



Gender and Tuberculosis

Globally, 8.4 million people are estimated to develop tuberculosis (TB) each year, and nearly 2 million deaths result from the disease. Overall, one-third of the world's population is currently infected with the tuberculosis bacillus, over 90% of them in developing countries.

It is the poorest people from the poorest countries who are most affected by tuberculosis. Not only are they more vulnerable to the disease because of their living and working conditions, they are also plunged deeper into poverty as a consequence of tuberculosis. A person with TB loses, on average, 20-30% of annual household income due to illness.

The situation warrants urgent action to curb the epidemic. Examining the gender dimensions of TB is important for overcoming barriers to effective prevention, coverage and treatment of tuberculosis.

What do we know?

Tuberculosis incidence and prevalence is higher in adult males than in adult females

In most settings, tuberculosis incidence rates are higher for males at all ages except in childhood, when they are higher in females. Studies have reported that sex differentials in prevalence rates begin to appear between 10 and 16 years of age, and remain higher for males than females thereafter. The reasons for the higher male prevalence and incidence are poorly understood, and need further research to identify associated risk factors.

Sex and gender differences may impact upon tuberculosis notification rates

Differences in

tuberculosis notification rates between men and women may reflect biological differences (i.e. sex differences) in the epidemiology of tuberculosis, differences in the societal roles of men and women (gender differences) that influence risk of exposure and/or gender differences in access to care.

Some studies report that less women than men presented with a productive cough, or tested positive for tubercle bacilli on sputum microscopy. Lower rates of notification for women may also be a consequence of a smaller proportion of women than men with tuber-

culosis visiting a health facility and/or submitting sputum specimens for testing. This may be due to reasons such as difficulty in accessing health care, preference in consulting private practitioners such as traditional healers, lack of female health

Examining the gender dimensions of tuberculosis is more than ascertaining which sex has a higher prevalence rate, or a higher case fatality rate. It also includes looking at other issues such as differences in risk of exposure to infection, in health seeking behaviour and health systems response, economic consequences, and stigma associated with being known as a tuberculosis patient.

providers, embarrassment and/or fear of stigma. Information from Bangladesh indicates that women perceive the stigma of TB to be worse for them than for men and this therefore acts as a disincentive for women experiencing chest symptoms to report to a health provider. Similar findings have been reported in Thailand and Vietnam.

However, some studies report an increased delay for males in the time lapse between the onset of symptoms and the patient's first contact with a health care provider. A study in India, for example, found that males were less likely to be notified than females. The study suggests that the under notification of male TB cases could be because employed men find it difficult to take leave from work to attend health centres that are open only during the day.

These contradictory findings are perhaps a reflection of differences in gender roles and/or in health provider responses across societies.

Sex and gender differences may influence the development and outcome of tuberculosis

Some studies have found that although the overall prevalence of pulmonary TB is lower in women, progression from infection to disease, as well as case fatality rates, are higher in women of reproductive age than males in the same age range. Evidence on the contribution of pregnancy to these differences is inconclusive.

However, gender differences in behaviour may also influence disease progression. For example, poor nutrition, smoking and alcohol abuse may result in decreased immunity. A 15 year study of 280,000 subjects in south India found that the risk of progression from infection to disease for pulmonary TB was 8.6% among men and 3.1% among women. In the study population, virtually all alcoholics and smokers were males. After excluding smokers and alcoholics, the MF ratio was reduced considerably from 2.7 to 1.2.

HIV is contributing to sex differentials in risk of tuberculosis in young people

HIV weakens the immune system, and a per-

son who is HIV positive and infected with TB is much more likely to develop active disease than a person similarly infected but HIV negative. Since young women are at a greater risk of HIV infection than men in the same age group, in parts of Africa where incidence of HIV is high, there are more young women notified with TB than young men.

Tuberculosis in pregnancy enhances the risk of a poor pregnancy outcome

Case-control studies from Mexico and India report that pulmonary tuberculosis in the mother increases risk of prematurity and low birth weight in neonates two-fold, and the risk of perinatal deaths between three and six-fold.

In pregnant women with a late diagnosis of pulmonary tuberculosis, obstetric morbidity is increased fourfold, according to a recent review on tuberculosis and pregnancy. The review also reported higher risk of miscarriage, eclampsia and intrapartum complications.

Genital tuberculosis frequently leads to infertility in women

Tuberculosis of the genitourinary tract is often difficult to diagnose in both women and men. It is a relatively rare condition in men. However, one in eight women with pulmonary tuberculosis may also have genital tuberculosis, as suggested by studies from India and Turkey. Genital tuberculosis is an important cause of infertility in women in many developing countries, with far-reaching consequences to their lives and their well-being. In India, genital TB was the cause of tubal damage in nearly 40% of women experiencing tubal infertility.

Social and economic consequences of tuberculosis varies by gender

Because of gender differences in the division of labour and in roles and responsibilities, tuberculosis affects women and men differently. In one study, women patients reported inability to spend time on childcare, and difficulty in carrying out household chores because of the deterioration in their physical condition. Male patients reported distress because of loss of income and inability to con-

tribute adequately to household expenditure.

Social isolation because of stigma associated with tuberculosis affects both sexes. But the consequences may be harsher for women and girls. Women patients in a Pakistan study were at risk of divorce or marital break-down. In India, women with tuberculosis were concerned about reduced chances of marriage, rejection by husbands and harassment by in-laws, while male patients were concerned principally with loss of income and economic hardship.

