

Positive gains are needed to accelerate change for women with lung disease

COPD receives low attention as a women's health issue. It's time to change that.

By [Linda Armstrong](#) | Mar 02, 2018

Last year, a report by the World Economic Forum¹ predicted that gender parity is still over 200 years away. More recently, the #MeToo movement has brought sexual harassment in the workplace to the top of the news agenda, and rightly so. No one expects true gender equality to happen overnight, but it's critical that continued positive progress is made in all areas of society and culture – including within the field of respiratory health.

A time to act

Now, more than ever, is the time to think, act and be gender-inclusive. Once a year, International Women's Day invites the world to focus on achieving the goal of gender parity under a united banner.

While gender parity affects us all in many ways, gender inequality has a specific impact on the field of respiratory care. For example, it is a sad reality that chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) – a progressive, debilitating and incurable lung disease – receives scant attention as a women's health issue, even though women are more likely to lose their lives to COPD than to breast and lung cancer combined.²

Unhelpful stereotyping of people affected by COPD

The perception that COPD is the preserve of older, male smokers is outdated but still lingers on despite a raft of evidence to the contrary. Evidence shows that the prevalence of COPD globally is now increasing more rapidly in women than in men, that the number of COPD-related deaths in women surpasses the number in men in some countries,³⁻⁸ and that women often develop COPD earlier and experience more rapid disease progression than men.⁹

The prevalence of COPD globally is now increasing more rapidly in women than in men.

COPD in women

So why isn't COPD more widely recognized as a women's healthcare issue?

One problem is the lack of awareness of COPD symptoms among women. Another is that some are embarrassed by their symptoms and can feel so stigmatized that they are reluctant to seek help from their healthcare providers.

Meanwhile, many physicians remain unaware of the gender-specific disease characteristics and issues of COPD. So, when a woman does seek help, she is much more likely to be misdiagnosed or suboptimally treated than her male equivalent. This not only puts her health at risk but also impacts her quality of life.

The moment-by-moment struggle to breathe – a symptom of COPD – is exhausting and often isolating. We

see women whose daily lives are impacted to such an extent that they are unable to fulfil roles within the family and workplace, and therefore cannot contribute fully to their respective societies. This further cements long-established gender inequality gaps.

Little wins fuel societal change

Things must change. Gender parity is not only the right thing to do; it is one of the most important things that will make society a better place – for both men and women.

That is why at Novartis we support independent research into gender-specific differences in COPD and how these can be addressed. We are also using our voice to help educate and empower women with the condition to stand up and demand personalized care.

Just like gender parity, improved awareness and treatment of COPD in women won't be a quick win; it's only through constant positive gains that we will accelerate change. We must be tenacious, we must be collective, and we must continue to [#PressforProgress](#).

Positive gains are needed to accelerate change for women with lung disease. [#PressforProgress](#) @Novartis

COPD: the women's health issue that can no longer be ignored

Women are now more likely than men to be diagnosed with COPD, an incurable lung condition. They are also more likely to develop it earlier and in more severe forms. Despite the fact that COPD kills more women around the world than does breast cancer, it is still not considered a women's health issue and gender-based care inequalities exist. This must change. [#PressforProgress](#)

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