

## The female health-survival advantage: paradox unwarranted

Douglas Dix

Published online: 23 August 2013  
© Swiss School of Public Health 2013

Van Oyen et al. (2012) claim that women are less healthy than men and that their longer lifespan is, therefore, paradoxical. It is a claim worthy of scrutiny, particularly as there is no objective measure of health.

There is no doubt that women live longer than men. In the 193 nations reporting life expectancy at birth for 2009, values were greater for females than males except in Cameroon, Chad, Somalia, and Sudan, where values were equal between the genders, and in Central African Republic, Tonga, and Tuvalu, where values were greater for males than females (World Health Organization 2012). In all reporting nations, adult mortality rate for 2009 was smaller for females than males except in Central African Republic and Tuvalu, where rates were greater for females than males.

There is also no doubt that men are more likely than women to adopt or tolerate health risks. Of the 140 nations reporting smoking prevalence for both genders in 2009, all but Nauru reported a greater prevalence for males than females. Of the 183 nations reporting the prevalence of high blood pressure in adults, all but 6 reported a higher prevalence among males than females. What then could justify the claim that women are less healthy than men?

Van Oyen et al. found that in a 2006 survey in 25 European nations, women reported being “more limited because of a health problem” than men. Before concluding from this evidence that women generally are less healthy than men, we ought at least to consider that these particular women might only have been less stoic.

Better evidence of a female health disadvantage comes from obesity data. Of the 189 nations reporting prevalence of adult obesity for 2008, 151 reported a greater prevalence

among females than males. This weight disadvantage, however, did not translate into a greater prevalence of fasting hyperglycemia. Of the 189 nations reporting gender-specific data, 101 reported fasting hyperglycemia being more prevalent among males than females. The conservative conclusion is that females are better able than males to withstand health assaults because they are healthier.

The female health and survival advantage is manifest even in infancy. Of the 193 nations reporting gender-specific infant mortality rates, all but 27 reported a greater rate for males than females, and only 6 of these 27 reported a greater rate for females than males (World Health Organization 2011). Of the 193 nations reporting gender-specific child mortality rates, all but 27 reported a greater rate for males than females, and only 10 of these 27 reported a greater rate for females than males (World Health Organization 2011).

Paradox is rare. That is why it attracts attention. The abundance of data demonstrating that females are better suited to survival than males argues against any “health-survival paradox”. Women outlive men because they are healthier. We need to focus now on finding the mechanism of that health advantage.

**Conflict of interest** The author declares no conflict of interest.

### References

- Van Oyen H, Nusselder W, Jagger C, Kolip P, Cambois E, Robine JM (2012) Gender differences in healthy life years within the EU: an exploration of the “health-survival” paradox. *Int J Public Health*. doi:10.1007/s00038-012-0361-1
- World Health Organization (2011) World Health Statistics 2011. [http://www.who.int/whosis/whostat/EN\\_WHS2011\\_Full.pdf](http://www.who.int/whosis/whostat/EN_WHS2011_Full.pdf). Accessed 20 May 2013
- World Health Organization (2012) World Health Statistics 2012. [http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/44844/1/97892415644441\\_eng.pdf](http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/44844/1/97892415644441_eng.pdf)

---

D. Dix (✉)  
University of Hartford, West Hartford, CT, USA  
e-mail: Dix@hartford.edu