Evaluation of Biological Sex, Gender and Mental Wellbeing Forum for Frontline Workers

Background

In April 2023, WHISE delivered a forum to its stakeholders on biological sex, gender and mental wellbeing. Following the success of this forum, WHISE collaborated with HER Centre Australia, pioneers in education, research, and public advocacy for women's mental health, to deliver a follow-up forum to a targeted audience of frontline workers in July 2023. This included anyone in a client-facing role, such as, doctors, nurses, allied health workers, social workers, youth workers, and emergency and response workers.

Extensive research illuminates the interplay of biological, psychological, social, and environmental factors that shape mental health for those assigned female at birth, those who identify as women, as well as non-binary individuals.

The second forum for WHISE's gender and mental wellbeing portfolio therefore delved into the biological and gendered determinants of wellbeing throughout the lifespan, and the translation of theory into tangible, everyday practice.

It was expected that attendees would leave with:

- Increased understanding of the underlying sex determinants of women's mental health.
- Increase understanding of the underlying gendered determinants of mental health.
- Increased understanding of how mental health promotion with a gender lens can be embedded into a direct-service provision role.
- Increased understanding of the gendered mental health and wellbeing gap (such as services or research).
- Increased confidence to apply knowledge of a gendered approach to improve mental health and wellbeing.

Who attended the forum?

Forty-six frontline workers attended the forum. The pre-forum survey was completed by 34 people which is 74% of the attendees. Of these, 94% identified as female (with one person additionally selecting non-binary), 3% (one person) as male, and 3% (one person) as non-binary. The post-forum survey was completed by 21 people (62%) of which 90% identified as female and 5% (one person) as non-binary. One person did not provide their gender in the post-survey.

Changes in understanding of key factors relating to women's mental health

Before and after the forum, attendees were asked to rate their understanding of:

- How biological sex impacts women's mental health
- How gender stereotypes impact women's mental health
- The gendered health gap in appropriate mental health support for women

Figures 1 to 3 show that levels of understanding on all measures increased following the forum. Before the forum, the majority of people rated their understanding as *low*, *neutral* and *high*. Following, more than three-quarters of respondents said their understanding was *high* and a handful of people felt their understanding was *very high*.

Ratings of understanding can be recoded so that they become a scale whereby *very low* = 1, *low* = 2, *neutral* = 3, *high* = 4, and *very high* = 5. In doing this, it is possible to analyse whether the difference in mean ratings before and after the forum were statistically significant. The analyses found that the difference in mean ratings for each measure were statistically significant (p ranged from < .001 to .002). The Rank Biserial Correlation (r) ranged from -0.43 to -0.65 which indicated that the increases in understanding were statistically moderate[1] which demonstrates the success of the forum in supporting frontline workers to learn about the impacts of biological sex and gender on mental wellbeing as well as the gendered health gap in appropriate support for women.
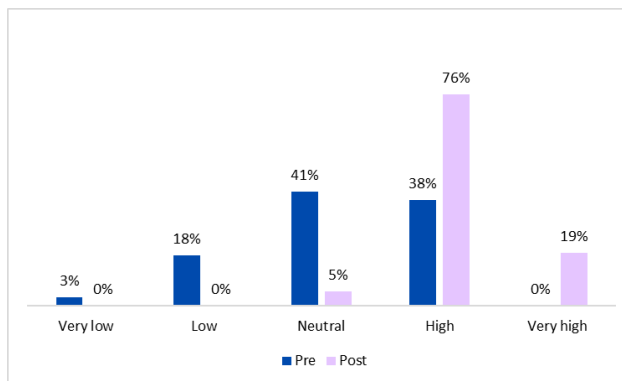

