

I'm Not a Man!

Once you realize that there are approximately 8.9 million women in our country who must all deal with female-specific or female-sensitive health issues, it's incomprehensible that there is so little knowledge about this issue. That's because medical research is still mainly based on men.

Without the right information, we cannot properly treat conditions specific to women. This issue can no longer be ignored because women's problems are everyone's problems.

**PIA DIJKSTRA, POLITICIAN AND FORMER
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Mirjam Kaijer

**I'M
NOT A
MAN!**

**Why are there so many women
with unexplained health complaints?**

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What people say to you

You're always so busy!

Could it be an anxiety disorder?

BUT YOU LOOK PERFECTLY FINE.

There's nothing wrong with you.

You'll just have to learn to live with it.

You can still work, right?

All women suffer from that.

It must be menopause.

Physical therapy is the only remaining option.

There's always something wrong with you.

You worry too much.

How about some antidepressants to take the edge off?

You have a low pain threshold.

Are you actually happy?

You're a strange case.

Do you have kids?

Your blood test results and X-rays are fine, so...

Hormonal imbalance.

Should I refer you to a psychologist?

What you say to yourself

Am I going crazy?

I'm probably just too busy.

This can't be normal, right?

This is the new normal.

I don't eat healthy enough.

I'm being overly dramatic!

I need to work out more.

HURRY UP AND ORDER SOME MORE VITAMINS.

Stop whining: you have a great life!

My body is falling apart!

Mother Nature has it in for me!

Nothing to look forward to; it's all downhill from here.

Why is it always me who seems to have something wrong?

Am I a hypochondriac?

Why do I seem to have the memory of a goldfish?

I feel ancient.

I'm such a whiner.

Pain is just part of life.

There's something really wrong with me, but what?

I won't live to see old age.

For...

all the amazing people who have supported me over the past few years.

Especially for my husband Erwin, who was confronted with the transience of life during the writing of this book. I thank him for his unconditional love and support.

For Marieke, whose empathy and acknowledgement of my symptoms made a huge difference to me.

For Cockey, who always managed to lift my spirits no matter what. She understands how this works better than anyone.

And of course, for Bella, the woman who supported me so unconditionally and ultimately helped me get the right diagnosis. Without her, this book would never have been written.

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PREFACE

When I wrote the first edition of this book in 2021, I could not have imagined what it would set in motion.

At first, I wanted to make one major issue visible: why are so many women living with unexplained health complaints? Complaints that are too often dismissed as psychological, while something else is frequently at play. I wanted to offer an honest look at a medical world in which the male body is still the norm, even though women become ill differently. I told that story through my own experience.

Soon after the book was published, it became clear that the problem was far greater than I had imagined. A wave of responses followed. I asked myself: what can I do, within my own small sphere, for all those women who are not heard and not seen? During my own search, a complete stranger helped me find a diagnosis. I wanted to give something back.

My voice could have been damaged as a complication during surgery. That is precisely why I decided to use it, both literally and figuratively, for women who are still searching. For women who do not receive the right treatment, who face misdiagnoses, sometimes with fatal consequences.

I started a petition: More research into (unexplained) health complaints in women. The response was overwhelming. Through a call on a Dutch television programme, I asked: "Dear women of the Netherlands, what is your story? And that of your mothers and grandmothers? Share it through our reporting point."

The responses were immense. Stories poured in. Painful stories that had sometimes never been shared before.

Within a short time, we reached 40,000 signatures. A few months later, together with thirty other women, I stood before the then Minister of Health, Ernst Kuipers, to present the petition.

But how do you make a real statement?

We presented the petition wearing blue surgical gowns, holding signs that displayed our misdiagnoses. We called for political attention to a problem that had been ignored for too long. To reinforce the message, I sang the song *Erkenning* (Recognition) for the minister.

This led to wide media attention.

Shortly afterwards, we presented the petition to the Dutch House of Representatives, after which parliamentary questions were raised.

In 2022, four months after my book was published, the Voices for Women Foundation was established. Together with volunteers, we organised lectures and symposia, such as *Eva = geen Adam*, free and accessible to all women. We wanted to inform people about how differently the female body can become ill and to show how serious the consequences can be when these differences are not recognised.

