



Fact Sheet:

Gender and Health

There are obvious differences between women's and men's bodies, and others that are more subtle. Over time, these differences have been overlooked and this affects everything from how spaces and objects are designed to how doctors manage patient's pain. This leads to poorer health outcomes for women.



How are women's bodies different?

Reproductive organs are the obvious 'illustrated on a poster' difference between men's and women's bodies because they look and function differently. But there are also less talked about differences such as the way men's and women's bodies react to drugs ([source](#)) and sex differences in symptom presentation for medical conditions ([source](#)). Some of the common biological differences between women, men and intersex people are:

- Reproductive organs and fertility
- DNA
- Chromosomes
- Hormones
- Metabolism
- Size and shape of bones such as the pelvis and eye socket
- Ways in which sounds are heard and colours are distinguished
- Physical characteristics such as body hair

"Women make up half of the world's population and yet medical research has largely been conducted by men, on men and for men. The pendulum has shifted towards balance for women and girls, but progress has been too slow."

[Professor Kate Leslie AO, University of Melbourne](#)

What influences how women's bodies are perceived?

History, culture and media influence how different people and cultures perceive women's bodies.

For example, in the early as 1900s, women's reproductive organs were linked with irrational emotions known as hysteria. Hysteria comes from the Greek word *hystera* which was the name given to the uterus. While it is easy to believe this is 'old thinking,' the diagnosis of hysteria was only officially removed from the Diagnostics and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1980 and, even today the operation to remove all or part of a women's uterus, is called a hysterectomy ([source](#)).

Although perceptions vary between cultures and change over time, they are important to acknowledge because the way women's bodies are viewed and the stereotypes attached to this are at the root of many problems women experience. These include:

- Sexual and physical violence ([source](#))
- Reproductive health issues and ill health and disease ([source](#))
- Less pay in the workplace ([source](#))

Did you know? *The measurements of women's and men's bodies (head, chest and hips) are different. Yet, everyday items such as seat belts and personal protective equipment are often designed to best fit the measurements of an average man. This has proved fatal for some women ([source](#), [source](#), [source](#)).*

How do these differences impact on women's health?

While there are many similarities between women's and men's bodies, it is the differences that give each sex unique strengths that help with survival. While that can help us better understand the health needs of each sex, these differences and the stereotypes attached to them led to gender bias in medicine and medical research.

Clinical trials have overwhelmingly been comprised of men, which has skewed medical research towards information and diagnosis that may be more accurate for men ([source](#)). Females with childbearing potential were also excluded from clinical trials from 1977 to 1993 ([source](#)).

Another reason given for excluding women in clinical studies is that, depending on where a woman is in her menstrual cycle, the variation of her hormones 'complicates' the results. This variability would mean more subjects would have been needed in clinical trials, thereby increasing costs ([source](#)). As such, many medicines and vaccines are optimised for men, affecting the quality of healthcare women receive.

What can be done?

When we talk about the differences in women's and men's bodies, it is worthwhile remembering equity is about treating everybody fairly, not the same. To improve women's health, we need to focus on gender as a determinant of health and how gender equality contributes to better health outcomes for women and girls.

Gender mainstreaming and gender analysis are two processes that can be adopted by health settings.

Gender mainstreaming provides tools to reduce the harmful effects of the determinants of health.

Gender mainstreaming is the process of assessing the implications for women, men and gender diverse people of any planned action within a health system, including legislation, policies, programmes or service delivery, in all technical areas and at all levels.

It is a strategy for making the concerns and experiences of diverse women and men an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all spheres so that they benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated.

Gender mainstreaming is not an end in itself but a strategy, an approach and a means to achieve the goal of gender equality.

Gender analysis identifies, assesses and informs actions to address inequality and inequity. It is used to systematically identify differences between groups of women and men, whether related to sex or gender, in terms of:

- risk factors, exposures and manifestations of ill-health,
- severity and frequency of diseases,
- health seeking behaviours,
- access to care and experiences in health care settings,
- outcomes and impact of ill-health.

Systematically collecting and analysing data disaggregated by sex and additional factors such as age, ethnicity, socio-economic status and disability, is critical. ([source](#))



Resources:

World Health Organisation (2011), Gender mainstreaming for health managers: a practical approach.

https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/44516/9789241501064_eng.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y

Women's Health Victoria (2019), Towards Gender Transformative Change: A Guide for Practitioners

[https://womenshealthvic.com.au/resources/WHV_Publications/Knowledge-Paper_2019.12.03_Towards-gender-transformative-change-a-guide-for-practitioners_\(Fulltext-PDF\).pdf](https://womenshealthvic.com.au/resources/WHV_Publications/Knowledge-Paper_2019.12.03_Towards-gender-transformative-change-a-guide-for-practitioners_(Fulltext-PDF).pdf)

OXFAM (2014), Quick Guide to Gender Analysis

<https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/312432/ml-quick-guide-to-gender-analysis-300114-en.pdf;jsessionid=DC0F6B487E450A469CE1252988788D05?sequence=1>

WHWBSW (2021), Gender Impact Assessment 101

<https://admin.womenshealthbsw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/GE-Act-Gender-Impact-Assessment-101.pdf>

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