BioSpectrum
the business of Bio & Health Sciences
ASIA EDITION

Addressing gender inequality is for life, not just International Women's Day

March 8, 2024 | Opinion | By Prof Jennifer Visser-Rogers, Vice President for Statistical Research and Consultancy at Phastar

Many of the issues facing women who want to pursue a career in science are systemic and societal



With International Women's Day taking place annually in March, the conversion has, inevitably, returned to gender inequality in the workplace. And while female representation may be stronger in pharma than other STEM industries, there are glaring disparities in terms of who gets the top jobs and who gets the most pay.

With so much work still left to do, what can we do to ensure that addressing gender gaps is on the agenda all year round – and not just on March 8?

The landscape

At first glance, the stats on representation in the pharma industry can appear positive. The McKinsey Women in the Workplace 2022 report showed more than half (56%) of new entrants to the global pharmaceuticals and medical products industry were women1.

However, less than a third (28%) of pharma C-suite members are women1 and men still account for 92% of the industry's CEO roles2. Across the sector, men's median hourly pay is 10% higher than that of women3.

Male analysts and data scientists outnumber their female colleagues 4 to 14. What's worse, the gap is getting wider. In 2019, 31% of the industry was female but then the pandemic hit, and women were disproportionately impacted by job losses and changed personal circumstances. This saw the proportion of women in the data and analytics space drop to 20%. While there has been some recovery, we are still in a worse position than we were five years ago5.

The challenges

Outdated ideas on how women should behave create a glass ceiling, sticky floor and motherhood penalty for women in STEM. Earlier in my career I cared too much about what people thought of me and it has taken me a long time to get to a place where I decide what my self-worth is. But behavioral stereotypes are still holding women back.

The idea that women are not well-suited to the workplace causes us to paint traditionally female traits such as empathy and emotional awareness in a negative light. Traits more often associated with male gender roles, such as dominance, assertiveness, and confidence are considered essential for leadership positions and women are often forced to conform to prevailing leadership styles[6].

More than half of women (54%) worry about how they come across in meetings. Forty-seven percent of women face everyday sexism and microaggressions, 21% do not believe harassment is dealt with appropriately and 29% often feel undermined or dismissed in meetings[7]. Women are also less likely to self-nominate for awards[8] which means they may not receive the same level of recognition, or opportunities, as their male colleagues.

Childcare responsibilities can also be a major barrier to being offered, and accepting, promotions or even remaining in work at all. One in 10 mothers quit their jobs due to childcare pressures and 4 in 10 have turned down a promotion for the same reason[9]. A third of women working in pharma (34%) believe pursuing career progression means they are not a good parent or carer[7].

The solutions

Many of the issues facing women who want to pursue a career in science are systemic and societal, but companies and leaders can still make a difference. We need to understand the problem and train staff to recognize unconscious biases and micro aggressions. Senior leaders should take the time to empower women in their teams rather than penalizing them for having other commitments.

Small practical changes can make a big difference. For example, accommodating childcare responsibilities by not scheduling meetings at school drop-off and pick-up times and offering flexible working patterns.

Signposting to networking and support groups, for example the Women in Pharma mentorship program or Women of Color in Pharma, can provide much-needed support. Even if it is not a formal group, helping women in science to find their own tribe can be hugely beneficial.

At an individual level, women in leadership need to support each other. We need open-door policies, sharing opportunities and to ensure credit is given where it is due. We need to encourage women to celebrate their own achievements and those of the women around them.

I heard a wonderful quote recently that the role of women in leadership is not to take a seat at the table, it is to pull up more chairs. I hope we will be pulling up many more chairs soon.

Prof Jennifer Visser-Rogers, Vice President for Statistical Research and Consultancy at Phastar