Despite early care seeking, women may have a longer period of delay before diagnosis

Evidence from some settings indicates that despite seeking treatment for symptoms, women had a longer delay before tuberculosis was diagnosed. Some possible reasons for this are:

- They often sought care from a private practitioner or a less qualified professional, and waited for the treatment to take effect before going to the hospital.
- They did not go to the hospitals where TB treatment was available, because of the distances to be covered and restrictions on their physical mobility.
- Fewer women presenting with chest symptoms were referred for sputum examination by doctors.
- It took the doctors longer to diagnose women with tuberculosis than men, perhaps because they did not present with what is considered 'typical' symptoms: prolonged

Features of treatment centres registering the highest proportion of women¹

- Visible and physically accessible shop-front setting
- DOT centre integrated with a women and family-based primary health centre
- No cost barriers
- High proportion of women staff
- Ability to diagnose extrapulmonary disease
- Active late-chasing policy
- Emphasis on educating families and patients

¹ Source: Stebbing M. Gender and TB: Perspectives from Nepal. Proceedings of a Conference on Poverty, power and TB, February 23-25, 2000, Kathmandu.

cough with expectoration.

It would be important to probe deeper-into variations in health seeking behaviour and health-provider response not only by gender but also by age and social class to better understand groups that face the most barriers to accessing health care.

Men are less likely to complete treatment

Studies report that while men are better able to access TB treatment from a

DOT facility, the need to earn a livelihood also acts as a barrier to completing treatment. Women, on the other hand, have greater difficulty reaching an appropriate facility, but those that do, usually complete treatment.

What research is needed?

Research on gender and tuberculosis needs to be geared in the direction of:

- Ascertaining the magnitude of sex and gender-disparities in tuberculosis, from contracting the disease to successful recovery and rehabilitation, starting with:
 - a) ensuring that all current data on progress of global control of tuberculosis is age and sex-disaggregated, and
 - b) re-examining age and sex-disaggregated data from past surveys and data maintained by TB programmes.
- Examining the causes underlying any sex or gender disparities, to understand the extent to which these are biological, social/cultural or operational, through comparative studies in diverse settings.

- Investigating the specific ways in which tuberculosis affects women of reproductive age, and especially their reproductive health, including the consequences for foetal and neonatal health.

What are the implications for policies and for TB control programmes?

- Tuberculosis control programmes need to develop appropriate health education on tuberculosis symptoms, diagnosis and treatment for the general population as well as for health providers, in order to reduce diagnostic delays. Gender considerations regarding health seeking behaviour, outcomes of a positive tuberculosis identification and so on must be integrated into these health education programmes.

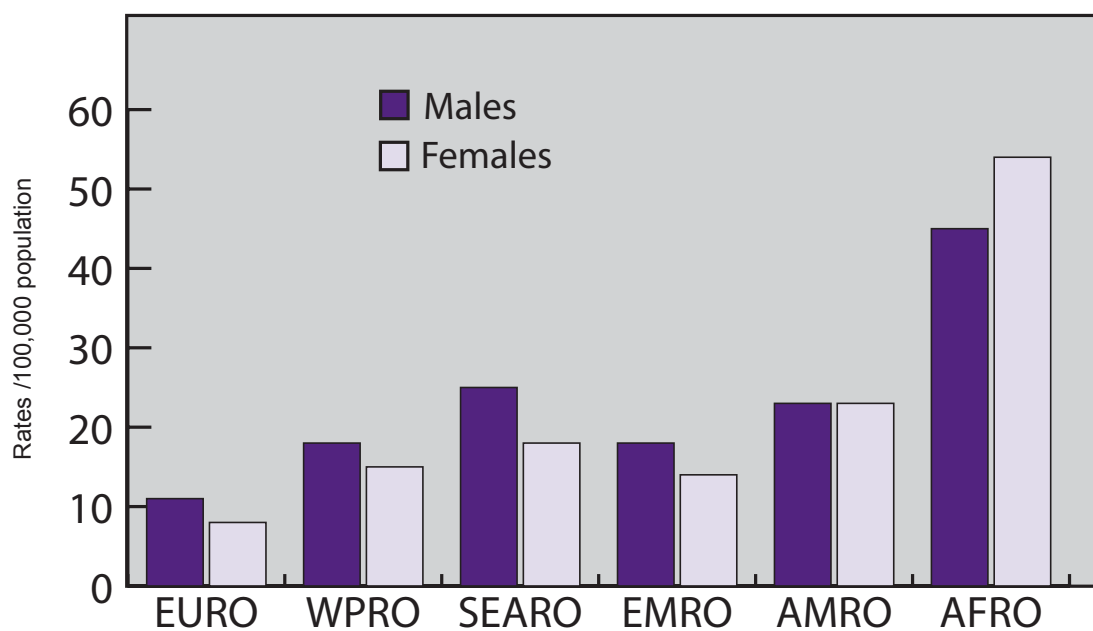
- Information campaigns need to make the availability and location of TB treatment facilities better known in the community to discourage care-seeking for TB from unqualified providers. Such campaigns should make a special effort at targeting women, young people and other vulnerable social groups.

- Community-based and/or family supervision models of the DOTS strategy may be more successful in achieving treatment compliance and positive outcomes among women as well as men who may be unable to visit treatment centres on a daily basis.

- Incorporation of gender issues in training curricula for service providers and TB programme managers.

Figure 1: Smear-positive notification rates in young people (15-24 yrs), WHO Regions, 2001

Source: WHO Report 2003 – Global Tuberculosis Control



World Health Organization, 2003
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World Health Organization
Department of Gender and Women's Health
20, Avenue Appia
Geneva, Switzerland