

Description

Dr. Jennifer Williams and Dr. Justin Brady met at a conference they both were attending. During the lunch break, they are discussing several issues affecting academia, during which the topic of gender disparity comes up.

> Dr. Williams: “Sometimes I feel like women will never get ahead. Did you know that in 2019, only 24% of those employed full-time in STEM fields in the US are women?”
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> Dr. Brady: “It’s hard to believe the disparity is still so high. It’s a global problem. But you know, awareness about the existent gender disparity has spread globally. In fact, there are several men working these days to change these unfair conditions and promote women’s advancement.”

We are about to celebrate another International Women’s Day on March 8, amidst all the gender disparity controversies. However, the controversies are true—gender disparity in STEM fields and academia is a global problem. Women continue to lag behind men in academic authorship, institutional leadership, winning research grants, and other key areas. In fact, the gender disparity in STEM is well known, but the majority of articles on the topic focus on what women can do to overcome it. What if you are a man who wants to join the fight? In this article we look at how few men can push back against gender disparity and promote the advancement of women in STEM.

So What Can Men Do For Women?

Why does gender disparity persist in STEM fields and academia as a whole? While numerous factors are at play, there are several major areas where men can make a big difference. The first is in understanding implicit bias. From a young age, girls may be discouraged from participating in STEM courses which can undermine their self-confidence. Those who do make it struggle in male-dominated classes and workplaces.

Men can start by recognizing that a little encouragement of their female students or colleagues can go a long way. Juan Gilbert, a computer scientist at the University of Florida in Gainesville, recommends that men call out bias when they see it. This can be in a conversational setting when a woman is interrupted, or on a larger level, such as when a hiring pool consists entirely of male candidates. Drawing attention to existing disparities

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is the first step in the push for equality.

Shaun Hendy, a physicist at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, agrees. He highlights the efforts of himself and other male colleagues who refuse to participate in “manels” (all-male panels) at conferences. By drawing the attention of conference organizers to gender disparities early on, men can help ensure more balanced representation.

Terry McGlynn, an entomologist at California State University, helps his male colleagues learn to be comfortable in calling out harassment in the moment. When men see other men behaving badly, they can use phrasing such as “That was a completely inappropriate comment,” or “Here’s another way of saying that.” He believes that men should be actively removing obstacles for women instead of encouraging women to overcome them.

A Slow But Steady Sea Change

As more studies draw attention to the struggles faced by women in STEM fields, the pressure to do better is increasing. Awareness is increasing and more men in positions of power are using that power to make real change where it matters—in hiring, publishing, and pay. Paul Walton, a bioinorganic chemist at the University of York, UK, describes how during his tenure as head of the Department of Chemistry, they worked to institute fairer hiring and pay practices. By annually publishing salary information, his department worked to decrease the gender pay gap.

Better data is highlighting new directions for policy improvement as well. Anna Kaatz, a data scientist at the University of Wisconsin in Madison who studies diversity in the scientific workforce, recently published a study showing the impact of parenthood on STEM careers for men and women. The study suggests ways that parental leave policies could be improved to decrease the “motherhood penalty”. Other initiatives to promote women’s career advancement in academia are seeing real uptake among well-known institutions. While there is still a long way to go, it seems as though the tide may finally be turning.

What are some other ways that men can support their female colleagues and promote gender equality? Do you have some tips for promoting cultural changes in the workplace? Let us know your thoughts in the comments below.

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