

Achieving Gender and Social Equality: More Than Gender Parity Is Needed

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Abstract

In this Perspective, the authors review Association of American Medical Colleges data on gender parity and intersectionality, consider the literature on gender parity in academic medicine and the underlying gender norms that explain these statistics, and offer recommendations for moving past indicators of parity to achieve gender and social equality.

Improvements in gender parity among medical school graduates have not translated to gender parity among practicing physicians or medical school faculty, particularly for racial/ethnic

minorities. Further, gender parity does not correspond to gender equality, such that gender-based disparities in salaries and advancement persist. In addition, social norms related to traditional gender role expectations reinforce existing biases and lead to sexual harassment and discrimination against women in the workplace.

Building on their analysis of existing data and the literature, the authors offer concrete recommendations to achieve gender equality in academic medicine that not only improve parity but also support policies and

practices to address the norms that further bias and discrimination. These recommendations include the collection, monitoring, and open reporting of data on salaries as well as on sex and race/ethnicity; stronger policies related to family leave and sexual discrimination and harassment; and accountability structures to ensure that policies are enforced. While these efforts alone cannot eliminate gender inequalities, academic medicine should be at the forefront of creating a climate in medicine that is supportive of gender equality as part of their larger goal of promoting social equality.

Many have called for gender parity (i.e., numeric equality in representation by sex [assumed as biology]) in medical school faculty to promote justice and improve quality of care.^{1,2} With the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) now tracking sex-disaggregated data on students, faculty, and leaders in academic medicine, we can see improvements in gender parity among medical school matriculants. However, improvements in numbers alone do not equate to gender and social equality (i.e., a situation of justice where one's rights, responsibilities, and opportunities are not affected by gender [socially constructed beliefs, expectations, and status based on sex] or other social considerations).

In this Perspective, we review AAMC data on gender parity and intersectionality

(i.e., considering multiple forms of social marginalization simultaneously, such as sex and race/ethnicity), and we consider the literature on gender parity in academic medicine and the underlying gender norms (i.e., the underlying social rules governing behavior that are based on gender) that explain these statistics. On the basis of this work, we offer concrete recommendations for improving gender parity and gender and social equality in academic medicine.

Gender Parity Does Not Equal Social Equality

Currently, only 35% of active physicians in the United States are women.³ However, the sex distribution of medical students—a balance that has been consistent for the past 5 years—indicates that gender parity could be achieved in the physician workforce in the near future.^{4–6} Despite gender parity in recent medical school graduates, the underrepresentation of racial/ethnic minorities persists regardless of sex.^{4–8} Among medical school faculty, there is gender parity and even an overrepresentation of women at the instructor level. However, the share of female faculty declines at each subsequent rank such that the share of female

professors is 56% lower than the share of female assistant professors.^{7,9} This decline in female representation is even more pronounced among racial/ethnic minorities.^{7,9}

Representation and advancement do show some variation by specialty. Pediatrics and obstetrics–gynecology have a high percentage of female faculty (63% and 57% female, respectively)¹⁰ and a higher percentage of female chairs (37% and 28% female, respectively) than across all other departments at U.S. medical schools (18% female).¹¹ In the specialty with the lowest percentage of women—orthopedic surgery (5% female)—only 1 of the 120 chairs nationally is female, and representation of racial/ethnic minorities among chairs is 13%, less than their percentage among chairs across all other departments.¹¹ These findings suggest that improving gender diversity must be linked with improving racial/ethnic representation.

