

Achieving gender equality and empowerment of women chemists

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Gender equity or fairness of treatment for women and men, according to their respective needs is vital for achieving gender equality which is a global priority today. Women and girls represent half of the world's population and they represent half of world's human potential. Therefore, the empowerment of women and girls is essential to achieve economic, social and environmental sustainability. Achieving gender equality is among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations that has been identified as essential for achieving a better and more sustainable future for all. The world's advancement and sustainability hinges on continuous development in science. Women's contribution to science will be a pivotal part of development and sustainability.

Globally as well as in Sri Lanka, there has been progress in women empowerment in chemical sciences over the last few decades. There has been a tremendous progress in female enrollment in Chemistry education in Sri Lanka. In many instances, the vast majority of chemistry graduates are female. However, women representation in senior positions in chemical sciences is still far below parity. Even the talented women who have chosen their careers in science are not progressing to senior positions. Therefore, the participation of women in high level decision and policy making is weak. The empowerment of women who are already in the field of chemical sciences is vital for Sri Lanka to achieve the real meaning of gender parity.

When I reflect on my 17-year career in the private sector, I experienced many challenges as a woman. However, I was able to face and overcome those challenges and progress in my career to a senior leadership position.

In my opinion, many women have the knowledge and skills to become leaders in their field. What I see as lacking, is the mental resilience and the perseverance to cope with the external pressures they face. Biological and socio-cultural conditioning may play a role in focusing more on the soft and emotionally sensitive nature of women.

To achieve a remarkable progress in women empowerment, the whole of society should be conscious about socio-cultural aspects that hinder the progress of females in some way. Every member in the family and the society has a role to play in achieving gender equality. It is important to develop the ability to persevere and the personality and self-confidence of young girls within the family, which will lay a foundation for them to develop themselves in future as successful women.

Mental resilience will pave the way to overcome many barriers that exist for women to get equal opportunities. Females hold disproportionate responsibilities in parenting and caring. Globally women spent three times as many hours in unpaid domestic work and care giving as men. Time has come to hold shared responsibilities in parenting and caring within the family.

What I see as most relevant for Sri Lanka today is the need of developing women in chemistry into leadership positions within academia and the industry. This will surely need some strategic initiatives. Areas such as personality development in primary and secondary education, mentoring and coaching as part of career development programs and implementation of best practices would essentially benefit women, helping them to live upto their full potential.

Ms. Wickramathilake obtained her B.Sc. in Pharmacy from the University of Colombo and completed her MBA at the Postgraduate Institute of Management, University of Sri Jayawardenepura. She currently serves as the Head of Exports & Regulatory Affairs at Link Natural Products (Pvt.) Ltd.