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Introduction to Women's Gynecologic Health

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Women's Health from a Feminist Perspective

Lisa Kane Low

Joanne Motino Bailey

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WOMEN'S HEALTH CARE AND GYNECOLOGIC HEALTH

The state of women's health care today is a direct reflection of women's status and position in society. Many healthcare advances have been made in women's health, yet comprehensive, compassionate healthcare services that address the complexity and diversity of how women live their lives and experience health and disease are still lagging.

This text is based on a feminist framework in an effort to advance the quality of health care provided to women in today's society. The authors attempt to acknowledge the complexity of women's health by paying particular attention to women's status in society and their unequal access to opportunity and power, while focusing on women's gynecologic health and well-being. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of women's health using a feminist perspective and gender considerations as a lens for exploring women's health in general and gynecologic health in particular. The glossary in **Box 1-1** offers definitions of key terms that are used throughout the chapter and are linked to feminist critical analysis of gender and health.

WHAT IS FEMINISM?

The author bell hooks (2000) offers a definition of feminism that is well suited for addressing the context in which women experience health and

wellness: Feminism is a perspective that acknowledges the oppression of women within a patriarchal society, and struggles toward the elimination of sexist oppression and domination for all human beings. Acknowledging the oppression of women is increasingly difficult because affluence and increased opportunities within some sectors of employment and education are construed as equal access or equity in opportunity for all women. Hooks, however, defines oppression as "not having a choice." With this definition, many more individuals are able to recognize constraints in their personal experiences. Examples of such practices include unjust labor practices, lower wages for equal work, lack of maternity leave policies, limited access to a range of contraceptive options, and inability to access desired healthcare providers. These examples indicate the breadth of experiences within the context of a patriarchal society that denies women equal access to power, resources, and opportunities.

Characteristics of a feminist perspective include the use of critical analysis to question assumptions about societal expectations and the value of various roles on both sociopolitical and individual levels. The process of critical analysis is accomplished by rejecting conceptualizations of women as homogeneous. It acknowledges power imbalances, and uses the influence of gender as the foremost consideration in the analysis. Using a gender lens that is informed by feminism permits areas

BOX 1-1 Glossary of Key Terms

Cis-sex/gender: An individual whose gender identity coincides with that individual's birth-assigned sex/gender (e.g., a cis-man is often referred to as simply "man," a cis-woman is often referred to as simply "woman")

Classism: Discrimination or prejudice on the basis of social class

Discrimination: The prejudicial treatment of an individual based on that person's actual or perceived membership in a certain group or category (e.g., race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, national origin)

Feminism: A movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression (hooks, 2000)

Gender: A socially constructed category addressing how people identify and act based on sex (e.g., men and women)

Homophobia: Prejudice against individuals with same-sex attraction

Intersectionality: The unique combination of multiple identities based on race, class, gender, and other characteristics, and the compounded experience of oppression based on these identities

Medicalization: Defining or treating a physiologic process or behavior as a medical condition or disease

Oppression: Exercise of authority or power in an unjust manner; according to bell hooks, "not having a choice"

Patriarchy: A social system of institutions that privileges men, resulting in male domination over access to power, roles, and positions within society

Power: The ability to do something, act in a particular way, or direct/influence others' behavior or a course of events

Race/ethnicity: Socially constructed categorization of individuals and communities based on a combination of physical attributes and cultural heritage

Racism: Individual and structural practices that create and reinforce oppressive systems of race relations

Sex: Biological classification as female or male based on chromosomes, genitalia, and reproductive organs

Sex/gender: Combined term of sex and gender acknowledging that the discreet meanings of these terms are not easily separated in research and practice

Sexism: Individual and institutional practices that privilege men over women

Social construction: The process by which societal expectations of behavior become interpreted as innate, biologically determined characteristics

Socioeconomic status (SES): An indicator that encompasses income, education, and occupation

Trans*: Represents multiple identities in transgender communities; read as "trans star" (Erickson-Schroth, 2014)

Transgender or trans: An individual whose gender identity does not coincide with that individual's assigned gender at birth

of disparity to be identified both between groups, based on gender, and within groups, based on the recognition of heterogeneity among women.

