

# Physician burnout has disproportionate effect on women

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While physician burnout has become a reality across the profession, its disproportionate impact on women should sound an alarm within the health-care sector that more supports need to be offered, according to a recent Western study.

In a recent paper for the National Academy of Medicine, the authors noted that the prevalence of [burnout](#) may be as much as 20-60 percent higher among women physicians than among their men counterparts. The authors explore how gender-based differences create unique experiences of burnout with the aim of creating new strategies to promote wellness among women physicians.

"This paper reflected our desire to start a conversation on gender-related differences, which are not sufficiently addressed in studies of [physician burnout](#) and well-being," said Dr. Javeed Sukhera, a Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry professor and co-author of the international research paper.

The authors found a number of external and internal factors have an impact [physician](#) burnout and that gender plays a role in the prevalence and influence of these factors.

"One of the most [important factors](#) that influences women's experiences of burnout relates to how [gender bias](#) and discrimination results in differing day-to-day experiences for men and women," Sukhera said.

"Women physicians consistently earn less than their male colleagues and are less likely to be promoted. Along with [sexual harassment](#), these forces worsen experiences of exhaustion, cynicism, and imposter syndrome."

Recognizing these gender-related differences, the authors noted, can help to design successful strategies to improve physician wellness and to identify, treat, and prevent burnout.

"Institutions should explore which organizational factors are most important in their learning and practice environments," the authors wrote. "Societal expectations that women are primarily responsible for life at home remain a barrier to fully equalizing the roles and responsibilities of men and women within the outside the workplace.

"Until these expectations change, health-care organizations must acknowledge these societal demands and provide the resources and flexibility in the [work environment](#) that can enable women's success."

The authors suggest several strategies that organizations can employ to mitigate physician burnout among women:

- Improving the work environment, including instituting policies to mitigate the challenges of achieving work-life integration and to address workplace sexual harassment and gender biases. These could include organization training programs designed to educate participants about unconscious bias, workplace norms, and effective communication and reporting mechanisms;
- Offering more career development opportunities. Intentional efforts to ensure that qualified women are placed on appropriate committees, given necessary administrative staff and are supported for their work are needed to ensure that [women](#) are promoted at rates equal to those of men; and
- Improving wellbeing of students and trainees in the learning environment.

Sukhera says the most immediate strategy to start addressing the differences in burnout and to mitigate them is to start talking about

them.

"When we hear, read or see research or discourse related to burnout in medicine, we should be asking how such research or discourses relates differently when it comes to gender," he said.

He challenges researchers to go even further and think about the unique challenges presented by the intersection of burnout and age, race and ethnicity, as well.

"The next step is to explore how all types of differences influence the experiences of burnout so that we can hold organizations accountable to prioritize the physical and mental health of all physicians, with specific and targeted strategies."

The paper, "Gender-Based Differences in Burnout: Issues Faced by Women Physicians," was released last week.

**More information:** Kim Templeton et al. Gender-Based Differences in Burnout: Issues Faced by Women Physicians, *NAM Perspectives* (2019). [DOI: 10.31478/201905a](https://doi.org/10.31478/201905a)

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