



**Summary and Notes:  
WHRN Workshop**

**Untangling Sex and Gender in Health Research  
Thursday, October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2005**

**Video-linked sites:**

**Children's & Women's Health Centre of British Columbia  
Simon Fraser University – Harbour Centre Campus  
University of British Columbia  
University of Northern British Columbia  
University of British Columbia - Okanagan  
University of Victoria**

This two-hour session, entitled *Untangling Sex and Gender in Health Research*, was the first in a series of video-linked workshops to be hosted by the Women's Health Research Network of British Columbia. WHRN Co-Leader Dr. Joy Johnson led the discussion between a diverse group of researchers from across British Columbia, including academic, clinical, and community-based researchers.

Dr. Johnson opened the discussion by presenting a document outlining key definitions in the ongoing debate about sex and gender in health research, along with a comprehensive bibliography of relevant works. In her remarks, Dr. Johnson noted that while some of the issues concerning issues of sex and gender in health research may be viewed as theoretical, research decisions are often politically driven, aimed at highlighting systemic gender inequities in health.

From this introduction, the discussion moved toward a dialogue regarding gender-based analysis [GBA]. Workshop participants discussed the fact that much of the GBA toolkit has been developed to speak to specific audiences, such as policy makers. These tools continue to play a significant role in ensuring that gender differences are taken into consideration in the spheres of health policy and research. One participant introduced additional distinctions which must be taken into account when talking about sex and gender, including intersexed and transsexual people, prompting a spirited interchange around the fluidity of sex and gender and the necessity of contextualizing health research. As a few of the participants discussed, discrete sex and gender categories continue to be normalized with little understanding of the real diversity which exists. Moreover, the hegemony of gender is difficult to overcome, and can result in essentialization or – at worst – marginalization of certain populations.

Stemming from the discussion of gender-based analysis, a dialogue developed concerning emerging explorations of *masculinities* and *femininities*. Participants underscored how such research is helping to further our understanding of gender. For instance, one participant touched on the idea that women's health research has allowed for new understandings of men's health by moving research beyond culturally ingrained or hegemonic understandings of what health is through explorations of disease or uncontextualized biology.

Workshop attendees offered examples of approaches to incorporating sex and gender analysis into health research. While some participants suggested that creating a theoretical framework for describing sex and gender diversity is essential, others pointed out that health researchers must not lose sight of the lived realities of sex and gender differences. One participant asserted that in conducting research it is crucial to recognize the intersection of sex and gender with cultural variables which evolve over time. However, this participant went on to say that the creation of categories which illustrate differences as well as commonalities is necessary for the development and management of policy and programs. The participants agreed that because inequities persist within the health system – resulting in inadequate health care for many – issues of sex and gender must remain key concerns for researchers and policy makers.

Questions and ideas emerging from the workshop:

- How do we identify tools and methods to help define, measure and analyze the multiplicities of sex and gender in health research?
- How do the lens and agenda of the research[er] affect how and what aspects of sex and gender are operationalized?
- How can researchers find and categorize effective tools and guidance in a way that broadens our understanding of the diversity of the human experience [i.e. without essentializing or furthering knowledge production that advances dominant ideologies or otherwise silences critical aspects of the sex and gender debate]?

This workshop laid the foundation for a project on untangling sex and gender in health research to be undertaken over the next year [2005-2006]. The goal of the project is to offer tools and resources to assist researchers in pursuing an analysis of how sex and gender influence health. Individuals with an interest in participating in this project are asked to contact Joy Johnson at [Joy.Johnson@ubc.ca](mailto:Joy.Johnson@ubc.ca).

For more information about the WHRN, please visit our website at [www.whrn.ca](http://www.whrn.ca)