Gender Parity Does Not Equal Gender Equality

A clear demonstration of the inequality in medicine is the difference in women's versus men's salaries.^{12–17} Among physicians generally and medical school

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faculty specifically, the representation of women and racial/ethnic minorities is greater in lower-paying primary care specialties, with some specialties such as pediatrics and obstetrics–gynecology now having more women than men in practice; these specialties also have greater stagnation of salaries.^{9,10,16–18} However, even in cases of equal work and position (same rank, training, and experience), unequal pay continues to disadvantage women^{12,16} despite evidence that the quality of care women provide is equivalent and in some cases superior to that of their male colleagues.^{19,20}

Lower salaries for women relative to men in academic medicine have been attributed to women's lesser productivity, defined by number of grants and authorship roles.^{21–23} Yet, gender bias in peer review is well documented.^{24–26} Despite this, the underrepresentation of women in authorship roles is declining,²³ and female representation on the editorial boards of premiere journals is increasing.²⁷ Further, the representation of authors from low- and middle-income countries is increasing, and greater gender parity in authorship roles is now seen in these countries compared with wealthier nations.²⁸

Gender parity in authorship roles leads to more diversity in the type of work that is published. An analysis of more than 1.5 million scientific papers published from 2000 to 2015 found that women were

more likely than men to publish sex-disaggregated data and a gender analysis of a given topic.²⁹ Unfortunately, while women and racial/ethnic minorities are more likely to publish research on gender and racial/ethnic biases, this work is also less likely to be funded or published in higher-impact journals, undervaluing both these researchers and their work.³⁰

Despite decreases in publication bias, women continue to face gender discrimination in recognition and advancement.^{31–37} Female faculty are less likely than male faculty to be invited to speak at grand rounds, less likely to be introduced with their title when they speak, and less likely to receive awards from their professional societies.^{38–40} Decanal roles for women are also rare; only 15% of medical school deans are women.⁴¹ Those in dean-level positions are often appointed to “nurturing” roles of service,^{31,32} such as education or mentoring, rather than policy-setting roles in finance and governance.^{9,41} Notably, when institutions have a female dean at the helm, they tend to have more women in decanal roles⁴¹ and support more research on women's health.⁴²

The Effects of Gender Norms and Inequalities

Gender inequalities in salaries and advancement contribute to the attrition of women in practice and faculty roles.^{16,31,43}

This attrition helps to explain why gender parity at medical school matriculation has not translated into sufficient improvements in the representation of women among medical school faculty, leadership, and the field more broadly. The costs of gender inequality are not just a lack of fairness but also a loss of the benefits to science and health that women bring.^{19,20}

Traditional gender norms also affect women's entry and retention in medicine. These norms include expectations that physicians are men, that women must prioritize family responsibilities, and that sexual harassment in the workplace is expected. Below, we discuss these gender norms and their effects on women in medicine.

Physicians are men

Early in training and practice, women may receive subtle and not-so-subtle hints that medicine is inherently masculine and thus they may be less suited for it, particularly in the case of specialties with higher mortality risks for patients and longer duty hours, such as surgery.^{44,45} Medical school textbooks continue to largely depict physicians as white men.⁴⁶ Female trainees report that their nonadherence to gender role expectations, such as displaying assertiveness even in a crisis situation, may result in backlash from both their peers and superiors.⁴⁷ Female faculty in male-dominated specialties receive lower evaluation scores than their male colleagues from both male and female trainees, suggesting gender bias in performance evaluations.⁴⁸ As a result, female faculty report less self-efficacy than male faculty with regard to performance and readiness for advancement.⁴⁹

Women must prioritize family responsibilities

In medicine, women report being responsible for a greater share of domestic work than their male colleagues and are more likely to have a full-time working spouse, with their careers often viewed as secondary to the careers of their spouses.^{50,51} Correspondingly, women are more likely to move for their spouse's job than their own, decreasing their opportunities early in their careers.^{16,52,53} The context and climate of academic medicine reinforce these gender inequalities, with inadequate support for family leave policies^{43,54} and breastfeeding and pumping at work.⁵⁵ These issues,