Feminist women's health explores the context of how women live their lives both collectively

and individually within a patriarchal society. The various social, environmental, and economic aspects become integral to understanding the context in which women are able to achieve health and well-being. Furthermore, feminism requires

BOX 1-2 Components of a Feminist Perspective in Women's Health

- Works *with* women as opposed to *for* women
- Uses heterogeneity as an assumption, not homogeneity
- Minimizes or exposes power imbalances
- Rejects androcentric models as normative
- Challenges the medicalization and pathologizing of normal physiologic processes
- Seeks social and political change to address women's health issues

consideration of health, as influenced by the intersection of sexism, racism, class, nation, and gender, within a framework that acknowledges the role of oppression as it affects women and their health as individuals and as a group. **Box 1-2** summarizes the components of a feminist perspective when considering women's health issues or models of care, which can help to reframe one's view of women's health in a feminist perspective.

GENDER

What does gender have to do with women's health? Although women's health is focused on the female sex (as determined by chromosomes, genitalia, and sexual organs), its priorities are shaped by what are considered socially important attributes of being a woman (such as reproductive capacity and feminine appearance). Gender is defined as a person's self-representation as man or woman and the way in which social institutions respond to that person based on the individual's gender presentation. Gender is often congruent with sex (a person with female genitalia identifies as being a woman "cis-woman"), but can also be incongruent (a person with female chromosomes may identify as being a man "trans-man"). Sex and gender are ultimately "irreducibly entangled" from both the research and the practice perspectives, however, and are better referred to by the combined term

"sex/gender"—a term that acknowledges the combined contribution of both the biologic and socially constructed aspects (Springer, Stelman, & Jordan-Young, 2012).

Sex/gender is a socially constructed attribute that is shaped by biology, environment, and experience and is expressed through appearance and behavior (Fausto-Sterling, 2012). Social construction is the process by which societal expectations of behavior become interpreted as innate characteristics that are biologically determined. Thus, behaviors associated with femininity become confused with innately determined behaviors rather than being recognized as socially constructed behaviors. As a result, health risks, treatments, and approaches to care are not necessarily biologically based aspects of women's health, but rather are determined by social expectations rooted in assumptions about sex/gender differences. In addition, diagnoses can be influenced by sex/gendered assumptions regarding behavior or what is socially constructed as feminine behavior. A significant body of literature has documented such influences on the manner of diagnosis and treatment in mental health (Neitzke, 2016) and obesity (Wray, 2008), as well as in the misdiagnosis of women's cardiovascular risks (Worrall-Carter, Ski, Scruth, Campbell, & Page, 2011).

Three primary aspects must be considered when examining the impact of sex/gender on women's health. The first is the priorities assigned to research, treatment, and outcomes in women's health as compared to men's health. The second is the context of sex/gender, including how it affects the process of providing healthcare services, which encompasses an acknowledgment of power differentials. The third aspect is the social construction of sex/gender, including how it affects women's health. Each aspect has implications for the manner in which women access, receive, and respond to health care. Collectively, these three aspects provide opportunities for us to better understand women's healthcare experiences and assist in the identification of underlying factors that influence the healthcare disparities experienced by women.

Sex/gender-based social role expectations can create undue burdens for women and may subsequently lead to increased health risks. For example, limited access to all contraceptive options may create reproductive health risks for some women.

Extensive cultural preoccupation with dieting and thinness may lead to unsafe dieting practices and precipitate eating disorders. Anorexia and bulimia are more prevalent among women despite the lack of a clear biologic explanation for this predominance.

Another example of a gender-based health risk is the disproportionate amount of violence that women experience (Modi, Palmer, & Armstrong, 2014). Gender-based violence includes any act that results in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering (United Nations General Assembly, 1993). The multiple health consequences of violence reveal the long-lasting layers of health consequences associated with a gender-based health risk. Refer to Chapters 13 and 14 for further discussion of this topic.

INTERSECTIONALITY

Sex/gender interacts with many other identities that affect healthcare delivery and outcomes. Intersectionality is the unique combination of multiple identities based on race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status (SES), gender, nation status, ability, and other factors and the experience of oppression based on these identities. Disparities in health outcomes are often better explained by considering the intersections of multiple forms of oppression based on identity (Etherington, 2015; Warner & Brown, 2011). For example, poor women of color often obtain fewer or receive different health services and have worse health outcomes compared to more affluent white women. Although low socioeconomic status is the single most powerful contributor to illness and premature death (Mehta, Wei, & Wenger, 2015), numerous examples of poorer health based on race/ethnicity can be cited even after controlling for SES (Williams, 2008).

