Gender Issues in the Research Project

Considering sex and gender in health research is important. Being blind to potential differences of sex/gender may result in missed opportunities, with certain groups of people being left out or poorly accommodated.

The HRB Gender Policy came into effect on 1 June 2016. This will have some implications for all future HRB funded schemes. Applicants are encouraged to consider the following:

1) Gender Balance in research teams

- Gender balance of the research team will be included among ranking factors prioritizing proposals with the same score at panel stage.

- Successful applicants, within contracts, will be required to aim for gender balance at all levels of personnel assigned to research, including at supervisory and managerial level.

2) Gender dimension in research content

In HRB funding proposals, all applicants will be asked to indicate whether a potential sex and/or gender dimension may be present or could arise in the course of their proposed research.

- and, if so, to outline how sex and/or gender analysis will be integrated in the design, implementation, evaluation, interpretation and dissemination of the results of the research proposal;

- if not, to outline why it is not relevant to the research proposal.

Sex versus gender

Distinguishing between sex and gender and investigating the impact each one has on health is becoming a priority for medical research. Sex is a biological construct, gender is a social construct. Depending on the health problem being studied, either, neither, or both sex and gender may affect the risks and outcomes.

Researchers should avoid confusing the two terms and also consider the inclusivity of their language with regards to gender, e.g. acknowledging the presence of transgender people in patient and healthcare groups. For example, diseases largely considered to be women’s health issues (breast, cervical, ovarian cancer) may also affect transgender men.

Sex differences

When conducting clinical research it is important to take into account how research protocols, methodologies, and analysis of results may be impacted by differences in the male and female body. E.g. levels and composition of the hormonal system mean that drugs can affect male and female patients differently; symptoms of cardiac illness are different in men and women.
Gender differences

Differing social factors between men and women are important to consider in health research as these affect risk, response to treatment, and uptake of services. For example, women may be at more risk of contracting certain infectious diseases due to social and economic factors, access to resources, and decision-making power. Men may be at higher risk of dropping out of studies or long-term treatment schemes due to a perception that health centres are spaces for women and children.

Gender disparities also exist within the healthcare system itself: for example, higher numbers of women employed in roles perceived as caring/nurturing (nursing, midwifery) and higher numbers of men in roles perceived to be technical and managerial (surgery, administration). The gendering of roles can lead to disparities in income and influence. Researchers should consider gender equity when giving healthcare workers opportunities to voice positions, participate in policy debate, or make ethical decisions.

Questions to ask when designing your project:

• How are the problems of men and women different? How might solutions be different?
• How might contributions of men and women to projects be different?
• How might activities differently affect women and men?

Useful links:

Yellow Window, ‘Gender in EU-Funded Research: Toolkit and Training’:
https://www.yellowwindow.com/genderinresearch

Health.gov, ‘Integrating the Gender Perspective in Irish Health Policy: A Case Study’:

WHO Europe on gender: http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-determinants/gender

Canadian Institutes of Health Research, ‘How to Integrate Sex and Gender into Research’:
http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/50836.html

1 WHO Report, ‘EQUITY, EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES, GENDER AND ORGANIZATION PERFORMANCE’ <http://www.who.int/hrh/documents/en/Equity.pdf.ua=1>