Box 1

About the Athena Scientific Women's Academic Network (SWAN) Program

The Athena SWAN program started in the United Kingdom in 2005 to advance women in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) institutions of higher education and research.⁶⁵ It was subsequently expanded to Ireland and Australia.⁶⁹ This initiative monitors and scores STEM institutions on (1) gender parity among students/trainees (from entry to exit) and professional and support staff (from entry to advancement and retention) and (2) policies toward fostering a gender-supportive working environment. Only institutions holding “silver awards” or higher are eligible for federal research funding. Improvements in the representation of women in STEM institutions in the United Kingdom have been attributed to the Athena SWAN program, which has also been viewed favorably by institutions.^{69,75} A similar approach was implemented with university hospitals in Europe, reaching providers as well as faculty researchers.⁷⁶

The Athena SWAN program shows great promise, but many question the long-term impact⁶⁵ of such a top-down approach and its ability to address entrenched power and pay imbalances and persistent inequalities in women's responsibilities in the home relative to men.⁶⁹ Critics also cite concerns that linking an institution's Athena SWAN program award level to federal funding access will discourage female faculty from disclosing discrimination because of the resulting funding loss and its impact on their peers.⁶⁷ Resentment and backlash also could form against female faculty by those who perceive that the program provides incentives for “positive discrimination.”⁶⁹ Some qualitative evaluations of the Athena SWAN program have raised concerns that it puts the burden on women to implement it, which could negatively affect their productivity and other scholarship efforts.⁶⁶ While not specific to the Athena SWAN program, a meta-analysis of faculty mentoring programs documented that, while such programs do increase gender parity in faculty rank and retention, they also create additional work for women who have to participate in ways that men do not.⁷⁷

combined with patients' expectations of more "care time" from female physicians, increase their risk of burnout⁵⁵⁻⁵⁷ and may help explain the greater escalation in burnout among female physicians compared with male physicians.⁵⁸ Female physicians who reduce their duty hours to accommodate family care needs, even for a short period, pay a disproportionate penalty in compensation, which extends throughout their career,¹⁴ as well as a reduction in future career advancement opportunities.

Sexual harassment in the workplace is expected

Existing gender norms about the roles women and men play in public generally and in the workplace specifically help explain the widespread sexual harassment women face.⁵⁹ Among medical school faculty early in their careers, 30% of women compared with 4% of men reported being

harassed in the workplace; women who reported harassment also stated that it affected their confidence and/or hampered their careers.⁵⁴ Such harassment can start early in training. Recent data from graduating medical students indicate that 4% received unwanted sexual advances and 15% were subjected to sexist remarks during training.⁶⁰ This harassment contributes to the attrition of female physicians and is exacerbated among racial/ethnic minorities.⁶¹ While the #MeToo movement and calls from the National Academies⁶² have advocated for a climate of zero tolerance for these behaviors, efforts to tackle the underlying norms remain inadequate. Nonetheless, retaliation from those accused of harassment, and even fear of retaliation, can negatively affect the career opportunities and professional development of medical school faculty who have faced harassment.⁶³

Recommendations to Support Gender Parity and Gender and Social Equality

Given that the current climate in medicine reflects restrictive gender norms that impede the advancement of women and racial/ethnic minorities, medical schools and other institutions need to develop specific programs and policies to overcome the biases underlying these inequalities.⁶⁴ Outside the United States, efforts are being made to improve gender equality with top-down approaches, such as the Athena Scientific Women's Academic Network (SWAN) program, which tracks and offers incentives to health institutions that demonstrate gender parity in their workforce (see Box 1).^{65,66} However, such top-down efforts, attending primarily to establishing parity to eliminate discrimination, do not address the root causes of and norms sustaining gender inequalities and can lead to backlash or retaliation.⁶⁷⁻⁶⁹

Table 1
Recommendations for Approaches to Achieving Gender Equality in Academic Medicine