"Race" as a category has been critiqued as creating a false perception of biological difference, despite gene-level similarities across defined races. Thus the term *race/ethnicity* is used to describe a socially constructed combination of physical attributes and cultural commonality (Williams, 2008). Although disparities in health outcomes across race/ethnicities are often assumed to be genetic or biologic, in reality they are significantly impacted by social forces of discrimination. Discrimination is unjust treatment that is based on appearance

or identity and is often described primarily as an interpersonal construct (e.g., a person expressing racist opinions). Even more damaging than interpersonal discrimination is systemic or structural discrimination—such injustice perpetuates large-scale, often invisible processes, policies, systems, or structures (e.g., underfunded school systems in poor districts, locations of subsidized housing) that are much harder to dismantle than individual opinions. Structural discrimination impacts the social, political, geographic, and economic influences on health, yet it is very difficult to quantify and often is misidentified (Krieger, 2014).

The structural components of where we live, learn, work, and play impact health across the life span. "Where we live" encompasses factors such as access to living space with good air quality, access to safe drinking water, access to green space, a safe environment for spending time outdoors, local grocery stores with high-quality fresh food, neighborhood and community support, and even the distance needed to get to a place of employment, which dictates the ability to walk to work versus having a lengthy car commute. "Where we learn" incorporates factors such as access to well-equipped, safe schools with challenging and engaging curricula, and skill acquisition to prepare for high-quality employment and future life skills. "Where we work" reflects access to living wages, safe working conditions, healthcare benefits, and a sense of meaningful work. "Where we play" includes types of recreation that promote physical activity, community connection, and long-term healthy behaviors such as exercise. Feminist considerations in relation to health disparities in these areas include factors such as gender bias in hiring, access to resources, availability of healthcare providers, and contraceptive options. Policies or practices that impose undue stress or limit access based on gender contribute to health disparities and are a form of structural bias.

The social embeddedness of women's health must attend to all of these factors—such as types of medical care, geographic location, migration, acculturation, racism, exposure to stress, and access to resources—when exploring disparities in women's health. Only by incorporating these factors into the discussion can we fully and accurately appreciate the health disparities women experience, including factors of sexism.

A MODEL OF CARE BASED ON A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

A model of care that is based on a feminist perspective contrasts sharply with a biomedical model, particularly in the areas of power and control and, in the definition of what is health compared to pathology. A feminist model supports egalitarian relationships and identifies the woman as the expert on her own body. The woman is at the center of this healthcare model. The following key points provide further insights into a feminist-based model of care:

1. The model of care must focus on *being with* women, not *doing for* women. This frames the model of care as a partnership with women as opposed to a model of care in which treatment decisions are directed by others and then dictated to women.
2. Heterogeneity, rather than homogeneity, is assumed. Using broad generalizations like “all women,” with their inherent gender-based assumptions, essentializes women rather than acknowledging the diversity within individual women and across populations of women's experience. An assumption of heterogeneity considers women on an individual basis, tailoring health care and services to each woman's unique needs, rather than treating all women as a group with the assumption of similarity across all considerations of health.
3. The feminist model of care seeks to minimize or expose power imbalances that are inherent in most current healthcare models, especially those based on a biomedical model. Power should be distributed equally within the healthcare interaction, and the interaction should be based on a belief in a woman's right to self-determination as well as her self-knowledge of her body. Therefore, the role of the clinician focuses on providing support, information, education and skillful knowledge, as opposed to asserting authority over the decision-making ability of the individual.
4. A feminist framework rejects androcentric models of health and disease as normative. The pervasiveness of male-based models being extrapolated and applied to women assumes that women are merely a biologic variant of men. This misapplication of androcentric models to women's health also serves to medicalize or pathologize normal physiologic processes of women, such as menstruation, childbirth, and menopause (Lorber & Moore, 2011). In contrast, the feminist model acknowledges as normal those physiologic changes that occur over a woman's life span, such as menarche and menopause.
5. A feminist perspective challenges the process of medicalization and pathologization by identifying and exploring women's unique health experiences and normalizing them. Medicalization is the process of labeling conditions as “diseases” or “disorders” as a basis for providing medical treatment. The medicalization of women's biologic functions, such as menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause, is frequently cited as an illustration of both the social construction of disease and the general expansion of medical control into everyday life (Conrad, 1992; Zola, 1972). In addition, characterizing behaviors that are not gender normative as potential pathology instead of appreciating the social context in which they occur serves as a form of pathologizing, such as defining sexual desire using androcentric models and then developing treatments for it without considering the potential for coercion or prior history of sexual trauma.
6. A feminist framework acknowledges the broader context in which women live their lives and the subsequent challenges to their health as a result of living within a patriarchal society. It argues for a process of social and political change that would eliminate gender bias and sexism. This includes consideration of how the personal health decisions and healthcare interactions a woman experiences are influenced by the larger structural and political context in which women live their lives, including access to services and resources.

