

# Why women's health?

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## Because women are different from men.

**Women and men are differently positioned in society. Women are more likely to be carers and have lower incomes than men. Women are also more likely to live in poverty and experience associated financial difficulties such as problems paying their rent or mortgage.**

There are also many differences between women that influence their health. Some women are part of marginalised communities; women also vary in terms of their ethnicity/race, religion culture, economic status and social connectedness, all of which are linked to health.

**A focus on women's health is a focus on the range of issues that keep women well. Supporting women to feel a sense of empowerment, control and connectedness can lead to positive health outcomes for women, their families and indeed their communities.**

Women are also different biologically. The biological and social differences between women and men are connected to health.

### Sex and gender

**Sex refers to the biological differences between men and women.**

Our understanding of the biological differences between men and women has been developing over time. Traditionally, the focus was on reproductive differences but increasingly we have come to understand that the differences are much broader. This is important in our understanding of disease and determining the health needs of both women and men.

Women and men are different in terms of their anatomy, physiology and

genetics. Some diseases are exclusive to women while others affect both men and women but in very different ways. Biomedical studies, which give us the knowledge we need to prevent, diagnose and treat disease, continue to be dominated by male subjects which limits our understanding of how well different treatments work in women.

### Case study - heart disease and women

**“Heart disease doesn't discriminate. It is the leading killer of men and women. But when it comes to diagnosing and treating it, there is a gender gap. Women with heart attacks are more likely to die than men... According to one Israeli study... the death risk for women was 1.7 times that of men.”** Women's Heart Foundation<sup>7</sup>

**Women may experience symptoms of heart disease later than men. When symptoms appear they can be very different to symptoms that men experience, so they are often not recognised.<sup>7</sup> Men also tend to be treated more quickly for cardiac symptoms; they are also treated differently, receiving common interventions more than women do. Although the reasons are unclear it maybe that there is subtle, unconscious discrimination against women in the clinical setting.<sup>7</sup>**

**“Medicine as it is currently applied to women is less evidence-based than that being applied to men”** (Nature 2010)<sup>1</sup>

### Gender

**Refers to the different social and cultural roles, attitudes, behaviours, expectations and constraints placed upon women and men by virtue of their sex.**

Gender influences health in many ways, for example:

- the way in which women and men are exposed to things that make them sick, like smoking, obesity and alcohol.
- the way in which women and men are treated in the clinical setting including the suggestion that for men there is greater attention to preventative counselling in general practice.
- the way in which men and women experience illness and the different social implications of being ill; for example, how illness affects women's ability to care for family
- attitudes towards maintaining health and that of other family members
- women and children are more likely to live in poorer socioeconomic conditions than men and this makes them more vulnerable to risk factors that can make them sick

- women are much more likely to have experienced multiple instances of being forced or frightened into engaging in sexual behaviour - most sexual coercion occurs before 18 years of age.<sup>9</sup>
- young women are much more vulnerable to unsafe sexual health practices.<sup>10</sup>

**A focus on women's health acknowledges that women have particular place in society as well as unique health issues, and health seeking behaviours.**

#### **What is a gendered approach to health?**

A gendered approach pays attention to how biology and genetics, and the social, political, cultural and economic circumstances of women and men influence their health. It examines the similarities and differences in conditions, situations, needs and priorities between women and men.<sup>12</sup>

#### **Why take a gendered approach?**

A gendered approach to health is important because it will:

- give equal weight to the knowledge, values and experiences of women and men
- take into account the implications of disease as it affects women and men
- lead to a better understanding of the causes of ill-health
- result in more effective interventions to improve health
- enable the full participation of women and men at all levels of decision-making about health and health care

- contribute to the attainment of greater equity in health, health care and health care access.

### **Implications for the future**

**When we use a particular lens on a camera we know that it will influence the way we will see the final picture. Similarly, a 'gender lens' on health and health care will influence the way that we consider health and health care policy, research, programs and services.**

Only then will we truly take into account the ways in which the biological and social differences between women and men influence their health. Using a gender lens will help reorientate services so that they can genuinely take into account the many things that influence women's health.

In an era of evidence-based health policy and practice, it makes sense to use all evidence including that which is gendered.

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- This fact sheet is based on the Women's Health Victoria banner entitled *Why Women's Health: an Overview* first published in 2006.