Recommendation	Approaches ^{a,b}	Additional considerations ^a
Improving gender parity		
Increase female representation in medicine broadly and in leadership roles specifically	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Track those entering and leaving medicine by sex to identify gender disparities in entry and retention.^{65,69,75,76,78} Track time at rank, advancement to a leadership role, and type of leadership role (nurturing versus governance) by sex to identify gender disparities in advancement.^{65,69,75,78} Track those in government and institutional leadership roles at all levels by sex and training to identify gender disparities in advancement.⁷⁸ Make available mentoring programs for women to provide support, guidance, and role models for entry and retention.^{76,77} Ensure open announcements and hiring for leadership positions. Address implicit biases in hiring. Reduce selection bias in hiring with structured behavioral interviewing and blinding of names on initial screens of applicants.⁷⁹ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tracking gender parity improvements must include monitoring other social equality indicators (e.g., race/ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation) or marginalized minority groups may be lost (i.e., consider issues of intersectionality). Advancing women by increasing their positions in medicine and other specialties may inadvertently decrease the value of primary care and frontline providers. Gender-focused mentoring programs, while promising, do add time and labor for women.^{66,77} Given variability in the mentoring preferences of women, organizations should encourage input from mentees regarding their mentorship preferences and diversity in mentorship.⁸⁰ An emphasis on gender data can unintentionally stigmatize gender minorities and may impede the representation of transgender people as health care providers.
Establish equality in compensation for comparable work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explicitly state that salary is negotiable. This improves women's negotiating position and salary equity.^{81,82} Create written compensation plans to inform faculty how compensation is determined. Conduct audits of initial job offers and start-up packages and conduct intermittent audits to ensure equality. Track gender and other social equality indicators to gain institutional awareness regarding the impact of intersectionality on compensation. 	
Increase male representation in primary care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Track time trends in gender parity among physicians in contexts/nations where more women than men are entering or practicing medicine. Track health providers at each level (physician to outreach worker) and by sex and balance of primary care versus specialist providers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender parity may not affect gender biases and discrimination in the workplace for women or men. Frontline health care may need to expand beyond maternal and child health and include men's health to effectively engage men as care providers at the community level.

(Table continues)

Table 1
(Continued)

Recommendation	Approaches ^{a,b}	Additional considerations ^a
Value primary care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Professionalize primary care by offering providers salaries that are commensurate with their training and experience.</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Primary care physicians in faculty roles at medical schools can role model and encourage primary care as a viable career choice for students only if they feel valued and are not burned out.
Increase female representation in scientific contributions in public health and medicine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve the representation of women as editors and on editorial boards, which is linked to better gender representation of published authors in journals.²³ <i>Implement blinded reviews to prevent bias.</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some studies suggest that gender biases in submissions (i.e., fewer women submit manuscripts) is a concern.^{83,84} Editors should encourage submissions from diverse groups. Increased female authorship is more likely in female-dominated fields like pediatrics.⁸³ Monitoring authorship by specialty is needed.
Improve norms regarding gender parity and its value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitor norms within and outside institutions, among and across types of providers. Similarly, monitor norms regarding the status, value, and professionalism across all cadres of providers. 	
Improving gender equality beyond parity		
Establish institutional support for family responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Offer family leave for maternity/paternity care or elder care.</i>⁸⁵ <i>Offer flexible schedules or part-time/shared schedules.</i> <i>Subsidize on-site child care.</i>⁸⁵ Offer subsidized or free contraceptive services.⁸⁵ <i>Implement policies that support breastfeeding.</i>⁴⁷ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leave policies should offer pay and sufficient time to ensure their utility for young families. Leaves should be structured to provide incentives for men to take them. For example, in Sweden, family leave can be extended for men to use. Social norms supporting paternity leave and paternal care need to be improved. In some fields, increased paternity leave resulted in men using this time for career advancement and widened gender inequalities.⁸⁶ Part-time work can become full-time work with part-time pay. If women are more likely than men to use this option, gender gaps in pay and opportunities for advancement will be reinforced. If on-site child care is cost-prohibitive, does not allow for flexible work schedules, or allows institutions to increase pressure for early return to work, it is not helpful. Confidential, person-centered, and respectful family planning support needs to be emphasized to ensure that this effort does not become a means of controlling physicians' reproductive timing or choices based on employer preferences. Policies must include provisions for adequate breaks and private spaces at work that allow for breastfeeding and pumping for nursing mothers as well as public breastfeeding.
Implement institutional protections against harassment and discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Train all physicians to understand the scope of harassment, discrimination, and other unprofessional conduct, including bystander training, and processes and protections in reporting.</i> <i>Establish a clearly defined sexual harassment policy with accountability structures.</i>⁸⁵ <i>Use climate surveys to monitor these concerns. Monitor claims of discrimination, harassment, and assault and their handling.</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training rather than just policies should be provided to staff and trainees at all levels in the context of ethics/human rights.
Offer institutional rewards for gender equality and advancement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluate supervisors on their respectful and nonpunitive treatment of their subordinates. <i>Ensure safe working conditions across locations and opportunities for employment and advancement (e.g., rural settings, night shifts).</i> Offer mechanisms for spousal hires and spousal supports to facilitate physicians' work participation. 	

