Preface

Dr Margaret Chan, Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), stated in her Foreword to the 2009 WHO report on women and health:

*The Millennium Development Goals and other global commitments have focused primarily on the entitlements and needs of women. The current financial crisis and economic downturn make this focus even more urgent: protecting and promoting the health of women is crucial to health and development – not only for the citizens of today but also for those of future generations.*

A rise in the number of women smokers around the world will have enormous adverse effects on households’ financial status and family health. While the epidemic of tobacco use among men is in slow decline in some countries, use among women in some countries is increasing. However, in India and in several other countries, women also use other forms of tobacco, such as chewing tobacco. Unless innovative and sustained initiatives are undertaken, the number of female users of tobacco is predicted to rise over the next several decades as a result of increased prevalence, as well as population growth.

This monograph is part of WHO’s continued efforts to curb an epidemic of tobacco use affecting girls and women of all ages. It originated from a previous WHO monograph, *Women and the Tobacco Epidemic – Challenges for the 21st Century*, published in 2001. That monograph presented scientific papers commissioned by WHO in preparation for the 1999 WHO Conference on Tobacco and Health, *Making a Difference to Tobacco and Health: Avoiding the Tobacco Epidemic in Women and Youth*, held in Kobe, Japan. Since then, new data, changes in tobacco control legislation, and issues have emerged that warrant a new publication.

Much progress has been made on the issue of gender, women, and tobacco since 1999. Most significantly, the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC), now endorsed by 168 signatories and with more than 170 Parties, emphasizes the need for a gender perspective. The Preamble states:

*Alarmed by the increase in smoking and other forms of tobacco consumption by women and young girls worldwide and keeping in mind the need for full participation of women at all levels of policy-making and implementation and the need for gender-specific tobacco control strategies,*

*Emphasizing the special contribution of nongovernmental organizations and other members of civil society not affiliated with the tobacco industry, including health professional bodies, women’s, youth, environmental and consumer groups, and academic and health care institutions, to tobacco control efforts nationally and internationally and the vital importance of their participation in national and international tobacco control efforts,*

*Recalling that the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 18 December 1979, provides that States Parties to the Convention shall take appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the field of health care.*

In addition, Article 4 of the Guiding Principles of the WHO FCTC specifically mentions gender, noting “the need to take measures to address gender-specific risks when developing tobacco control strategies”.

WHO has given high priority to strengthening global action on the gender, women, and tobacco issue in its own programmes, including an operational project in Viet Nam. In the WHO Western Pacific Region, all five-year Action Plans on tobacco or health since 1990, including the 2010–2014 Plan, have emphasized the importance of preventing a rise in tobacco use among women. In 2010,
Gender and Tobacco with an Emphasis on Marketing to Women is the theme of the WHO campaign for World No Tobacco Day.

Progress has also been made in mobilizing non-governmental organizations (NGOs), foundations, and the scientific community in support of activities concerned with gender, women, and tobacco. For example, the International Network of Women Against Tobacco (INWAT), founded in 1990 to address issues of tobacco and women, has grown steadily and now has members in more than 80 countries. INWAT regularly distributes reports and newsletters and in 2006 published *Turning a New Leaf: Women, Tobacco and the Future. The Tobacco Atlas*, now published by the American Cancer Society and the World Lung Foundation, places a special emphasis on girls and women. A gender perspective has been integrated into many American Cancer Society tobacco projects. The CHEST Foundation, based in the United States of America, developed a Speaker’s Kit on Women and Girls—an educational tool addressing the dangers of tobacco use—which has been produced in many Asian languages. World and regional conferences on tobacco and health now strive for gender equality in their committees, chairs, and speakers, and they include the topic of gender, women, and tobacco in their programmes.

The publication of this monograph is opportune. The numbers of women who use tobacco and who are exposed to second-hand smoke (SHS), especially in poor communities, are expected to increase in the coming decades, for the following reasons:

- The female population in low- and middle-income countries is predicted to increase; thus, even if smoking prevalence remains low, the absolute numbers of women smokers will increase.

- Girls’ and women’s spending power is increasing, so cigarettes are becoming more affordable for them.

- The social and cultural constraints that have prevented many women from smoking are weakening in some countries.

- Women-specific health education and quitting programmes are rare, especially in low- and middle-income countries.

- In countries where rates of smoking are increasing among men, women will be increasingly exposed to the hazards of SHS.

- The tobacco companies are targeting women, using well-funded, alluring marketing campaigns.

In her editorial for INWAT, Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, the former Director-General of WHO and a lifelong anti-tobacco advocate, concluded:

> We need a broad alliance against tobacco, calling on a wide range of partners such as women’s organizations to halt the relentless increase in global tobacco consumption among women. There is a special need for gender-sensitive health education and quitting programmes. There is also a need to involve more women in senior, decision-making positions in the tobacco control movement, on editorial boards of medical journals which include tobacco issues, on WHO expert panels, and in nongovernmental organizations that deal with tobacco issues.

In keeping with this urgent call, this monograph helps to assess the current situation, identifies gaps in research, and offers solutions that must be heeded to prevent an epidemic of the gravest order.

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