

SCIENCE

Women's Health Research

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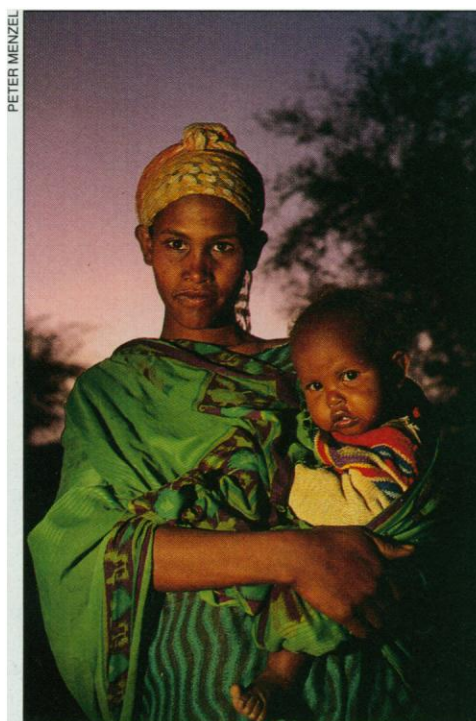
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A Special Report



Women's health and the research aimed at promoting it cover a huge range of topics. After all, it applies to half the world's population, living in every conceivable condition from the greatest luxury to the most miserable poverty. In addition, until recently, few studies were designed to probe specific differences between men and women in patterns of disease and reactions to therapy. Now all that is changing, due in part to a vigorous women's health movement that began among women of one of the wealthiest countries of all: the United States.

Rather than attempting to describe every detail of this vast subject, our issue is organized around four themes. The first is the emergence of the women's health movement as a political force, a motif touched on in Charles C. Mann's introductory News story. The second is the vexed question of whether women have been excluded from clinical trials, and, if so, what should be done to remedy that exclusion, a subject covered in depth in Policy Forums by Curtis Meinert and by Linda Sherman *et al.* An additional Policy Forum by S. Jody Heymann argues that the patient's perspective must be included in the design of clinical trials.

The third overarching theme is the emergence of gender-based research as an important area of biomedicine. This subject is covered in News stories by Trisha Gura on cardiovascular disease, Virginia Morell on the immune system and on infertility, and Jon Cohen on AIDS, and in an Article by Myrna Weissman and Mark Olfson on depression in women. Acute readers will notice that one subject they might have expected to find in that list—breast cancer—is missing. Our reasoning in omitting it is that breast cancer has received massive press coverage in recent years, including a special report in *Science* (29 January 1993, p. 616). Moreover, breast cancer is far from the biggest killer of women in economically developed countries—that grisly pride of place is held by cardiovascular disease, a fact often lost in press coverage of women's health.

The final theme is the health of women in developing countries. For women in poor countries, one of the greatest threats is motherhood: Complications of childbirth are among the leading causes of death for women of child-bearing age. A News story by Rachel Nowak describes how most programs designed to improve maternal health have largely benefited children—not their mothers—and how a small band of epidemiologists is fighting to change that pattern. Policy Forums by Gertrude Mongella and by Claudia García-Moreno and Tomris Türmen describe the role of the United Nations and the World Health Organization in encouraging governments to carry out their programs to improve women's health.

Because even this generous selection of stories cannot begin to exhaust an increasingly important subject, women's health research is a topic *Science* will be revisiting regularly in the future.

—Stella Hurtley and John Benditt