SOCIAL MODELS VERSUS BIOMEDICAL MODELS OF HEALTH

As the discussion of the social construction of sex/gender and its relationship to health unfolds, it becomes evident that a broader model of health must

be employed to address the health consequences of gender bias and sexism and their implications for the overall health and well-being of women. The first step in broadening the model of health requires redefining health itself. *Health* is biomedically defined as the absence of disease—a narrow definition that does not address the context in which the absence of disease may occur. Considering only the absence of disease fails to address quality of life or the opportunity to reach the individual's potential. To gain a fuller appreciation of the scope of health, the dominance of the medical model as the rubric that defines health must be challenged in an effort to broaden the lens of what is health and to expand its definition. Without a broader definition, opportunities to understand the social realities and complexities within the healthcare system and the experiences of health for an individual and the collective community will remain limited. Without a broader perspective, which aspects of health are understood or studied will also be limited to individual characteristics or behaviors devoid of the context in which those behaviors and/or experiences are occurring. The biomedical model, as a conceptualization of health, generally does not address health beyond an individual perspective.

An alternative to the biomedical definition of health is offered by the World Health Organization (WHO). WHO defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” This broader definition is based on assumptions of what must be present to secure health for individuals and the community in which they live. It addresses the social context in which individuals live their lives, including the communities where they live, work, and play. According to WHO, the following prerequisites must be in place before health can occur:

- Freedom from the fear of war
- Equal opportunity for all
- Satisfaction of basic needs for food, water and sanitation, education, and decent housing
- Secure work
- Useful role in society
- Political will
- Public support

Germaine to this definition is the commitment to address social injustice, equity, economic

development and opportunity, and accessibility of healthcare services as a basic human right for all individuals in any society. WHO's definition of health requires that the community and environment in which women live their lives must also be considered in the same context as a new medical procedure. The constraints of an individualistic, disease-only-focused biomedical model of health become readily apparent when WHO's broader context and definition of health are considered. Through the use of this definition of health, the social aspects of health and the contributors to health are acknowledged, broadening the lens of factors that must be addressed to support individual as well as collective health.

A social model of health is more congruent with a feminist perspective compared to the biomedical model. The social model of health expands the contributors to health beyond just the individual body, extending them to the family, community, and society. This broader perspective enhances the understanding of health disparities that are rooted in the social and cultural forces that affect how women live their lives.

The interconnectedness of working and living conditions, environmental conditions, and access to community-based healthcare services becomes a focus when health and well-being are framed within a social context. Questions about health and well-being for an individual hone in on these factors as well as lifestyle decisions and health habits. The prevention of health problems becomes both a social burden and an individual responsibility. This wider emphasis, in turn, forces greater consideration of the various social factors that can either support or degrade an individual's health.

A social model of health also requires asking questions about the health effects of socially situated factors such as racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression. Consideration of women as central to the health model, rather than marginal to it, is a requirement of the feminist social model of health care. The broader social models do not ignore biologic or genetic components of health, nor is the significance of individual lifestyle health habits denied. However, the broader social model frames these issues as important to health, but no more so than women's experiences within everyday life, their access to healthcare services, their socioeconomic

status, their racial/ethnic identity, and their membership within a community (Schiebinger, 2003).

