

Increasing the Visibility of Women – An initiative by the Women in Vision and Eye Research Ireland

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Gender disparity between men and women has been brought to light recently, highlighting inequalities within the fields of medicine and academia. Achieving equality within these professions is beneficial not only to women but for medicine, research and patients as a whole. Diversity in fields of practice ensures a variety of thought, innovation, with stronger teams and ensures better outcomes for all. It has been noted that women in academic and clinical medicine face significant professional challenges. While women are increasingly entering the field a number of barriers have been identified that result in gender disparity. Women are less likely to be recognised as experts and leaders, with fewer women speaking at national medical conferences, receiving prestigious awards, being promoted or holding leadership roles. A study undertaken to determine whether gender differences in individual National Institutes of Health (NIH) awards and in funding totals exist in ophthalmology found that that men were awarded higher awards and funding when compared to their female colleagues. Furthermore, it has

been noted that reviewers hold women applicants to higher evaluation standards. Among the most frequently noted obstacles to women's career success are challenges managing the demands of work and family. Women with children publish less than men with children, suggesting that family demands impact women differently. This was highlighted during the COVID 19 pandemic during which first authorship among women declined by 23%.

Women are under-represented as authors of research papers in many scientific areas, particularly in senior authorship positions. Women also have smaller professional networks, smaller audiences, and a narrower reach on virtual platforms which are increasingly essential for dissemination, thus negatively impacting on citation counts. Despite recognition that current global and national healthcare challenges have shown the requirement for novel approaches that are dependent of on a diverse range of leaders, women professional continue to be under-represented.

Overall, these differences may have consequences for the professional success of women in their fields of work. The Women in Vision and Eye Research Ireland (WVER) network aims to support the Royal College of Surgeons (RCSI) and the Royal Victoria Eye and Ear Hospital (RVEEH) strategies in relation to reputation enhancement, forming collaborations in addition to strategies that focus on reducing gender disparity.

To achieve this the WVER network aligns with best practice from industry and the university sector and incorporates key strategies aimed at addressing the barriers faced by women in academic and clinical medicine. Specifically to redress the gender disparity experienced by women in academic and clinical medicine the WVER annual conference provides a platform that recognising and supporting the excellence of women in eye care and research. The annual conference promotes women speakers, amplifying women's profiles, thus enhancing reputation, providing recognition of expertise and excellence. The committee

and the annual conference will also provide access to national and international networks.

In a recent study *Ayyala et al.* found that "women, for the most, part lacked the career accelerator provided by sponsors leveraging power to advance their protégés/ées' careers". This can be detrimental to career progression, as sponsorship in addition to mentorship, is now recognised as a critical factor for successful career advancement. It has been reported that although women require the supports afforded by sponsorship opportunities, they are less likely to seek them out.

A further study investigated men's invisible advantage in STEM by comparing mentoring and sponsorship in four higher education institutions in Bulgaria, Denmark, Ireland and Turkey. While the mentorship received by women focussed on reassurance, men's mentorship was more likely to be career focussed. Furthermore, men were more likely to receive sponsorship from their PhD supervisors in contrast to women and have working relationships with senior academics, resulting in

mentorship possibilities.

It was suggested that domestic responsibilities may account for the limited access women had to these networks, particularly in Ireland and Turkey. Female sponsors were noted to be lacking or entirely absent, potentially resulting from a lack of female representation at more senior levels. The WVER committee therefore aims to create a supporting and mentoring network that encourages career

development by championing the talents of its members. This will enhance and facilitate women's leadership and career aspirations within fields' of academia, research and clinical medicine.

While women are gaining numeric representation in academia and at the entry level stages of medical education, the absence of women in high ranking positions within this field limits exposure to role models. This can have negative

effects on women's professional aspirations, self-perceptions, and stereotypes leading to a paucity of women reaching positions of leadership. The WVER committee aims to tackle this by providing additional events that will foster the visibility of professional women. Furthermore, at our annual conference we will be presenting The Dr Kathleen Lynn Award. Aside from being a highly skilled

and dedicated physician, Dr Lynn was an ardent feminist, suffragette and a patriot. In her career as a doctor she led the way for women working in medicine in Ireland despite the barriers and restriction placed upon women in the professional at the time. Dr Lynn is an inspiration, as she did much to improve the lives of her patients through medicine and education. We look forward to presenting this medal in her name to an early stage career investigator who is making outstanding contributions to eye health and research at our inaugural conference. This conference will also feature both international and national female expert speakers who will present updates on innovation and recent scientific advancements pertaining to eye care, as well as rapid fire presentation sessions for early career clinicians and investigators.

Our institutions need to continue to grow and innovate. The way to ensure this prosperity is to eliminate gender disparity. Diversity, equity, and inclusion will strengthen and benefit us and our respective fields.



Fewer promotion opportunities



Not cited as often



Less recognition of expertise



Receive less funding



Smaller networks and presence on social media



Less grants accepted – held to a higher standard