young-soo, WHO Regional Director for the Western Pacific.

Gender equality is a priority for WHO because it affects health in many ways across the Region, which is home to nearly 1.9 billion people, or more than a quarter of the world's population.

When women are educated, they and their families have better health and well-being. Studies in Cambodia and the Philippines, for example, show that children under 5 years of age with more educated mothers are measurably healthier.

"We must take comprehensive action to ensure that women and girls reach the highest attainable standard of health and well-being. This is important for women, and for families and the broader community, because gender equality benefits all of us," he added.

By considering gender, equity and human rights at every stage, health programmes can be designed to meet the needs of everyone — women and girls, men and boys. This makes programmes more effective, producing more sustainable health results, according to WHO.

This approach to development – focused on leaving no one behind – underlies the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which will guide global development until 2030. SDG 5 calls for gender equality, both to advance women's human rights, and also as a driver of development and poverty reduction.

"One-size-fits-all approaches to health do not benefit all people equitably," explained Dr Shin.

"Among certain groups, inequity may even increase. Therefore, health programmes need to be tailored to the specific needs of various groups."

To mark International Women's Day, the WHO Regional Office is releasing a preview of a report with success stories from the Region on advancing health through attention to gender, equity and human rights.

The report, scheduled to be published later this year, contains these stories, among others:

- How carefully considering the needs and preferences of those left behind, such as women and girls, can improve access to water, sanitation and hygiene in the Philippines;
- How empowering women with negotiation skills in China can create smoke-free homes that benefit entire families; and
- How focusing on the needs of disadvantaged groups and remote communities led to greater acceptance of polio vaccination efforts in the Lao People's Democratic Republic and helped to reduce barriers to accessing health services in Mongolia.

Since 1975, International Women's Day has celebrated the economic, political and social achievements of women with a renewed call for gender equality and empowerment. This year's theme channels the spirit of the SDGs: *Women in the Changing World of Work: Planet 50-50 by 2030*.

"As we mark the International Women's Day today, I want to acknowledge what we have achieved together in the Western Pacific Region with the participation of women and men, boys and girls from diverse population groups," said Dr Shin.

"But gender equality really must be promoted every day, not just today," he concluded.

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