The health risks associated with the social construction of sex/gender and the inequities associated with gender-based assumptions are essential components of the feminist social model of health. As links are forged between human rights, social models of health, women's health disparities, and opportunities to address those disparities, a feminist perspective offers new strategies and ways of thinking or asking questions that can promote expanded approaches to women's health issues.

FEMINIST STRATEGIES FOR THE ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S HEALTH

Several aspects of analysis are important when considering women's health from a feminist perspective. The following strategies for analyzing women's health using a feminist framework are adapted from Franz and Stewart's (1994) strategies for conducting feminist research. Each of the strategies listed in **Table 1-1** can be used to form a question one can ask about women's health issues. Taken together, they constitute a feminist lens that

TABLE 1-1 Strategies for Analysis of Women's Health from a Feminist Perspective

Strategies	Questions
Look for what has been left out or what we do not know.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do we know, how do we know it, and who knows it? • Why don't we know? What do we want to know and why? • Who determines what is left out or who has access to what we want to know?
Analyze your own role or relationship to the issue or topic.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is it personal? What is the meaning of this issue for you as an individual? • Is it political? What is the meaning of this issue for you as a woman or as a member of an identified group? • Depending on your relationship to the issue, can you be objective in its analysis or are you engaged personally and subjective? • Are you invested in the outcome or topic or not? • Why do you care about the issue?
Identify women's agency in the midst of social constraints and the biomedical paradigm.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are women really victims, or are they acting with agency? • Are individuals making choices despite positions of powerlessness? • Are the choices allowing individuals to remain in control, or do they allow individuals to have some form of power in the context of the situation? • By identifying women's agency in a particular context, can we learn new ways of understanding or approach the health implications?
Consider the social construction of gender and how its assumptions may be used to define what health is, limit options, or presume which behaviors and/or choices can be made within the context of health.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore gendered assumptions about the value of anatomy such as breasts or facial appearance. • Would this health issue be defined or explored in the same manner if it primarily affected one sex or another? • Do socially prescribed gender norms influence how this health condition is understood or defined (e.g., mental health)?

(continues)

TABLE 1-1

Strategies for Analysis of Women's Health from a Feminist Perspective (*continued*)

Strategies	Questions
Explore the precise ways in which gender defines or affects power relationships and the implications of those power dynamics in terms of health.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physician/nurse • Clinician/patient • Parent/adolescent • Husband/wife • Parent/child • Father/daughter • Partnered or not partnered woman • Heterosexual/transgender
Identify other significant aspects of an individual's or group's social position, and explore the implications of that position as it relates to health issues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider examples such as an adolescent who is seeking reproductive healthcare services or a same-sex couple seeking fertility services. • Ask who has access to various forms of healthcare services and resources and who does not. • Consider the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status. • Who has a choice, what constitutes a choice, and who is able to exercise the right to make choices within the context of health?
Consider the risks and benefits of generalizations and speaking in terms of groups versus individuals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who are "all women"? Are "all women" the same? • Consider who benefits from generalizations or assumptions of homogeneity versus heterogeneity. • Is value placed on having a coherent understanding of a health issue compared to acknowledging diversity or complexity in how the issue is experienced? • Which reflects reality most accurately—a coherent story or an appreciation for diversity in the understanding of the health issue? • When "grouping" occurs, who is missing from the group or who might not be reflected in the group process?

Data from Franz, C., & Stewart, A. (Eds.). (1994). *Women creating lives: Identities, resilience, and resistance*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

allows for new considerations to arise as health issues are reframed. The following discussion highlights the manner in which some of the strategies can be applied.

Look for What Has Been Left Out or What We Do Not Know

This strategy is particularly applicable to investigations into the scientific basis of women's health.

Much of what we know about women's health needs, outside of reproductive health, is historically based on androcentric models of men's health considerations. For many years, almost all medical research that was not related to gynecology was conducted using male participants (human and animal), with the findings then being generalized to women. Large-scale investigations focusing on health promotion have been based primarily on study populations composed of only men. This practice persisted

prominently until the 1990s, but continues to be an issue (Pinnow, Herz, Loyo-Berrios, & Tarver, 2014; Schiebinger, 1999).