Figure 1. Pre- and post-forum ratings of understanding how biological sex impacts on women's mental health.
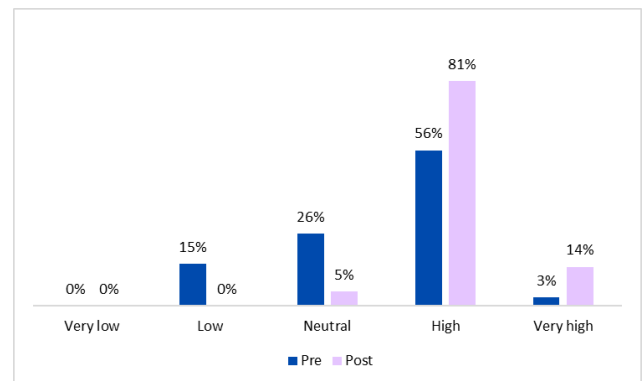

Figure 2. Pre- and post-forum ratings of understanding how gender stereotypes impact on women's mental health.

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[1] Cohen, J. W., 1998. *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences*. 2nd ed. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associated.
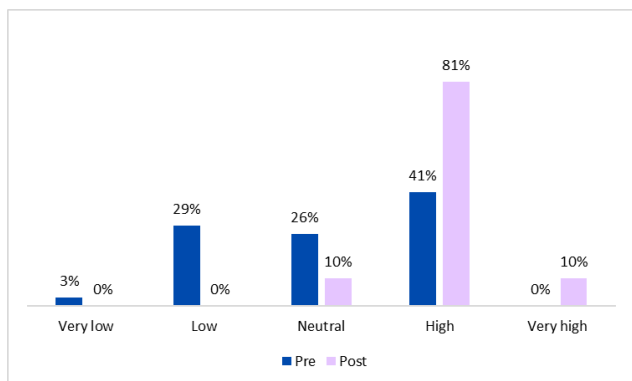
Figure 3. Pre- and post-forum ratings of understanding the gendered health gap in appropriate mental health support for women.

Confidence to apply learnings at work

Before and after the forum, ratings of confidence to apply learnings from the forum were measured on the following topics:

- Confidence to apply knowledge of biological sex and gender determinants of women's mental health in their work
- Confidence to apply a gender lens to their work
- Confidence to apply knowledge of women's sexual and reproductive health in their work
- Confidence to apply knowledge of a gendered approach to improve mental health and wellbeing in their work

As can be seen in Figures 4 to 7, respondents reported an overall increase in confidence on all measures. Most people felt *not so confident* and *fairly confident* to apply their knowledge before the forum. Following the forum, similar proportions of people felt *fairly confident* and *confident* to apply a gender lens to their work (see Figure 5), to apply knowledge of women's sexual and reproductive health in their work (see Figure 6), and to apply knowledge of a gendered approach to improve mental health and wellbeing in their work (see Figure 7). Figure 4 shows a notable increase in confidence to apply knowledge of biological sex and gender determinants of women's mental health in their work as about two-thirds of respondents endorsed the second highest rating.

Analyses of the mean pre and post ratings of confidence were statistically significantly different for all measures (*p* ranged from < .001 to .001). The Rank Biserial Correlations (*r*) ranged from -0.59 to -0.64 which evidenced the increases in confidence were statistically moderate.[2] This is a fantastic outcome as confidence can be harder to increase following a learning forum as it requires attendees to operationalise their knowledge.
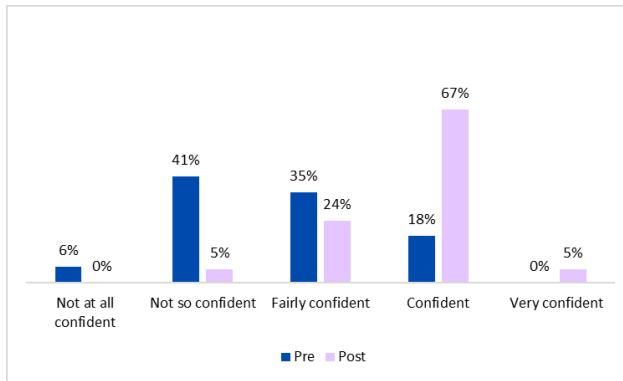
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[2] Ibid.

