

## Women in Different Roles, National Women's Eye Health and Safety

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As it's National Women's Eye Health and Safety month, one could ask the question: 'why is there a need to focus on 'women' in different roles, eye health and safety?'

Is there currently a disparity between risk for women in their day-to-day activities than men? If so, why should this be? And how can we address this?

The answer is clear: in the vast majority of countries women are more at risk of blindness than men. So, why should this be?

There are few activities that are exclusive to women or men. Indeed, even in sport, women are successfully competing against men at an elite level. For example, last month's winner of the Grand National horse race in the UK was won by Rachael Blackmore. However, there is one activity men cannot perform, and that is childbirth. This, and the associated hormones can contribute to eye pathology such as the acceleration of diabetic retinopathy.

However, the physiology of pregnancy cannot account solely for the pattern of vision loss difference between men and women. It could be instructive to look at the roles played by women in society. For example, 'The Economist' claims that only 7% of women in India are in paid employment. The reported prevalence in 2004 of severe vision loss for men was 6.98% and for women was 9.87%. In Iceland, by contrast, where 42% of management positions are taken up by women, the incidence of severe vision loss is 0.87% for men and 1.03% for women - a statistically insignificant difference when you allow for longer female life expectancies.

This suggests that environmental factors, including the ease of access to health care, may be playing a role. In some societies, not being employed may translate into reduced power - both financially and otherwise - and it doesn't seem implausible that this could result in reduced access to health care. In addition, the hard labour which often characterises the life of a traditional housewife may lead to the neglect of eye health. Insidious diseases such as glaucoma come on with few symptoms.

Another important question is the one of whether women could simply be more preoccupied than men. Women across a wide spectrum of societies often have more caring responsibilities. If true, does this make it less likely that they will make time for the appointments and general administration involved in looking after their own eye health? More research is needed to answer these questions, but that doesn't mean they're not worth asking.

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