According to feminist scientist Londa Schiebinger's analysis, many common health promotion measures have been assumed to be true for both men and women, despite the fact that the evidence supporting the measures came from research in which the study populations included only men. Examples of such studies include the Physicians' Heart Study, in which the findings led to recommendations on the use of aspirin to prevent heart disease, and the Multiple Risk Factor Intervention Trial, which evaluated correlations among blood pressure, smoking, cholesterol, and heart disease. In fact, one of the first studies to investigate the use of estrogen for heart disease was conducted on a study population consisting of only men (Schiebinger, 2003)!

The lack of representation of women in research trials reflected a prioritization of men's health issues and was also rooted in gendered assumptions about the potential impact of research on women's reproductive capacity. Additional considerations focused on women's hormonal variations throughout the menstrual cycle as potentially challenging issues in studies of medications. These as well as other biases related to women's participation as research participants extended through 1988, when clinical trials of new drugs were routinely conducted predominately on men—even though women consume approximately 80% of the pharmaceuticals in the United States (Schiebinger, 2003). In employing one of the feminist strategies, the question of "What has been left out?" can be asked and answered: considerations of women's biologic variations in processing drugs! The significance of potential hormonal variations was not considered in exploring the impact of particular treatments on women or was not factored into study designs. For example, acetaminophen is eliminated in women at 60% of the rate at which it is eliminated in men. This finding obviously has sex/gender-related implications for prescribing dosage regimens. Alternatively, it should not be assumed that all medications will have variations or that variations in dosing regimens are the same for all women because women post menopause may be more similar to men at that point than they are to women who are menstruating.

Examples abound of the problematic manner in which the scientific base for women's health, beyond reproductive health, was initially developed. Even when positive study examples are cited, limitations were often present in the design of the studies. Many key women's health studies, such as the Framingham Heart Study and the Nurses' Health Study I and II, were either observational or epidemiologic investigations instead of randomized clinical trials, even though the latter design has long been considered the gold standard for investigative research (Schiebinger, 2003). Examples such as these suggest women were being left out of the scientific quest to understand many health issues that directly affected them.

Consumer health advocates, women's health activists, and members of the scientific community have been instrumental in coming together to address the many limitations concerning women's health care and scientific investigations of women's health issues. In 1993, the National Institutes of Health's (NIH) Revitalization Act was considered a milestone in this regard. The Revitalization Act required that women and minorities, and their subpopulations, be included in all NIH-supported biomedical and behavioral research, including phase 3 clinical trials, in numbers adequate to ensure valid analysis of differences in intervention effects; that the cost not be the basis for exclusion from clinical trials; and that outreach programs to recruit these individuals for clinical trials are adequately supported. As a result of this policy change, important progress has been documented in terms of significantly greater inclusion of women and minorities in research investigations. In this case, asking "what had been left out" or "what was missing" provided an opportunity to alter what had been left out of women's health research.

There is an ongoing need to employ this strategy to expose blind spots in what is being presented under the rubric of women's health. An example can be found in the current focus on heart disease in women. Heart disease is now the number one killer of women in the United States. Every step in the healthcare process related to cardiovascular disease—from identification of symptoms to diagnosis, treatment, and referral—demonstrates sex/gender-related differences. The need to explore this disease process in women becomes even

clearer when the question of “what has been left out of prior studies” is asked. The answer has helped frame new ways to address this health condition. Rather than accepting the inappropriate misapplication of findings to women when the research was conducted only in men, researchers are being charged with exploring new avenues of research and new ways of asking the research question.

Analyze Your Own Role or Relationship to the Issue or Topic

Traditionally, the focus of women's health has been relegated to those systems “between the breasts and the knees.” Pregnancy and childbirth were long the focus when it came to health care of women, because the value of women was based on their role in procreation and continuation of the citizenry. Historically, this focus on reproductive health created opportunities to promote maternal and child health reforms in the public health arena. In such cases, women typically took advantage of the focus on reproductive health to advance an agenda that addressed both maternal and child health. At the same time, the practice of addressing only reproductive health carried risks, as it enabled normal physiological reproductive processes to be medicalized within a biomedical context.

In response to the practice of medicalizing aspects of women's health and traditional models of women's health care, consumer activism by women has been directed at reframing women's health and calling for reforms at even the most basic levels. The strategy of “analyzing your own role or relationship to the issue” may help reveal the role women play in relation to the process of rejecting medicalization of many of the normal healthy physiologic processes they experience.

