



## IMPROVING GENDER EQUITY IN ACADEMIC WORKSPACES: WHAT MALE SCIENTISTS CAN DO TO HELP

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A very gradual improvement in the status and representation of women in scientific workspaces in India is discernible during recent years. This has come about because of the personal courage and tenacity of a few women academics, and perhaps an equally gradual evolution of our culture, but not so much through any specific change in institutional practices. To pursue their passion, women have accepted considerable injustice – for example taking up jobs that provide inadequate child support, or being passed over for leadership positions, or simply accepting a lower-ranking position compared to their academic achievements.

There are men in academia who actively support better representation for women, but their proportion is still quite small. A similarly small proportion of men (though often holding positions of authority) display skepticism and resistance towards this goal. It seems likely that a large majority of male scientists fall in between these two ends, and their active involvement can help the situation to evolve much more rapidly.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to this is a sheer lack of awareness on the part of men of the injustice inherent in the system. Yet, institutionalised prejudices against women in science are real and have existed for centuries – one just has to look at the many women scientists in the 20th century who deserved a share of a Nobel prize but were denied it. Studies of the nature and impact of historic gender discrimination are widely available. It is desirable for male academics to study and share this information in order to heighten awareness among themselves and their colleagues.

Though an academic workplace can also be challenging for men, women scientists face singularly complex and subtle forms of discrimination that need to be observed with care and sensitivity. Men lead their daily lives – for the most part – travelling in public spaces unmolested, and get down to work without being followed by watchful eyes or receiving unwanted compliments on their personal appearance. Women face

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hassles of this sort on a daily basis, but they try to “adapt” and work around these issues keeping bigger goals in mind. Yet the strain of being always on one’s guard, in situations where men tend to be relaxed and focused on their science, takes a toll.

More fundamental problems arise for women academics when they are judged according to standards that have been unfairly created or modified for them. It has been noted that certain traits in men are interpreted as showing a “decisive”, “strong” or “assertive” nature – all positives, while women academics with the same traits tend to be labelled negatively as “aggressive” or “difficult”. Sometimes a single problematic woman colleague in the field is effectively used to label all women, while no one would think of an equally problematic male colleague as representing all men. The degree to which such inconsistent judgements jeopardise the career path of a woman academic can hardly be overstated. But in order to address double standards they need to be identified, and for a woman to do this raises an additional burden on her: of getting into frequent debates with colleagues and being seen, inevitably, as a “complainer”. The helpful intervention of male scientists in such situations can considerably lighten this burden.

A male scientist who is committed to improving gender equity needs to be both principled and pragmatic. The principle is to treat women as equal human beings with equal cognitive abilities, deserving of equal opportunities, and to make sure this is widely understood and accepted. The pragmatic approach is to make those small efforts that can have a significant impact to redress past injustice in the future. Incentivising women students, particularly those who face negative social pressures, highlighting the historical achievements of women scientists, making workplaces more women-friendly, are all small steps that can have a cascading impact. But finally it is increased representation of women on faculties and decision-making bodies that has the greatest potential to redress the balance and create a truly gender-neutral environment. To this end, institutions and their leaders need to lay down guidelines on how to enhance the gender representation in small but steady increments.