
Progress and Challenges for Women in Academic Medicine



Since 1983, the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) has meticulously documented the progress and challenges faced by women in academic medicine. These reports offer a national snapshot of women learners, faculty, and administrative leaders, highlighting both representational gains and the cultural shifts needed to achieve true gender equity. The latest report underscores the gradual but notable advancements made over the past decade while also spotlighting persistent issues that continue to hinder full inclusion and equality for women in this field. Despite these challenges, women in academic medicine have shown remarkable resilience, and [this report](#) analyses their achievements, ongoing challenges, and the necessary steps to foster a more equitable environment in academic medicine.

Increasing Representation and Leadership Roles

The AAMC's 2023 report reveals significant strides in the representation of women across various levels of academic medicine. Notably, women now form the majority of applicants, matriculants, and graduates at U.S. medical schools. This shift marks a significant departure from historical trends where men predominantly filled these roles. The increase in female medical students not only indicates a promising future but also suggests that gender balance may become the norm rather than the exception, a prospect that should encourage us all.

Furthermore, the percentage of women in surgical subspecialties has grown since 2018, challenging the traditional gender norms in these highly specialised fields. This is a critical development, as surgical subspecialties have historically been among the most male-dominated areas in medicine. The growing presence of women in these fields not only enriches the diversity of perspectives but also paves the way for future female surgeons and leaders in medicine.

Leadership roles within academic medicine are also seeing a positive trend, albeit more slowly. As of 2023, women represent 27% of U.S. medical school deans and 25% of academic health system leaders. This increase from previous years indicates a slow but steady dismantling of the barriers that have traditionally kept women from ascending to top leadership positions. Additionally, the percentage of women full professors has risen from 21% in 2013 to 29% in 2023, suggesting that more women are reaching the highest echelons of academic career progression. However, these gains are not uniform across all departments. For instance, women are underrepresented in leadership roles in surgery and radiology, areas that continue to be dominated by men.

Persistent Pay Disparities and Workplace Challenges

Despite the progress in representation and leadership, significant challenges remain, particularly in terms of pay equity and workplace culture. The report highlights a persistent pay gap between men and women, which remains a significant issue across various levels of academic medicine. Women, especially those with MD degrees in clinical science departments, continue to earn less than their male counterparts, a disparity that emerges early in their careers and compounds over time. For example, on average, a female clinical MD and full professor earns 83 cents for every euro earned by her male counterparts. This gap is even more pronounced among women from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, with Black women earning only 74 cents on the euro compared to white men.

The issue of workplace harassment also poses a significant barrier to gender equity in academic medicine. Nearly one in three women reported experiencing gender harassment within the past year. This figure, though slightly lower than previous years, remains alarmingly high. The prevalence of harassment is particularly acute in specific departments, such as emergency medicine and anesthesiology, where over half of the women reported experiencing harassment. This hostile environment not only affects the well-being and career satisfaction of women but also contributes to a culture of exclusion and inequality.

The Role of Institutional Support and Policy Interventions

© For personal and private use only. Reproduction must be permitted by the copyright holder. Email to copyright@mindbyte.eu.

The incremental progress seen in the representation and inclusion of women in academic medicine can largely be attributed to the efforts of institutional Women in Medicine and Science (WIMS) and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) offices. These offices have been at the forefront of implementing policies and programmes designed to support women and other marginalised genders. However, the report suggests that these efforts, while

commendable, are insufficient to overcome the deeply ingrained structural and cultural barriers.

To build on these gains, the report advocates for a multi-faceted approach to promoting gender equity. One of the primary recommendations is to address the issue of pay disparity. Institutions are encouraged to conduct regular salary audits to ensure equitable compensation and to make adjustments where discrepancies are found. This also includes revising promotion and tenure criteria to be more inclusive and reflective of diverse contributions, thus ensuring that all faculty members, regardless of gender, have equal opportunities for advancement.

Another critical area is the enhancement of mentorship and sponsorship opportunities for women. The report highlights that mentorship is crucial for navigating the complex landscape of academic medicine, particularly for women and those from other marginalised groups. Institutions are urged to develop structured mentorship programmes that pair junior faculty with senior mentors who can provide guidance, support, and advocacy. This is particularly important in fields where women are underrepresented, as it helps to build a pipeline of future female leaders.

Furthermore, the report calls for improved mechanisms for reporting and addressing harassment and discrimination. Creating a safe and supportive environment where issues can be reported without fear of retaliation is essential for fostering a culture of respect and inclusion. This includes regular training for all faculty and staff on recognising and addressing unconscious bias, preventing harassment, and promoting a respectful workplace.

The AAMC's 2023 report provides a comprehensive overview of the state of gender equity in academic medicine. While significant progress has been made, particularly in terms of representation and leadership, substantial barriers remain that need to be addressed. The persistent pay gap, high rates of harassment, and underrepresentation in certain specialities underscore the need for continued and concerted efforts to promote gender equity.

Institutions must leverage the data and insights provided in this report to implement actionable strategies that foster a more inclusive and equitable environment. This includes addressing pay disparities, enhancing mentorship and sponsorship programs, and creating robust systems for reporting and addressing harassment. By doing so, academic medicine can move closer to achieving true gender equity, benefiting not only women but the field as a whole. The journey towards gender equity is ongoing, and institutions must remain committed to this goal, continuously evaluating and refining their approaches to ensure sustained progress.

Source: [AAMC](#)

Image Credit: [iStock](#)

Published on : Thu, 25 Jul 2024