

# Gender and Becoming Fragrance Free



## Design Statement

This image visualizes survey data we collected to understand gender-based differences in opinions. Survey data was collected to orient and supplement other ethnographic methods. Instead of presenting the survey data in conventional tabular form, we literally drew the data into an illustration of the "matters of concern" that the survey addressed—hoping to add meaning and interest, especially for viewers with (figurative) allergies to quantification.

## Project Statement

People with illnesses caused by toxic exposure are often referred to as canaries: like canaries in coal mines, they warn others of the mounting harm of everyday exposure to the toxic products of capitalism, from personal care products to industrial effluent. The Chemical Entanglements initiative at the UCLA Center for the Study of Women (CSW) is exploring how differently situated people understand toxic exposure. We are also exploring how visual representations of canary narratives can serve as activist tools and challenge gendered conceptions of chronic illness as imagined or hysterical.

## Caption

In 2018, CSW researchers surveyed 700+ UCLA undergraduates to understand how fragranced products impact educational outcomes and how gender can influence attitudes and behavior regarding fragrance use. We aimed to assess how EDC exposure presented a potential barrier to students with Multiple Chemical Sensitivities (MCS) or aversions to fragrances. The comments demonstrate that more females reported being personally impacted by fragranced products. Males were more accepting of fragranced product use in the context of adhering to social norms. One male commenter wrote: "still would rather have fragranced smells than a smelly classmate who is made fun of or ridiculed for smelling bad." Responses revealed that personal attachment to fragrance and fear of bodily odors overrode willingness to alter fragrance product use despite knowledge of toxic exposure. This suggests a gap between knowledge, attitudes, and behavior. While some respondents understand the risk of using such products, some possess a low self-perceived risk, which is not adequate enough to cause a behavior change. Dwelling on these comments has raised the prospect that our previous presumption that the use of toxic fragrances was rooted in a lack of awareness of toxic exposure was likely incorrect. Individuals are attached to masking bodily scents with fragrances despite health risks, and worry about social stigma from "smelling bad."

UCLA Center for the Study of Women. 2019. "Data on Gender Differences in Attitudes toward Becoming Fragrance-Free."

In "Canary Narratives: Visualizing Gender, Chronic Illness, and Exposure." In *Visualizing Toxic Subjects*, curated by James Adams and Kim Fortun. The Center for Ethnography. May.

<https://tinyurl.com/y3almnga>

