



# Inserm

La science pour la santé  
From science to health

**Gender and Health: A  
Public Health Issue**

**Inserm Ethics  
Committee**

“Gender and Health Research” Group

**June  
2019**

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## **Gender and Health: A Public Health Issue**

### **Summary of research (2017-2019) and prospects**

Since 2013, the “Gender and Health Research” Group of the Inserm Ethics Committee, has been working on the ethical issues of inequalities in health between men and women and on the ways to improve research and clinical practices.

Health differences between men and women are the result of complex interactions between biological, social and economic factors. While specific biological, anatomical and physiological aspects play a role in these differences, masculine and feminine social roles also influence how the sexes relate to their bodies, perceive symptoms, seek treatment and also , in the case of health professionals, how the latter interpret clinical signs and treat diseases. To this one must add the economic conditions and precarity that particularly affect women who will forego treatment and experience a decrease in the quality of life.

All these factors combined lead to healthcare inequality and sex discrimination in terms of exposure to risk, access to healthcare and how their illnesses are managed. Indeed, this is a public health issue that must be fully integrated into medical and research institutions' projects.

Studies on healthcare inequality through the prism of gender are rare in France, unlike in the USA, Canada and some European countries in which “gendered” medicine has become institutionalized.

#### **Gender and health: international initiatives**

In the USA, the NIH has integrated gender factors in its strategic plans for over 25 years. The *Office of Research on Women's Health*, which works with the NIH and FDA, was created in 1990 to promote women’s health, gender research and endeavor to increase the number of women in research careers (<http://orwh.od.nih.gov/research/strategicplan/>).

In 1995, the World Health Organization (WHO) created a “Women, Gender and Health” Department and thus, since 2002, has integrated the gender perspective in its various activities.

Since 2000, in Europe and with the support of the European Commission, various countries (Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Sweden) have created “Gender and Health” research institutes.

In 2013, the European Gender Medicine project was created. Among the various countries involved (Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, United Kingdom, etc.), France was not represented.

The European Union Horizon 2020 program attributes great importance to gender and sex issues in research (<https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/horizon2020/en/file/1407>).

### **Gender and health: the context in France**

In France, the first official report on women's health by the Delegation for Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities (by Dominique Hénon) was published in 2010.

In 2012, the "Gender Institute" was created - a Scientific Interest Group (GIS) gathering 30 partner institutions – by the Institute of Human and Social Sciences (INSHS) of the CNRS. Its objective is to structure research on "the study of women, gender and sexuality". That being said, the Institute focuses on the human and social sciences and does not propose a public health approach.

In 2013, the French Public Health Agency and the National Authority for Health announced its commitment to fight against gender inequality. The French National Assembly and Senate followed through in 2015 with the publication of reports and guidelines on improving the health of women and fighting gender discrimination. However, no French institute specifically devoted to "Gender and Health" research has been created.

The Inserm must embrace these issues in its future strategies. The activity engaged by the Inserm Ethics Committee "Gender and Health Research" Group has amply contributed this effort, thereby fulfilling the recommendations of the International Scientific Committee tasked with evaluating the Inserm in February 2016 ([www.inserm.fr/actualites/rapport-d-evaluation-sur-l-inserm-du-comite-scientifique-international](http://www.inserm.fr/actualites/rapport-d-evaluation-sur-l-inserm-du-comite-scientifique-international) (only available in French)).

### **Training physicians and researchers and public information campaigns**

It is important to encourage researchers to consider the differences between males and females, not as a simple dichotomy between male and female, but as the result of intricate relationships between sex and gender (Fausto-Sterling 2012, 2013). This approach is the most efficient way of improving clinical and research practices and as such enrich knowledge relative to the similarities and differences between women and men in health (Klinge 2012, Springer 2012, Krieger 2013).

From this standpoint, the “Gender and Health Research” Working Group of the Inserm Ethics Committee seeks to raise the awareness of physicians, researchers, patients and civil society actors invested in public health, and has accomplished this in a variety of ways (see the reports on the website:

<http://www.inserm.fr/qu-est-ce-que-l-inserm/l-ethique-a-l-inserm/les-groupes-de-reflexion-thematique-du-comite-d-ethique>.

- The first **international conference** held in France on:

***Sex and Gender in Health Research: An Innovative Articulation***

This conference, part of the Inserm Journées Recherche Santé was held in Paris in November 2017 at Institut Imagine Necker

- Video recording: <https://www.inserm.fr/information-en-sante/seminaires/journee-recherche-et-sante-sexe-et-genre-dans-recherches-en-sante-articulation-innovante>

**- Public information campaign**

Production of a series of **short videos** entitled: ***Gender and Health: Down With Clichés!*** available in English and French

This series of one-minute films is designed to raise awareness of prejudice in six areas of medicine and research: depression, life expectancy, cardiovascular diseases, osteoporosis, pain and brain imaging

<https://www.inserm.fr/en/news-and-events/news/gender-and-health-down-with-cliches>

- Contribution to the **COP23 White Paper** on ***Women, Health & Climate*** in partnership with UNICEF and UN Women France (<http://www.climat-sante.org/conference-sante-climat-2017/>)

**- Education**

Primary Care Physician Ongoing Training post-graduate diploma (Diplôme Universitaire), Hôpital Cochin

***Gender and Health*** seminar

- **Book: *Femmes et santé, encore une affaire d'hommes?***, Editions Belin, Egale à Egal collection, published 2017 by Muriel Salle and Catherine Vidal

**- Articles and interviews**

Inserm *Science & Santé* magazine, *Santé* magazine, *20 minutes*, *The Conversation*, *RFI*, *France Culture*, *France Inter*, *France 5: Allodocteur*, *Magazine de la Santé*, *BFM TV*, *Chérie 25*, *Le Généraliste*, *La Croix*, *Ça m'intéresse*, *Nouvel Obs*

## References

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Springer K., Mager Stellman J. and Jordan-Young R., 2012. « Beyond a catalogue of differences: A theoretical frame and good practice guidelines for researching sex/gender in human health », *Social Science & Medicine*, 74, pp. 1817-1824