

10 facts on gender and tobacco



This fact file focuses on the harm that tobacco marketing and smoke do to women.

About 200 million of the world's one billion smokers are women. The tobacco industry aggressively targets women in order to increase its consumer base and to replace those consumers who quit or who die prematurely from cancer, heart attack, stroke, emphysema or other tobacco-related disease.

Girls and boys start using tobacco for different reasons, and tobacco use harms women and men differently. Approximately 1.5 million women die every year from tobacco use. Understanding and controlling the tobacco epidemic among women is an important part of any tobacco control strategy.



About 200 million of the world's one billion smokers are women
Far fewer women than men use tobacco. Globally, about 40% of men smoke as compared with nearly 9% of women. However, the epidemic of tobacco use among women is increasing in some countries. More research is needed to understand trends in tobacco use among women.

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Nick K. Schneider

As many girls as boys now smoke in some countries

A WHO survey of smoking trends in youths showed that in half of the 151 countries surveyed, similar numbers of girls and boys smoked. Evidence suggests that most of these girls and boys will continue to smoke into adulthood. Bans on tobacco advertising, as called for in the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, could help to stop the increase in tobacco use among girls.



Saurabh Mittal/Courtesy of Photoshare



Germain P. Tabati/PICTA, Courtesy of Photoshare

Boys and girls start using tobacco for different reasons

Many more girls than boys smoke in the false belief that it is a good way to control weight. Low self-esteem is associated with smoking among girls, and available evidence from some developed countries shows that girls have lower self-esteem than boys. Tobacco control strategies must recognize that boys' and girls' decisions to start using tobacco are influenced by different cultural, psychosocial and socioeconomic factors.

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Rocco Rorandelli/TerraProject

Every year, 1.5 million women die from tobacco use

Of the more than 5 million people who die every year from tobacco use, approximately 1.5 million are women. Most (75%) of these women live in low- and middle-income countries. Unless urgent action is taken, tobacco use could kill up to 8 million people every year by 2030, of which 2.5 million would be women.

Women are one of the biggest targets of the tobacco industry

The tobacco industry gears richly-funded marketing campaigns towards women through advertisements that draw on gender stereotypes and falsely link tobacco use to concepts of beauty, prestige and freedom. The industry actively targets women because comparatively few women currently use tobacco, and women are increasingly able to afford tobacco.



Garrett L. Mehl



WHO/M. Gehner

More women than men smoke "light" cigarettes

Marketing strategies lure consumers with misleading categories, such as "light" or "low tar". More women than men smoke "light" cigarettes (63% versus 46%), often in the mistaken belief that "light" means "safer". In fact, "light" smokers often engage in compensatory smoking, inhaling more deeply and more frequently to absorb the desired amount of nicotine.

Tobacco use harms women differently from men

Women who smoke are more likely than those who do not to experience infertility and delays in conceiving. Smoking during pregnancy increases risks of premature delivery, stillbirth and newborn death, and may cause a reduction in breast milk. Smoking increases women's risk for cancer of the cervix.



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Women constitute 64% of deaths from second-hand smoke

Worldwide, second-hand smoke causes 430 000 adult deaths per year. Sixty-four per cent of these deaths occur in women. In some countries, second-hand smoke is a greater threat to women than the possibility that women might start using tobacco. More than 90% of the world's population is still not covered by comprehensive national smoke-free laws.



Garrett L. Mehl

People who smoke should avoid exposing the people with whom they live and work to second-hand smoke

Women and children often lack power to negotiate smoke-free spaces, including in their homes, in their workplaces and in other public spaces. Everyone, regardless of age or sex, should be protected from second-hand smoke.



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Controlling tobacco use among women is an important part of any tobacco control strategy

Tobacco prevention and cessation programmes should be integrated into maternal, child and reproductive health services. Warnings about the harmful effects of tobacco must take into account that illiteracy is higher among women than men, and should use clear pictures to ensure that those who cannot read are also able to understand the health risks of tobacco use.