Over the past 50 years, aspects of women's health have been topics of public debate and of organized social action. Two notable waves have occurred in the women's health movement. One wave coincided with social action movements such as the civil rights and women's rights movements. A key feature of this wave was its grassroots orientation, with a key focus on access to information and expanded knowledge regarding health. One outgrowth of this movement was the creation of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective (BWHBC)

and its publication of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* for consumers in 1974. During this period, primary access to health-related information was available only through medical textbooks. In contrast to this historical practice in which women's health information and knowledge was framed as reserved for the domain of medical professionals, particularly physicians, the BWHBC promoted open access to health information for women as consumers. Members of the BWHBC were consumers who sought out information, prior to the advent of the Internet and readily available online access. Arguably, they were the forerunners to the wealth of accessible online health information sources now available today. The BWHBC's membership included women who were healthcare consumers; they developed a consumer-oriented women's health book through a process of conducting individual research related to women's health. The framework that the BWHBC used was one of reclaiming health for themselves, using the feminist perspective of reducing power differentials as access to information. Knowledge about health empowered women to seek out services, redefine what health was, and consider a wider range of treatments or choices they might not have otherwise been exposed to or offered.

With this wave of health activism came a strong rejection of the medicalization of physiologic processes, with women reclaiming control of their health by offering new definitions. A key aspect of this ongoing process has been the demystification of health conditions and processes so as to promote women's agency and autonomy and empower them to engage effectively with clinicians. This change supported women in taking control of their health away from medical professionals and assuming responsibility for their healthcare decision making, rather than simply adhering to the older biomedical model, which placed authority for decision making firmly under the control of the clinician. The BWHBC was an initial pioneer in this movement, as was the Women's Health Network.

While this phase of the women's health consumer movement in the 1970s and 1980s was pivotal in many ways in defining a women's health agenda, it also lacked an appreciation of intersectionality and diversity. Essentially, this wave of the women's health movement could be critiqued as assuming homogeneity of women's health issues rather

than heterogeneity. In response, the National Black Women's Health Project was launched in 1983 by Byllye Avery, with the goal of understanding black women's health issues in the broader social context. This project, which was eventually renamed the Black Women's Health Imperative, remains the only national organization dedicated to the improving the health and wellness of black women (Black Women's Health Imperative, 2015). Importantly, this organization defines its goal as addressing health and wellness through a framework that includes physical, emotional, and financial aspects, thereby incorporating social considerations as well as the biological elements of health. According to some scholars, the launch of this project was not intended as a rejection of the importance of other women's health organizations, but rather highlighted the need for independent organizations to frame questions or areas of emphasis that were unique to them while also opening opportunities for collaboration in collective areas of interest (Hart, 2012). From a practical standpoint, this meant that instead of everyone working within one organization on what may be presumed to be all issues of women's health, individual organizations, representing various groups, defined by those groups, could organize to address their specific health concerns. However, the various organizations could build alliances and coalitions with one another when issues of common interest were identified (Hart, 2012).

The ongoing efforts directed toward close examination of how the intersections of racism and sexism affect health disparities are essential to disentangling the social determinants of health and how they impact overall health outcomes for women of color in particular. Asking the question of how a health issue relates to you personally or politically is an important first step in considering that issue's significance, but it is also important to consider how individual factors can or cannot be extended in making assumptions for a larger population of women.

Consider the Risks and Benefits of Speaking in Terms of Groups Versus Individuals

Reclaiming control of their health care from clinicians and focusing on women's role and authority

over their own health was initially promoted by well-educated white, straight, cis-women from middle- and higher-income groups. This limited view within the women's health movement revealed the problematic underpinnings of presumed homogeneity across all women.

The strategy of "considering the risks and benefits of speaking in terms of groups versus individuals" acknowledges this problematic aspect of the women's health movement. Today, women's health activists demonstrate greater diversity and focus on a wider range of issues that affect the health of women and their families.

Consider the Social Construction of Gender and How Its Assumptions May Limit Options or Presume Choices That Are Made Within the Context of Health

Earlier discussions regarding the social construction of sex/gender highlighted the implications of this strategy. An additional aspect to consider is the manner in which women's health issues are described—that is, the terminology used. The language used for many women's health concerns has been described by anthropologist Emily Martin (2001) as reflecting an androcentric bias—for example, the image of menstruation in medical texts is that of "failed reproduction" (p. 92).

