



# 10 Ways to Empower Yourself as a Woman in Science or Academic Medicine

Women are underrepresented in health care with few women in influential positions,<sup>1-3</sup> leadership roles,<sup>4</sup> and promoted to the highest academic ranks<sup>5</sup> compared with men. Moreover, women are less frequently lead authors of publications in top medical journals,<sup>6</sup> speakers at medical conferences or grand rounds,<sup>7,8</sup> and participants in clinical practice guideline development.<sup>9</sup> Perceptible and imperceptible features of organizational culture affect women and men differently and contribute to differences in professional experiences.<sup>10</sup> The implications of the gender gap are broad, impacting our patients, science, institutions, and health care systems.

Although gender disparity has gained increased visibility recently in academia and social media, evidence-based strategies to address gender inequity are lacking. Increasingly, efforts are being made to address systematic barriers and sources of bias that are at the core of the gender gap in science and academic medicine. Reforms to written and unwritten policies and structures that have maintained the gender gap in science and academia are expected to shepherd in a more inclusive academic environment in the future. Based on personal experiences and reflection, I compiled a list of 10 ways that women academicians can empower themselves in the interim.

**First, be an expert and a leader in your field.** Commit yourself to professional mastery. Know your strengths and weaknesses as a person and as a scholar. Believe in yourself and your capabilities. “Get behind” yourself. Remember that you do not require anyone’s permission or approval to have an opinion and to be the best version of yourself.

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**Second, find a catalyst, a champion, a facilitator, and a sponsor.** Find someone who believes in you as much (if not more) than you believe in yourself. Ensure that you have at least 1 sponsor.

**Third, act like an equal.** Expect to be treated like an equal and act accordingly. Model professional behaviors and discourse in everything you do. Learn to “ask for forgiveness” after the fact rather than to “ask for permission” before the fact.

**Fourth, be part of the conversation.** Choose to be part of the conversation when you are given an opportunity to sit at the boardroom table, even when it is uncomfortable for you. Be part of the dialogue. Propose solutions to address issues that directly or indirectly effect you. Believe that your insights, views, and experiences are valuable. Voice your opinion in a respectful, diplomatic, and composed manner. Be assertive but not aggressive. Be honest but not callous.

**Fifth, role model wisdom, compassion, and integrity.** Espouse a core set of values and make decisions in accordance with them. Communicate with sincerity, authenticity, and transparency. Be guided by your moral compass.

**Sixth, preserve yourself emotionally and mentally.** Share both the division of “tasks” and the division of “worry and emotional work” equitably in both your personal and professional life. Let go, even temporarily, of worries that weigh you down. Make time for self-care.

**Seventh, label inappropriate behaviors and comments in real time.** Find magnanimous ways to respond to inappropriate behaviors and comments, even though it may be challenging! Have prepared retorts on hand to address inappropriate behaviors and comments in real time.

**Eighth, limit the time and energy that you invest in being angry when you feel marginalized or suffer bias.** Find creative ways to move forward. Avoid being angry or sullen; it is not helpful, and it can be counterproductive. Choose to collaborate with like-minded individuals.

**Ninth, be an ally and an agent of change.** Channel your energy into effecting change. Value individuals who take a stand on issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion. Applaud their courage and willingness to act. Recognize

that men and women who act as allies may suffer adverse consequences for their advocacy.

**Tenth, embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion and mentoring across differences.** Set an expectation in your interactions that all voices are welcome. Embrace opportunities to mentor junior colleagues, especially women. Be cognizant of your personal assumptions as a mentor. Address differences openly and with sincerity and honesty. Enable diverse collaborations.

Women in science and academic medicine must not only learn to navigate career challenges but also obstacles, including unconscious, implicit, and explicit biases, that impede their success and advancement. While advocating for system-level reforms, women scholars can empower themselves and others through their approach to circumstances, behaviors, decision making, and communication.

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