Figure 4. Pre- and post-forum ratings of confidence to apply knowledge of biological sex and gender determinants of women's mental health in their work.
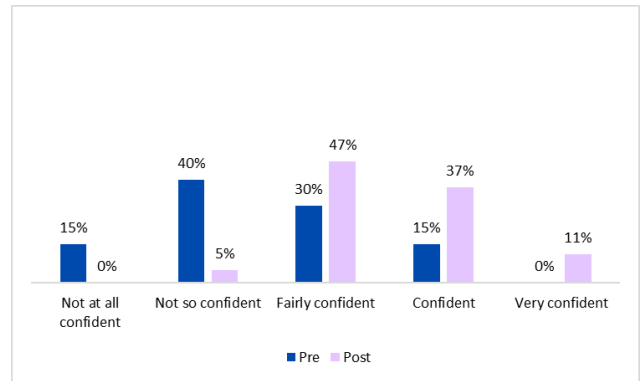

Figure 6. Pre- and post-forum ratings of confidence to apply knowledge of women's sexual and reproductive health in their work.
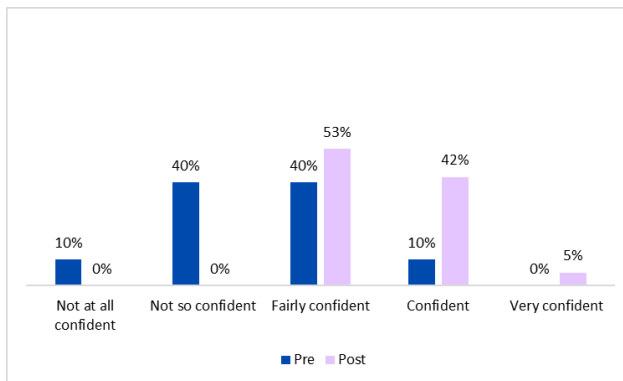

Figure 5. Pre- and post-forum ratings of confidence to apply a gender lens to their work.
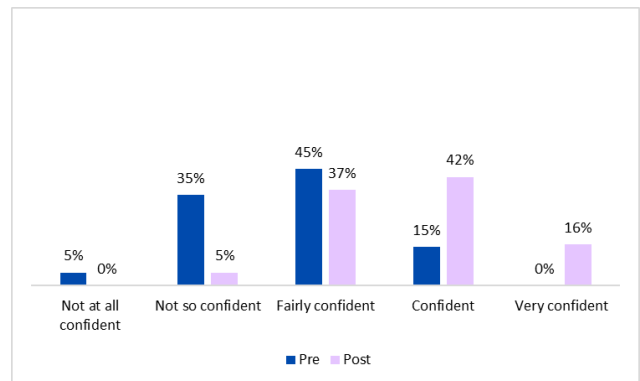

Figure 7. Pre- and post-forum ratings of confidence to apply knowledge of a gendered approach to improve mental health and wellbeing in their work.

Following the forum, people were asked if they felt confident to apply learnings from the forum to their role and if so, how would they do this. Twelve people responded to this question. Almost equal proportions of people said that they either did feel more confident or that they were unsure. Those who were unsure commented that they might be more confident "after relistening to the recording." Another person needed more information before feeling confident to apply learnings to their role.

Those who were confident said that they would apply their learnings in a variety of ways that were specific to their sector/role. For example,

Ask more questions and delve into understanding a person better and not just jumping to assumptions.

By validating feelings of Clients and be always mindful of pronouns and how to support them.

Be more understanding of and mindful of stress during Family Separation and impact that stress can have on that person during that particular time in their life.

Key learnings

Thirteen people shared a key learning from the forum. The majority of responses discussed learning about the "significant impact of females hormones on mental health." For example, one person stated, that "normal physiological changes can be misinterpreted as a mental health disorder."

Similarly, a couple of people found it fascinating to learn that medications can impact on women's mental wellbeing. Some respondents realised how little they know about women's mental wellbeing and commented, for example, "I still have a lot of learning to do in the areas of sex and gender within mental health. This topic is so interesting and diverse - I'm only scratching the surface!" Learning about HER centre was significant for one person.