

Weissman M M & Klerman G L. Sex differences and the epidemiology of depression. *Arch. Gen. Psychiat.* 34:98-111, 1977.
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This article reviews the evidence for differing rates of depression between the sexes in the US and elsewhere during the last 40 years, and then critically analyzes the various explanations offered. These explanations include the possibility that the trends are spurious because of artifacts produced by methods of reporting symptoms, or that they are real because of biological susceptibility (possibly genetic or female endocrine), psychosocial factors such as social discrimination, or female-learned helplessness. [The *Science Citation Index*® (SCI)® and the *Social Sciences Citation Index*® (SSCI)® indicate that this paper has been cited in over 230 publications since 1977.]

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"Although this paper was published in 1977, its writing was begun in 1974. In that year, I finished a PhD in epidemiology and published a book, *The Depressed Woman*¹ with Eugene Paykel. These events had conflicting consequences. The provocative title of the book, a rather dry scientific study with statistics and tables, suddenly stimulated invitations to speak on oppression and depression in women. As a new PhD, I was uncomfortable giving off-hand lectures on subjects that I really knew little about, and as a mother of four small children I didn't want to be traveling around the country. I asked Gerald Klerman the question frequently asked of me, 'Why are women more depressed than men?' and he answered, 'Are they?'

"We agreed we didn't know and decided to assess the evidence. Six months of collecting international epidemiologic

data answered the first question. 'Yes, women are depressed more often than men.'

"That led to the next question, 'Why?' Over the next six months, we reviewed the possible explanations. It was an intellectual challenge to prepare as exhaustive a list as possible of all the reasons we could think of. Answering the last question, 'What is the available evidence for these various possibilities?' took another year. The organization of the paper follows our own sequence of questions. We concluded that depression is more common in women than men, that there were a number of possible explanations, and that the evidence for any one of them wasn't compelling but suggested many opportunities for investigation.

"This paper has been highly cited for several reasons. The article appeared at a time when there was scientific and public concern about the status of women. Moreover, even without this concern, a sex difference in rates of any disorder is an important epidemiologic clue which suggests a variety of possible etiologies. Whereas this subject is often the source of ideological dispute and polemic, we tried to avoid premature closure and ideology.

"The paper we originally submitted to the *Archives of General Psychiatry* was much more lengthy than the one published. We are amused that, although we didn't find strong evidence for any one explanation, the paper is often cited as evidence to support a psychosocial explanation for women's depression.

"We are pleased that the article stimulated others to systematically investigate this controversial issue. Over the last few years we have been examining some of the genetic hypotheses which may account for the differences, and we have been collecting more systematic epidemiologic data. We are planning to update the paper."

1. Weissman M M & Paykel E S. *The depressed woman: a study of social relationships*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. 1974. 289 p. (Cited 190 times.)