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# GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE HEALTH PROMOTION

## HOW HEALTH PROMOTION CAN IMPROVE GENDER EQUITY

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It is internationally recognized that gender is among the most influential of the determinants of health and that gender inequities can affect health outcomes and access to health services. Evidence increasingly demonstrates that health care interventions—including health promotion—are more effective if they are designed with gender in mind.

Health promotion can either improve or worsen health outcomes and gender equality. Here are some suggestions for health promotion practitioners interested in further developing programs, policy and research to improve gender equity and the health of girls and women, boys and men.

**1 Avoid reinforcing stereotypes and harmful attitudes about women and men.** Pay attention to the content and tone used in health promotion awareness campaigns. While it's important to develop tailored approaches specific to different groups of women and men, support messaging that engages and informs without reinforcing harmful gender norms. For example, avoid encouraging women to quit smoking and reduce their alcohol use due to concerns about their appearance or suggesting that “real men” or “strong men” get tested for STIs.

**2 Work to overcome the tendency in health promotion to view women primarily as mothers or caregivers.** Historically, there has been a tendency in health promotion to focus on women largely in their reproductive and care-giving roles. Be aware of and work to overcome this tendency by considering the diversity of women's needs and experiences across the lifespan and consider the role of sex and gender in health promotion fields other than reproductive and sexual health.

The World Health Organization defines health promotion as “the process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve, their health.”

**3 Support empowerment at both the individual and collective levels.** The concept of empowerment is central to health promotion. Empowerment approaches, such as community-engagement, consciousness-raising, and educational strategies, aim to improve the ability of various marginalized groups to influence factors that determine their health. While these approaches can be beneficial for individuals during time-limited projects, strategies to address the root causes of disempowerment by addressing structural conditions (e.g., poverty, housing, systemic violence) are required to improve health over the long-term.

**4 Incorporate gender analysis into project planning.** Sex- and gender-based analysis (SGBA) is an analytical tool that systematically integrates a gender perspective into the development of policies, programs and legislation, as well as planning and decision-making processes. There are a number of tools that are designed to help identify the known or potential sex, gender, diversity and equity effects of a program, policy or research project. One starting place is the SGBA e-Learning Resource website (<http://sgba-resource.ca>)

**5 Avoid developing health promotion programs that encourage women to take responsibility for the health behaviours of their children, male partners and other family members.** Health promotion interventions often attempt to take advantage of women’s ability to influence the health of others, e.g., smoking cessation programs for men or encouraging physical activity in children. Many of these programs do not recognize how they may exacerbate existing inequities such as limits on women’s access to material resources, multiple caregiving roles, lack of priority for their own health needs, and unequal voice in household decision-making.

**6 Collaborate in the development of culturally safe interventions.** Health promotion interventions can benefit from recognizing the influences of colonization and migration on women’s and men’s health around the world. Health promoters need to be aware of their own cultural identity, socio-historical location in relation to service recipients, as well as of their attitudes and ways of conceptualizing health and wellness.



**7 One size does not fit all.** While gender is a fundamental determinant of health, it is important to remember that women (and men) are not a homogenous group. Develop health promotion strategies that are meaningful for diverse groups of women (and men) by examining the links between sex, gender and other determinants such as race-ethnicity, income, education, occupation and the social and built environments.

**8 Create a community of practice.** A community of practice (CoP) is a group of people who share a common concern, set of problems or interest in a topic. Virtual (on-line) or face-to-face communities of practice can provide an opportunity for dialogue, co-learning, action planning, and advocacy which can lead to innovation, policy and system change, and local solutions to health promotion concerns. Join an existing CoP or start one as part of an overall health promotion strategy.

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For more information about the project and other gender transformative health promotion training materials, visit [promotinghealthinwomen.ca](http://promotinghealthinwomen.ca).