

ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN IN THE BIOMEDICAL WORKFORCE

An Official Position Statement of the Society for Women's Health Research



POSITION

Science benefits from diversity. Individuals of all genders, races and ethnicities, socioeconomic circumstances, and other diverse backgrounds deserve a safe, supportive, and discrimination-free workplace and the opportunity to succeed within the biomedical workforce.

SWHR supports efforts that improve the representation of women and other historically underrepresented groups within all levels of the biomedical workforce, including policies that:

- Increase efforts to recruit and retain women and underrepresented groups in the biomedical workforce.
- Support the advancement of women and other underrepresented groups to leadership roles within the biomedical workforce.
- Reduce the burden of sexism, racism, and other forms of prejudice or institutional bias that hinder the ability of these individuals to flourish in the biomedical workforce.
- Remove systemic barriers that broadly impede the advancement of women in the biomedical workforce.
- Foster safe work environments by addressing sexual harassment and implementing strong sanctions against those found guilty of harassment.

BACKGROUND

Although women account for about half¹ of medical school graduates and doctoral degree recipients in the biological sciences, they continue to be underrepresented at all levels of leadership within universities, research institutions, industry, health care systems, and other workplaces in the biomedical field. The disparities are even greater for women of color.

Both implicit and explicit bias as well as cultural hurdles within the research community impede the advancement of women. These obstacles then contribute to the lack of women in leadership positions and to their departure from the biomedical workforce more broadly.

Research shows that women researchers typically earn less,² receive less funding at the beginning of their careers,³ and are cited less often⁴ than their male counterparts. In addition, women researchers are much more likely to

switch to part-time work, change career paths, or leave the workforce entirely compared to men. For example, one study⁵ showed new mothers are much more likely to leave full-time STEM jobs than new fathers after the birth or adoption of their first child.

Women in the biomedical workforce also disproportionately face sexual harassment⁶ and discrimination.⁷ According to a survey⁸ of women in science-related jobs, 91% said gender discrimination remains a career obstacle and 73% said sexual harassment was as an obstacle to women's career trajectories in the postdoctoral stage.

It is clear that in all facets of the biomedical workforce, we must cultivate environments that are more inclusive and diverse. A diverse workforce can broaden the viewpoints and questions explored in research and even increase productivity. Without women and other underrepresented groups in science, the world may miss out on valuable discoveries and ideas that alternate perspectives bring to the table.

SWHR strongly supports policies and programs that foster and promote women and underrepresented groups in the biomedical workforce and remove systemic barriers to their advancement. Changing the culture of biomedical research is imperative for the field to continue to advance and grow.

¹Clayton et al. Women's Careers in Biomedical Sciences: Implications for the Economy, Scientific Discovery, and Women's Health. *Journal of Women's Health*, 2017. DOI: 10.1089/jwh.2016.6012

²Scientists' salary data highlight US\$18,000 gender pay gap. *Nature*. January 22, 2019.

³Sege R, Nykiel-Bub L, Selk S. Sex Differences in Institutional Support for Junior Biomedical Researchers. *JAMA*. 2015;314(11):1175–1177. doi:10.1001/jama.2015.8517

⁴Why women are cited less often in research than men. *The Hill*. December 17, 2019.

⁵Erin A. Cech, Mary Blair-Loy. The changing career trajectories of new parents in STEM. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* Mar 2019, 116 (10) 4182-4187; DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1810862116

⁶Sexual Harassment of Women Climate, Culture, and Consequences in Academic Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2018. <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/24994/sexual-harassment-of-women-climate-culture-and-consequences-in-academic>

⁷Funk and Parker. Women and Men in STEM Often at Odds Over Workplace Equity. Pew Research Center. January 2018. file:///Users/emily/Downloads/PS_2018.01.09_STEM_FINAL.pdf

⁸Staying Power: Women in Science on What It Take to Succeed, October 2019. <https://www.loreal.com/en/usa/articles/commitment/alumni-study/>

“Sex” refers to the biological classification of living things according to reproductive organs and chromosomes. “Gender” refers to an individual’s self-identification as masculine, feminine, both, or neither, and is intrinsically associated with sociodemographic factors that ultimately affect health. Both sex and gender influence health across the lifespan, and SWHR strives to comprehensively address both sex and gender as they relate to women’s health. When citing research, SWHR uses terminology consistent with what is used in the study. As inclusive language practices continue to evolve in the scientific and medical communities, we will reassess our language as necessary.