What began as a personal story, grew into a broader social movement. Singing our message became our trademark. Soon a choir was formed and we stood on Dam Square in the heart of Amsterdam. We also sang for the Queen of the Netherlands.

We work together with healthcare professionals, for whom we also advocate. They too are part of a system that falls short, while they are still expected to provide the right care. During their training, knowledge about women's health is often still insufficient.

What we are most proud of, is that sharing lived experiences has truly made a difference. Women have found diagnoses, gained insight into their health, and begun to look at their bodies differently. Instead of thinking 'I am imagining this or I am exaggerating', they have started to take themselves seriously. Healthcare professionals, too, increasingly dare to say: 'We still do not know enough.'

Four years later, we have achieved a great deal and have made a measurable impact on women's health in the Netherlands by sharing these stories. We have received several awards and in 2025 I was knighted.

Voices for Women has grown into a connecting, independent foundation that collaborates with politicians, healthcare professionals and health insurers. We now also contribute substantively to the National Strategy for Women's Health in the Netherlands.

With our data, we inform and advise policymakers, politicians, companies, healthcare professionals and women themselves. Through stories, we monitor how healthcare is experienced, where it fails and where it can improve.

As advocates for better healthcare for women, we also see that not every new initiative automatically leads to real improvement. That is why it is essential to remain critical and to recognise that centuries old assumptions still influence healthcare today, even in 2026.

I hope this story inspires and that Voices for Women will also find its way to other countries. So please contact us.

Because our job is not done yet.

We have only just begun.
This story is far from over.

Warm regards,
Mirjam Kaijer

www.voicesforwomen.nl



*“You’re not
sick until
they find
something.”*

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PART 1 – THE QUEST FOR A DIAGNOSIS

Who's going to solve the big puzzle?

"I don't feel well. I have so many strange symptoms and this pain in my body." "You shouldn't be in pain, ma'am. The X-ray looks fine and your blood test results don't show any abnormalities." "But I really don't feel well!"

After every such comment, you become a little more alienated from yourself. You start to wonder if you're losing your mind because surely the doctors know best. But do they really always know? If not, then perhaps the wisest and most humane answer a health professional could give might just be: "I'm sorry. I don't know..." Because sometimes they genuinely can't know. Quite apart from the fact that a ten-minute appointment is often nowhere near enough time, I've discovered over the past year that there is an even bigger reason why women's symptoms are so often hard to pin down. And it's far more wide-ranging than I ever could have imagined.

WHO AM I?

Before forging full steam ahead, let me start by introducing myself. My name is Mirjam Kaijer and I was born in 1967. I'm married to Erwin and am the mother of two college-age daughters who still live at home. We share our house in the countryside with a dog and two cats. It's a warm, welcoming home where friends often visit and enjoy great conversation accompanied by home-cooked meals and a good glass of wine.

I was born in a small West Frisian village in North Holland and am the youngest of three children. We were raised by an open-minded mother who was a nurse, but who sadly passed away in 2001. But my father has reached the ripe old age of 92 and still lives independently. He's a great role model for how it's still possible to maintain some control over your life at that age.

Growing up in our family, important values included showing respect to everyone and speaking up in the face of injustice, no matter what resistance you encounter. But maybe the most important thing I was taught was to always see the humor in things, no matter how chaotic life gets. And over the past ten years, that's turned out to be my best weapon.

For the past several years, I've been working as a freelance journalist and newspaper columnist, in addition to running awareness training in healthcare settings. I originally trained as a registered nurse, then studied Public Health, and have since explored various paths within the healthcare system. For anyone who reads the I'm Not a Man! title and thinks this is some kind of feminist statement: it isn't.

Ironically enough, it's actually a plea for unequal treatment, as will become clear in the book. Of course, there are also a lot of men with unexplained health problems, but after reading this, you'll understand why I'm speaking specifically to women. I don't include the names of any healthcare professionals, hospitals, or other institutions in the examples I share, because it's not about these individuals or organizations but about exposing a flawed system.