^aWhere possible, approaches and additional considerations are based on prior research, which is cited.

^bApproaches in italics are those the authors recommend prioritizing, as systems are in place to undertake the work (e.g., annual Association of American Medical Colleges surveys), efforts are minimal (e.g., stating that salaries are negotiable), or political will is activated at the moment to help generate change (e.g., sexual harassment prevention).

Building on our analysis of the literature and lessons from the Athena SWAN program, we recommend approaches to achieving gender equality in academic medicine that not only improve parity but also support policies and practices to address the norms that further bias and discrimination (see Table 1). These approaches secure gender parity from matriculation through to senior leadership positions, such as dean, chief executive officer, and department chair, and they more broadly raise the visibility of women, from serving as leaders in organizations to giving grand rounds to being featured in the portraits on the walls. These approaches challenge the implicit biases in medicine's culture and include training in strategies to identify and overcome biases to improve attitudes and hiring practices.^{70,71}

We recognize that some of the efforts outlined in Table 1 may be time- and resource-intensive; however, there are a few simple activities that institutions can implement quickly and in conjunction with required practices. These activities are indicated in italics in Table 1 and include the collection, monitoring, and open reporting of data on sex and race/ethnicity; the inclusion of sex-disaggregated data on those in faculty and leadership positions; the inclusion of questions about institutional climate in exit interviews; and the inclusion of self-assessments of diversity efforts in annual reviews and interviews for leadership positions. Additionally, institutional policies, procedures, and trainings on sexual harassment and assault as well as those related to bias and discrimination in the workplace must be revisited to ensure that they meet national standards. This approach may take time and, in some cases, be costly, but this time and cost will likely be less than that needed to address resultant lawsuits and institutional turmoil if gender inequalities are not addressed, as we have seen in recent cases across multiple institutions.^{72–74}

Conclusion

Women now enter the medical profession in equal numbers to men, but gender parity at matriculation has not translated to social equality, with further underrepresentation of women of color, or gender equality, as women face discriminatory norms that limit their pay and opportunities, especially

as they advance in the ranks of academic medicine. Thus, despite the increase in the number of women in the field, critical changes in the culture are needed to ensure gender and social equality.

In this Perspective, we offer recommendations for institutional policies and climate change efforts to build gender parity and equality for those working and training in academic medicine. While these approaches alone cannot overcome norms related to the value and treatment of women and their work, such approaches can support a larger climate and policy environment beyond our institutions that does not rely on these norms. Further, such efforts to achieve gender equality support the larger goals of achieving social equality in medicine. Policies that support women (e.g., transparency in salaries and paid family leave) and foster an environment of safety for women (i.e., free from harassment), when implemented with an intersectional lens, benefit everyone, providing security and protections for all trainees, faculty, and patients regardless of sex or gender.

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