

LEADERSHIP IN DEI



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for their pain.³ As a result, women may receive less medical support and experience avoidable damage to their mental health.

Why is it important for employers to understand the gender health gap?

We recently partnered with Ipsos to dig deeper into the gender health gap; and we heard directly from Canadian women on their health needs, challenges and wants. Our findings are summarized in our new Bright Paper, "[The gender health gap: its impact on working women in Canada](#)."

The women in our research said that support for their health in the workplace was a key driver of job satisfaction. However, working women aren't always finding the health supports they need.

We also know that women shoulder a larger burden of unpaid caregiving in Canada, whether for young children or aging parents. The Ipsos research highlighted that most women (85 per cent) feel they still bear a greater burden of household and childcare responsibilities than men. This burden, along with the gender health gap, has a significant cost. Four in 10 working women said they've made career-limiting decisions to care for their family or for health-related concerns—for example, by reducing hours worked (25 per cent), switching to less demanding jobs (16 per cent), passing on an opportunity at work (12 per cent) or giving up their job (10 per cent).

When women step back, step down or step away from their careers, there's an impact on their current and future income—and employers lose valuable

What is the gender health gap?

The gender health gap is the disparity in women's health that specifically impacts their quality of life; and this is due to the legacy of a long history of inadequate recognition and support of women's health. Health care has frequently failed to take into consideration women's physiological differences, social dynamics and other determinants of health like education, income and employment. Too often, the result of this is women not receiving the health support they need, with significant negative consequences.

How does health care often underserve women?

First, there's still stigma attached to many women-specific health issues, including contraception, fertility, maternal health, perimenopause, menopause, menstruation and other gynecological health concerns. Discomfort talking about these issues can reduce awareness of certain health

conditions and funding for important research and medical advances. It also means women themselves may delay or avoid seeking help for these health issues.

Second, researchers have previously excluded women from clinical trials. Some worried that women's hormones could distort the results, making their findings less accurate. Others were concerned about unknown drug effects on pregnant women and fetuses. While pregnancy risk is a valid concern, exclusion has left women underrepresented in clinical trials and medical research. Even today, less than 8 per cent of Canada's national funding goes to women's health research,¹ and only 1.2 per cent of Canada's research chairs are in women's health.²

A third reason is that lack of awareness and research can lead to bias. Women may encounter a dismissive attitude toward symptoms or be misdiagnosed. They may also receive delayed or inadequate treatment. For example, doctors are up to two times more likely to diagnose women with a psychological cause

talent and the competitive advantage that comes with it.

What are some of women's top health concerns?

Our research identified mental health as a top concern among women across all age categories (from 18 to 50+). Women under 40 emphasized gynecological and reproductive matters. Among women 40+, hormonal issues related to perimenopause and menopause became more prevalent concerns, alongside migraines, cardiovascular diseases and osteoporosis.

In particular, the menopause transition is important to address because there are so many misconceptions about it. Typically happening when many women are at the peak of their careers, it's associated with more than 30 symptoms due to hormonal changes—from widely known ones like hot flashes and night sweats to disrupted sleep, fatigue, joint and muscle pain, depression, anxiety and memory issues. Unmanaged menopause symptoms cost the Canadian economy \$3.5 billion in lost productivity and missed days at work. Of that \$3.5 billion, \$3.3 billion is lost income as they step back, step down and step away.⁴

How can employers better support women's health through their benefits plans?

Employers have many solutions available to them—some of which may already exist in their current benefits plans. Check to make sure you have sufficient coverage for mental-health services, coaching, counselling, disability leave, medical treatments,

hormone therapy and fertility drugs, as well as family-building programs that cover fertility procedures, adoption and surrogacy. Chiropractors, osteopaths and physiotherapists can be vital resources to relieve discomfort and prepare for birth. In addition, health spending accounts and personal spending accounts give women flexibility to fund their specific health and wellness needs.

Why is it important to make women's health a priority within DEI programs?

Canadian women make up 50.3 per cent of the population⁵ and 48 per cent of the workforce.⁶ They're essential to the Canadian economy, meaning employers can't afford to not make this a priority. Those who support women's health will be in a stronger position to attract and retain talent and maximize the potential of their workforce.

How does gender diversity come into play when addressing women's health?

Women's health issues also affect non-binary, transgender and two-spirit people who have a uterus. In the context of the workplace, being empathetic and asking these employees what they need or want is vital; it shouldn't be assumed based on them belonging to a specific community.

How is Sun Life engaging in advocacy to improve women's health?

Sun Life will keep raising awareness of women's health issues to help close the gender health gap. We'll also continue to promote and evolve health solutions employers can use to address women's health needs in the workplace.

We have a multi-year partnership with the Menopause Foundation of Canada to advocate for more support for women in the workplace during this time of life. Our work together includes the *Menopause and Work in Canada* report, which outlines the urgent need for better supports in the workplace.

We're funding an educational scholarship program through the North American Menopause Society. It will improve access to menopause specialists by enabling qualified Canadian clinicians to earn the Menopause Society Certified Practitioner (MSCP) credential.



We're exploring additional group benefits solutions, including perinatal coverage enhancements for equipment and providers, as well as virtual consultations for initiating menopause hormone therapy.

And because many women suffer from major chronic diseases, such as diabetes, respiratory illnesses and cardiovascular conditions, we're looking at care programs to help those living with these conditions manage and maintain their health.

We encourage employers to use the many free resources on our website, including research and toolkits, to guide their efforts. Together, we can help Canadian women thrive—and build a healthier and more productive workforce.

Sunlife.ca/womenshealth

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