Another example is the practice of referring to a woman who has experienced sexual assault as a victim rather than as a survivor of the process, implying inherent weakness rather than strength. Descriptions of childbirth usually invoke the term *delivery*—that is, a woman being *delivered* rather than *giving birth*. The *delivery* terms focus on the actions of the clinician and place the woman in a passive position, rather than appreciating her as the central figure: the one giving birth.

Explore the Precise Ways in Which Gender Defines Power Relationships and the Implications of Those Power Dynamics on Health

Creating health care from a feminist perspective requires the acknowledgment of power differentials between individuals who are consuming health care and those who provide it (clinicians). It also

mandates attempts to minimize power differentials by developing a partnership model of care provision. In this model, rather than invoking a level of authority by virtue of being a clinician, the clinician acknowledges the life experiences and knowledge that the woman brings to the interaction. What makes a practice “feminist” is not who provides the health care, but rather how that care is provided, how the clinician thinks about his or her work, and which populations with whom the clinician works.

While hierarchical relationships and structures are typically elements of the traditional healthcare delivery system, feminist practice requires an active process of action to decrease asymmetrical relationships. Simple actions, such as not having a woman undress prior to meeting her clinician, allow the woman to greet the clinician as an equal rather than from a vulnerable position (naked and wrapped in an ill-fitting paper gown). Having a woman check her own weight, as opposed to having someone else do this for her, places some accountability for health on her shoulders. It sends the message that she can control aspects of her health. Although these simple changes can be readily made in the healthcare office setting, each demonstrates power sharing rather than placing the woman in a dependent position in relation to aspects of her health care that she should rightly control.

Additional ways for clinicians to address gender dynamics and power relationships include supporting a feminist model of care that focuses on the ways in which the healthcare interaction is addressed. Key features of this model deal with how one listens and trusts what the woman brings to the interaction. These steps include removing assumptions from consideration and not ascribing meaning without confirming it with the woman directly. Checking power imbalances and addressing them, even simply by means of introduction and the manner in which the clinician sits in relationship to the woman, can give the woman greater power in the relationship. Careful use of language and terminology, as previously noted, must occur in all discussions and information that is provided. Seeking consent before touching and assuring the woman has control over what is or is not done during an examination are required. For additional considerations of promoting a feminist

approach to healthcare interactions, see the blog series, *Feminist Midwife* (Tillman, 2016).

Each of the strategies discussed in this chapter provides an opportunity to consider the details as well as the global aspects of women's health care and women's health issues. These strategies can be applied both individually and collectively. They are not meant to be an exhaustive checklist to determine whether something is being considered from a feminist perspective, but rather are meant to serve as guidelines and considerations that allow for the identification of blind spots in how we are able to think about women's health issues when we are potentially constrained by the limitations of the biomedical model. Through the use of these strategies, clinicians, policy makers, and women themselves are able to reframe expectations, approaches, and the focus of women's health research, healthcare delivery, and receipt of healthcare services.

WHY A TEXT ON GYNECOLOGY?

Taking the same feminist strategies we use for analyzing women's health and applying them to this text on gynecologic aspects of women's health creates opportunities as well. Why, when a feminist perspective is being presented, along with the limitations of considering women's health as being equivalent to reproductive health, would a text purportedly using a feminist framework focus primarily on the gynecologic aspects of women's health? The reason is that gynecologic health is still important. Focusing on gynecology for clinicians is important because reframing and expanding considerations of gynecologic health from a feminist perspective may more accurately reflect the experience for women in their everyday lives. By offering a feminist perspective throughout the chapters in this text, we seek to dispel myths that pathologize normal gynecologic functioning, and we seek to support normality as opposed to medicalizing it. We also offer a framework for providing gynecologic health care that considers the social, emotional, and intimate and physical nature of this aspect of women's health care. Rather than ignoring gynecologic health and allowing it to remain within the biomedical domain, this text seeks to

reframe aspects of gynecologic health issues within a feminist framework. This perspective expands the opportunities for understanding gynecologic health within a wellness-oriented, women-centered

framework that considers the social elements as well as biologic and encourages providers to look beyond the medical model and to *support* normalcy instead of *manage* it.

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