



# Gender Inequality and Blindness

Throughout the world, research has shown that gender equality is crucial to economic development and poverty reduction in developing countries.

When women are denied equal access to health services, education and employment, they are less able to care for themselves and their family. The family has fewer opportunities to prosper and is more vulnerable to misfortune and poverty.

The Fred Hollows Foundation has an important role in promoting gender equality through its eye health care and development work.

By integrating gender equality into its blindness prevention programs, The Foundation aims to equally improve the health and wellbeing of both women and men.



## Facts about Gender Inequality and Blindness

According to the World Health Organisation, women account for approximately two-thirds (64%) of the world's blind population. (A)

Women are more likely to have cataracts, accounting for between 53% and 72% of people living with cataracts. (A)

Women in developing countries are much less likely to receive cataract surgery at the same rate as men. (B)

Trachoma is more common in women than in men, largely because women and girls are more likely to be infected while caring for young children. Surveys show that 75% of people with advanced trachoma are women. (A)

The disproportionate prevalence of blindness for women is true across all preventable and treatable conditions that cause blindness. Only conditions such as age-related macular degeneration affect men and women at similar age-adjusted rates. (C)

Women with disabilities, such as blindness, are much more vulnerable to social exclusion and abuse. (D)

**Photo** | After developing cataract blindness, nineteen year old Kamala's husband forced her to leave their home and return to live with her parents. A sight restoring cataract operation has given Kamala new independence and a brighter outlook for her future. She is pictured here with her young son. Kathmandu (Nepal).  
Photo courtesy of [www.nicolabailey.com](http://www.nicolabailey.com)

## Gender and Blindness

Women are overrepresented amongst the world's blind population and account for approximately two-thirds of the 45 million blind people. The reasons behind this gender imbalance are found in the various barriers faced by women in accessing eye health services, particularly in developing countries.

The barriers faced by women in enjoying eye health include:

- Lower incomes and less control of family finances means that women are unable to pay for health care. **(B)**
  - Fewer transport options and restrictive social norms surrounding women and travel means that women are less likely to travel outside their village for health services. **(B)**
  - Lower education and literacy levels, leads to women being less likely to know about treatment options or how to access them. **(B)**
  - Less decision making power in the family affects women's chances of treatment as women's health needs are often not a priority. **(C)**
- Women and men should participate and have equal voice in planning and decision-making for each of The Foundation's programs to end avoidable.
  - Skills and abilities should be transferred to local women as well as men in order to fully develop the capacity of local communities to find their own sustainable solutions to their health problems.
  - Development programs should include activities that specifically target women in order to promote women's equitable access to program services and benefits.

## The Fred Hollows Foundation's approach to Gender Equality

The Foundation is guided by a human rights based approach to its development work and integrates gender equality in all of its programs. Specifically The Foundation believes that:

- Women and men have equal right to receive high quality affordable eye care and their different needs, interests, priorities and roles should be addressed.
- Gender equality is critical to alleviating poverty and improving the life opportunities of women, men, families and communities.



**Photo** | Forty-three year old, Nguyen Thi Hao celebrates with two of her children after regaining her sight. Hao, a widowed mother of four, was affected by bilateral cataract. She needed to work to support her family, however her job as a waitress became increasingly difficult as her eye sight deteriorated. (Quang Tri province, Vietnam) Photo courtesy of [www.nicolabailey.com](http://www.nicolabailey.com)

## Gender Equality and the work of The Fred Hollows Foundation

The Foundation recognises that gender influences the needs, priorities, roles and opportunities of individuals. We also understand that issues surrounding gender equality will differ from country to country and will also vary within communities.

The Foundation's development programs are responsive to gender equality issues as they occur in each situation. We actively employ a variety of strategies to ensure women, men, girls and boys are able to access and benefit from our programs in an equal way.

Some examples of The Foundation's work include:

- Providing free or subsidized cataract surgery to the poorest of the poor in most of the countries where The Foundation works. This helps overcome the barriers of lower income and less control of finances that prevent women and girls from receiving treatment.
- Training local women and men to be eye health doctors, nurses and community health care workers. This ensures that women are equal beneficiaries of training and employment opportunities.
- Supporting eye health clinics in remote regions to ensure that eye care services are offered to women and men who are too poor or incapacitated to travel. This helps remove travel and transport barriers to women and girls accessing services.
- Providing training in primary eye health care (screening and referral) for Lady Health Workers in Pakistan. The Lady Health Workers are important primary health care providers for women in rural villages and help overcome cultural barriers to women accessing health care.
- Working in partnership with both women and men who share our vision to eliminate avoidable blindness. For example, women are employed as our Country Managers in Pakistan, Kenya and South Africa.
- Including gender analysis when monitoring and evaluating our international programs to ensure that both men and women are accessing The Foundation's services equitably.

## References

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