

Woman Oncologist's Perspective

Recently, there was a meeting held with an idea of having a separate forum for women oncologists of India. I did participate in the meeting. I also started thinking as to why we need a separate forum! Are we different than men? Why does society, in general, look at women differently? Is it a global phenomenon or only restricted to India?

Looking back at my own journey, I did remember few incidences. I was brought up in a family where I had complete freedom to make my own choices. I never experienced gender bias till I became an intern and entered medical ward. I proudly entered medical ward as a DOCTOR, just to be addressed as SISTER by patient's relatives! I used to get irritated, not because nursing is an inferior profession. However, BECAUSE patients perceived all males as DOCTORS and all females as SISTERS! It is difficult for our society to accept females in leadership roles. When I entered private practice as a Medical Oncologist two decades back, I interacted with many specialist health professionals. In general, male doctors feel that female doctors are not serious about their profession. They feel they are not breadwinners and are too busy with household responsibilities and social commitments. One of the male colleagues told me clearly that he does not refer his patients to female doctors as he finds them inefficient! I suggested to some of them that they should start sharing responsibilities with their wives, and things will change for better. Obviously, this was not appreciated much.

Fortunately, there are some exceptions. Some departments do see female doctors as an asset. However, in many departments dominated by males, it is certainly difficult for a female doctor to make her mark even if she is better.

I tried to see global picture. Well, things are almost the same! I came across many publications in oncology and other specialty journals. The European Society of Medical Oncology (ESMO) addressed this issue by forming "Women for oncology" committee in 2013 under the guidance of Martine Piccart, ESMO president in that year. This committee published a survey of 462 oncologists, of which 76.7% were female.^[1] It was found that women were underrepresented in leadership roles (45.5% females vs. 65% males). The biggest challenge was work-family balance. Pay gap and unwanted sexual comments were other significant challenges. Another paper published by Mehta *et al.* reviewed faculty participation at five critical care conferences over a period of 7 years.^[2] It was found that male speakers outnumbered female speakers at all five conferences. Back to oncology, Duma *et al.* have published a very interesting paper in a recent issue of Journal of Clinical Oncology.^[3] This paper analyzed the pattern of speaker introduction at the ASCO Annual Meeting in 2017 and 2018. It was found that female

speakers were introduced less often by their professional title compared to male speakers (62% vs. 81%). Males were less likely to use a professional address (professional title followed by the speaker's full name or last name) when introducing female speakers compared with females when introducing male speakers (53% vs. 80%).

Hence, this gender bias is a universal phenomenon, concerning all females in all strata, all professions and all countries!

Going back to my first question: is a separate forum required? The answer is YES. We have now started discussing this problem in public. This kind of forum can provide a platform where women oncologists can support each other, work toward overcoming our weaknesses and highlighting our strengths. We need to participate in academic activities more often and get leadership roles in conferences and departments wherever we are working. Remember! Rights and responsibilities are two sides of the same coin. Hence, women oncologists should take up more responsibilities as well. We also can make our male colleagues understand our point of view. There is a definite change in the perspective of males toward females in a positive manner. This change is slow but encouraging. Unless we, women, work toward it, this is not going to change!

Finally, I would like to tell my male colleagues that we are NOT here to fight. It is our attempt to grow as a better human being and leave behind a better world for the next generation. Namaste.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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Submitted: 14-Nov-2019

Revised: 17-Dec-2019

Accepted: 29-Dec-2019

Published: 24-Apr-2020

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Access this article online	
Quick Response Code: 	Website: www.ijmpo.org
	DOI: 10.4103/ijmpo.ijmpo_232_19

How to cite this article: Parikh BS. Woman oncologist's perspective. Indian J Med Paediatr Oncol 2020;41:64-5.

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