WCHM Position Paper on Sex Disaggregated Data

November 2010

A. Background

Women's Centre for Health Matters Inc (WCHM) works to improve the health and wellbeing of women in the ACT and surrounding regions, with a particular focus on women who experience disadvantage and marginalisation.[1] As a foundation of this initiative, WCHM conducts research based on gender analysis that relies on the collection of sex disaggregated data. This data enables WCHM to identify gaps in service provision and further recognize and advocate to improve the social determinants that form the basis for women's inequality.

This paper has been compiled to provide greater understanding as to the specific definition and nature of sex disaggregated data. Furthermore, it seeks to demonstrate the importance of sex disaggregated data in gender analysis and specificly, to the work conducted by WCHM.

B. What is sex disaggregated data?

Sex disaggregation data is defined as any data that has been disaggregated by biological sex and thus presents information specific to the life experiences of males and females.[2]

Sex disaggregated data should be combined with or can be focused on specific diversifying factors, such as age, education, cultural background, disability and occupation.[3] This seeks to further gender sensitivity in research practice and highlight the disparity and complexity between the lived experience of men and women.

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[1] Women's Centre for Health Matters, *WCHM Position Paper on Gender Sensitive Health Service Delivery: November* 2010, Women's Centre for Health Matters, Canberra, p. 2.
[2] Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (1999), *Framework for Integration of Women in APEC*, APEC Secretariat, Singapore, p. 4.
[3] Victorian Women's Health and Wellbeing Strategy, (2008), Gender *and diversity lens for health and human services: Victorian Women's Health and Wellbeing Strategy Stage Two: 2006-*2010, Portfolio Services and Strategic Projects, Melbourne, p. 8.

C. Why is sex disaggregated data important?

Although not commonly employed throughout the general field of research, sex disaggregated data collection has recently grown in popularity and as a consequence, has become an integral basic foundation to best practice research.[4] Whilst collected on the basis of biological sex, the particular significance of sex disaggregated data lies in its ability to combat gender blindness by informing gender research and analysis.[5] As gender analysis is often primarily concerned with identifying, understanding and negotiating the discrepancy between the value of different roles and expectations assigned to men and women through socialisation, culture and history, sex disaggregated data is seen as a vital informative tool for this process. By employing disaggregation, the inequalities existent in the lives of women, in comparison to men, become evident.[6] Subsequently,with its combination of diversifying elements, sex disaggregated data further demonstrates the heterogeneity of women's and men's lived experience and the value of a gendered perspective in data collection.[7]

As women's health is of primary concern to WCHM, the data collected and analysed by the centre is disaggregated with a focus on women's specific needs. Through this sex disaggregated data and its combination of diversifying features, WCHM is able to validate and acknowledge the array of women's experience and the importance of social determinants on women's health and wellbeing. In addition, it also assists in destabilising gendered assumptions.[8] For example, with this form of data collection WCHM has been able to illuminate and focus on key areas, such as mental health and ageing, that continue to undermine not only the equity experienced among women of different circumstances but also that which continues to perpetuate the inequality faced by women as a group.

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[4] J. Hunt, (2004), 'Introduction to gender analysis concepts and steps', *Development Bulletin*, no. 64, p. 140.
[5] The University of Adelaide (2010), 'Gender Indicators and Gender Equity: Gender Indicators Online', Australian Institute for Social Research, retrieved 20/08/2010: <http://www.aisr.adelaide.edu.au/gio/genderindicators/?template=2>.
[6] Ministry of Women's Affairs, New Zealand, 'What is Gender Analysis?', p. 1, retrieved 20/08/2010: <http://www.gdrc.org/gender/framework/what-is.html>.
[7] Office for Women and The University of Adelaide, (2005), *Gender Impact Assessment: Implementing the Netherlands Model*, Government of South Australia and The University of South Australia, Adelaide, p.6.
[8] Victorian Women's Health and Wellbeing Strategy, (2008), *Gender and diversity lens for health and human services: Victorian Women's Health and Wellbeing Strategy Stage Two: 2006-*2010, Portfolio Services and Strategic Projects, Melbourne, p. 1.

Through this WCHM is able to provide information and support to foster capacity building initiatives that hope to enhance the lives of ACT women. Furthermore, the foundational role of sex disaggregated data enables WCHM to advocate for change in community health service provision and government legislation, policies and budgeting.[9]

D. What does Sex disaggregated data look like?

Sex disaggregated data explicitly identifies the biological sex of study participants in order to discover differences in the life experiences and circumstances of men and women.[10] When data is disaggregated in this manner, the collated results of a study are presented as segregated by sex, thus differentiating the responses of females and males. Additionally, given the particular nature and formulation of the study, sex disaggregated data can also be employed to highlight diversifying factors that measure the responses of either women or men as a group socially unique from one another. This demonstrates that either group is not in itself homogeneous but rather each group, depending on their social determinants, can have both subtle or hugely differing experiences.[11] By doing this, sex disaggregated data demonstrates the similarities and diversities experienced by men and women both as distinct groups from one another and within themselves.

