

VIEWPOINT

30 years of observations and hopes for faster progress on promoting the status of women in science

Gwendalyn J. Randolph 

Gwendalyn Randolph shares her observations and ideas for how institutions can partner with women to support their careers in STEM.

One of the most encouraging developments I have seen in the last 30 yr is the recent interest in discussing the problems that women in science still face. I welcome this discussion, as we all recognize that to reach any goal, we must focus and openly plan for achieving it. We have learned over these last decades that the pace of a more passive approach is unacceptably slow.

Indeed, I have been training for a PhD or working as a PhD scientist for 30 yr. The advance of the status of women scientists during these three decades has been slower than I envisioned it would be when, as a starting PhD student in 1991, I joined a department with a faculty that was at least half women. Later, as a principal investigator (PI), graduate program leader, and former division head involved in recruiting faculty and interacting with leadership at high levels, I have made several observations that may be worthy of discussion as we continue to work as a community of medical scientists to foster equal opportunities and support young female scientists. These observations are at least partially redundant with other suggestions that have surfaced in the scientific community at large. Because I have worked at several different academic institutions and considered positions at a few more, no reader should construe that these observations are a commentary on a given institution. Furthermore, institutions

are not individual people. Individual people are ultimately the agents of change that will lead us to our goal. However, I believe it remains of greatest importance to address how institutions can structure themselves to more optimally support advance of women in science.

Below are some talking points on how we can make meaningful change happen faster.

1. Women in science are not a monolith. Being female is more complex than being male, simply because of the biological fact that females have the capacity to bear children. Some women will avail themselves of this opportunity, and others will not. It is critical that institutions support women in the capacity of childbearing and child-rearing, while also recognizing that supporting of women in science involves more than coming up with a plan to support those who choose to have children. Recognition of the diversity in life directions that women will take and the inherent need to take a broad approach to supporting women is critical.

2. Said diversity of choices that women can make is not simply whether women do or do not have children. Supporting women who do have children also needs to include a range of diverse options. While women who have caregiving needs will likely benefit from generous maternity and paternity



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leave programs, enforcing a single model on women is not ideal. For example, some European countries have generous maternity and paternity leave programs, which is great, but I have found at least a few universities that advise institutional leaders to create a leave that starkly separates the family leave period from the science life of the mother. For example, some PIs have mentioned to me that while a female post-doc is out on maternity leave, she cannot be contacted about her work in the laboratory or be expected to reply if asked. While very well intended (nicely removing pressures to be overloaded), this extent of separation may be detrimental to her career and may make women of childbearing years be considered “risky hires.” Some women scientists, perhaps many, will benefit from being

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allowed (not required) to combine motherhood with science from a very early point. Be generous, but let the woman choose—and always make sure the workplace is a friendly one for working mothers (milk expression stations, childcare options at conferences, allowing babies in the office where possible, etc.). One model does not fit all, but having supportive options for all is imperative.

3. Raising children is of course a job that women and men can and should do together. To support this concept, we can make sure that we do not inadvertently illustrate as a society that we are surprised when women remain scientifically productive even as their family grows. Currently, biographical articles covering women are more likely to mention who took care of the kids “while she did the science” than biographical articles covering male scientists who also have children.

4. Maintain high expectations for what women can achieve, and project confidence rather than concern over their career potential. Avoid the notion that different criteria are needed for judging women, with the exception that the pace of productivity should be accounted for after a formal leave is granted.

5. Put women together who are good scientific and personality fits. This type of synergy can be particularly effective and may be supported by “cluster hires.” Just like men are sometimes more comfortable around other male peers, the same can be true for women.

6. Institutions should stop being afraid of facing the problem of bias and harassment. Specifically, institutions should not fear women among their staff or faculty who are open about their trials, adverse experiences, and concerns. Trying to squelch the sharing of their concerns to save face with the outside world leaves women who are already experiencing trouble feeling further at risk. Consequently, they often do not seek the help they need; or worse, they are actually punished for it. Institutions need to develop effective systems to acknowledge and listen carefully, and to work with the group/person to seek a solution when concerns arise. I cannot underscore enough that hiding problems is often futile. It really is! Yet it is so common for institutions to work hard at

controlling the narrative but not the problem. On the other hand, carefully listening to an aggrieved person is a great first step toward a solution and is necessary to develop effective subsequent steps to do the hard work we all want to see happen.

7. Institutions should carefully review whether divisions, departments, or other major groups are creating a system of tokenism, wherein women (or a woman) are placed in what seem like influential positions for the sake of appearances, while at the same time their contributions in those roles are managed so that they feel ineffective or used. Indeed, women in such positions can feel threatened enough that they may actually exacerbate the problem by contributing to an unsupportive system that undermines the advance of women, including young women in early career stages, while hiding the overt appearance of doing so.

8. Institutions should carefully monitor whether they are making decisions based on common biases, like “women, yes, but not this particular woman,” “she’s too bitter and hardened to be effective,” or “there are mental issues.” These are red flags that signify a need for structured solutions to facilitate ongoing training of leadership skills to the highest of leaders. There is no shame in asking capable, accomplished people to learn how to avoid these common pitfalls.

9. Don’t shame women leaders for having different priorities than men are purported to have. I provide an illustration here from my own personal experience. Having been told for many years by institutional leadership that women’s pay inequity is partly because women do not ask for better pay, I learned over the years to ask for equitable pay. But in one negotiation I felt distressed when I learned that, in being offered a better salary as a result of my efforts, I would become the most highly paid woman in a group, although the hierarchy and experience I would bring to the group would make that inappropriate. I wanted to fight for my other underpaid, accomplished women colleagues. However, my follow-up complaint to leaders that the pay for women across the group was unfair was dismissed by a male institutional leader with, “Why are you even worrying about this? I should not say this,

but only women would worry about something like that—the pay of the other women around them. Be like the men and don’t concern yourself with it.” Let prospective women leaders bring a different approach; that different approach with attention to different priorities in turn stands to bring on big change, not just incremental change.

10. Most of all, let’s foster a culture of forgiveness and willingness to start over with each other after we clash. As is the case for any person working in the realm of advocacy, women who advocate for changes that affect themselves or other women will bruise some egos and generate some anger and misunderstanding. This is perfectly normal. Institutional leaders should avoid dismissing these women, though they often do just that. I am surprised how the adage that “I have a target on my back” is often true. But it needs not to be true! All parties (institutions and individuals) would benefit from programs that support working through difficult situations. Rather than consuming precious resources, fostering a bidirectional “let’s try again” culture will save institutions financial resources and capitalize on improved scientific productivity. And make no mistake, this is not only about what institutions can do by trying on forgiveness and dialog with “angry women” as an approach to a better future. We women should also be willing to forgive and move forward; we must avoid assuming that the leadership of our institutions cannot ever produce positive change when we witness some bad choices they may have made in navigating the relevant space of advancing women in science. Every day is a new day. Let’s come back to work each day working as hard as we can to give each other the benefit of the doubt. Forgiveness is not easy, because there are real biases and obstacles to overcome, and there is pride to set aside. But the possibility that we could productively work together, after we acknowledge the misunderstanding that has passed between us and the flaws we possess, stands to powerfully change the game for us women in science and for the institutions that employ us.

Dear institutional leaders, do you hear that knock on your door? It’s me and a few other women colleagues. Can we talk?