
Preface

Barely a day goes by without a news or an academic article about the status of women in science and medicine. They paint a remarkably consistent picture of gender inequality that seems to transcend national and institutional boundaries. No matter what measure is used, from salaries to promotion [1], to grant funding [2, 3], and to academic publishing [4]; women fare worse than similarly qualified men. Not surprisingly, they are more likely to leave research and academic life.

Although there has been progress, the gender gap stubbornly refuses to go away.

The issue of the “vanishing women” is perhaps most acute in academic psychiatry. This is because for more than two decades, psychiatry has been among the medical specialties with the highest proportion of women entering residency programs [5]. The percentage of women in junior academic positions in psychiatry is also high and consistently higher than that of men. However, the number of women in positions of leadership remains disproportionately low. In the USA, for example, only 13 % of department chairs in psychiatry are women [1].

My personal journey from medical school graduate of the University of Athens to trainee psychiatrist at the world-famous Maudsley Hospital and to senior faculty, first at the Institute of Psychiatry, King’s College London, and now at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, has provided the impetus for this book. It has been a journey full of amazing encounters. I have had the privilege of meeting many extremely accomplished women, true trail blazers, both as scientists, clinicians and role models. I have also had the responsibility of helping younger women navigate their own voyage through the stormy waters of academia as a program director for academic trainees for over a decade and as a mentor to my graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and junior faculty.

The book reflects the duality of my experiences. The first part “They Did It Their Way” starts with profiling 15 women that hold positions of leadership within academic psychiatry. They have been very brave in their willingness to provide intimately personal, very honest, and extraordinarily moving accounts of their own journeys. Their stories are not just accounts of professional success. They are powerful tales of self-determination and empowerment. A striking feature they all share is their desire to pursue their dreams and remain true to their selves and their

generosity in opening up their lives to women everywhere. There is of course no single pathway to academic success but reading these stories can help distill useful lessons. The second part of the book therefore aims to signpost the “snakes” and to highlight the “ladders” of the academic world. Very few are gender specific in themselves but they affect women disproportionately and they prevent the gender gap from closing. I hope that the messages conveyed in these chapters will provide opportunities for self-reflection and inspiration for future action.

Some may argue that writing a book such as this implies that the problem with the gender gap is women themselves. This was exactly what I was told early on in my career. A senior female colleague advised me to stay away from any women-centered initiative because these were only for women that were not “good enough” to make it on scientific merit alone. This was and is bad advice and a key example of how some women internalize and propagate negative societal attitudes about ourselves. Others may also argue that in order to close the gender gap we need to focus on societal and institutional barriers. This is of course true but meaningful change can only happen through the coordinated activity of a critical mass of likeminded people, women and men.

This is why this book is not just for women. It is also for those men who, either as partners, fathers, brothers, mentors, or leaders, are interested in understanding the female perspective on the gender gap and are motivated to strategize change. I have met many men who declared that they had no idea about the problems and barriers women faced. Initially I tended not to believe them as these problems were both tangible and obvious to me. However, I now think otherwise. Male myopia when it comes to the gender gap is real and needs to be addressed if we are to transform our working environment.

The hope with “Women in Academic Psychiatry: A Mind to Succeed” is that it will show to all readers, women or men, that change is possible. There are many more women than those contributing to this book that are engaged in this process of change. Success in closing the gender gap is a group process that also critically depends on individual efforts and achievement. Although this book is focused on psychiatry, it contributes to a wider societal effort to understand what underpins discourse on gender equality in leadership.

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