Sex disaggregated data is best conducted utilising a multimethod approach that incorporates gender sensitivity at all times. In particular, it should take into account both quantitative and qualitative measures.[12] This technique helps to ensure the sensitivity and accuracy of the information collected. In addition, it gives the added capacity of customizing research methods to better suit study participants. This is particularly important as sex disaggregated data has previously demonstrated that women and men often have different responsibilities and ways of expressing themselves that impact their availability and the way in which they prefer to interact. Moreover, it allows greater sensitivity and flexibility when researching individuals or groups who are further differentiated or dissadvantaged not only by gender but also
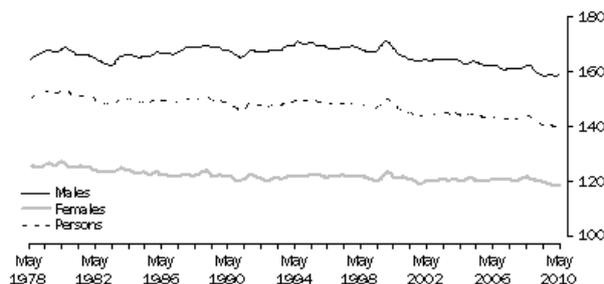
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[9] J. Hunt, op. cit.
[10] The University of Adelaide, (2010), op. cit.
[11] Office for Women and The University of Adelaide, (2005), *op. cit.*
[12] J. Hunt, op. cit.

by other factors, such as cultural or linguistic diversity. Furthermore, acknowledging this sensitivity in data collection, allows suitability for research in a wide range of subjects, situations and environments.

Studies that employ sex disaggregation in data collection can be both wide rangeing or specific in scope and subject. Previously, research that employs this sex differentiated feature has been applied successfully to such divergent subject areas as domestic violence or the ratio of men and women's accumulated earnings.[13] A report issued by the Australian Bureau of Statistics is a further example of this diversity of use and of what sex disaggregated data looks like when collated.[14] The Australian Labour Market Statistics report demonstrates how sex disaggregated data collection can be utilised to understand different trends in women and men's levels of employment.[15] The following table is expressive of the effect and power of sex disaggregated data:

Aggregate Monthly Hours Worked Per Employed Person, Trend - July 1978 to May 2010[16]

As demonstrated, this graph illuminates how sex disaggregated data differentiates the gendered experience of males and females in the work force over time. Subsequently, studies such as this, have the capacity to instigate new avenues for future research and specialisation in order to further understand the social determinantes that have led to this kind of substantial inequality.

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[13] Office for Women and The University of Adelaide, (2005), *op. cit.*
[14] Australian Bureau of Statistics, (2010), *Australian Labour Market Statistics July 2010*, ABS Cat. No. 6105.0., Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.
[15] Australian Bureau of Statistics, (2010), 'Aggregated Monthly Hours Worked' in *Australian Labour Market Statistics July 2010*, ABS Cat. No. 6105.0., Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.
[16] Ibid.

E. Conclusion

Sex disaggregated data is a vital feature of conducting a sensitive and well rounded research practice. By employing the technique of identifying the biological sex of study participants, the differing experiences of men and women and the gender roles and expectations placed on them can be illuminated. This crucial element of gender analysis is foundational in demonstrating the diverse experiences of men and women in relation to the social determinants.

With its capacity to raise awareness of the divergent experiences of men and women, this method is acknowledged as a foundation of WCHM's research.[17] With such data WCHM is able to conduct work that pinpoints ACT women's needs, whilst creating suitable and sensitive ways forward to promote and negotiate the various needs of women in health and wellbeing service provision.

But while ACT women overall are better educated, have higher incomes, and have higher housing standards than women nationally, there are a significant number of ACT women who are marginalised and isolated from their community and its wider standard of living, at a great cost to their health and wellbeing. Due to the lack of accurate, sex-disaggregated data on marginalised and isolated groups, it is almost impossible to quantify the number of women in the ACT that are experiencing marginalisation and isolation.

Therefore WCHM will continue to advocate for sex-disaggregated data to be collected both at a national and local level, in order to develop a sound evidence base, and for the further disaggregation of women's health data to include indicators like age, cultural background and disability to build an accurate picture of women's health and circumstances, particularly when it comes to women who experience disadvantage.

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[17] The University of Adelaide, (2010), op. cit.

References

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