

Editorial

Women Ophthalmologists in Nepal

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Worldwide, the medical profession is witnessing an increase in the proportion of women joining the field which is also referred as “the feminization of medicine” (Austin and Philips, 2009). In Nepal females pursuing medical education have also increased significantly. As per data of Nepal Medical Council, 33% of registered medical doctors were female in 2019.

Ophthalmology is encountering a similar increase in the number of female practitioners. There are 379 registered ophthalmologists in Nepal, out of which 46% are female. This is a huge jump compared with the proportion of female Ophthalmologists in the past. The first Nepali woman to take specialized training in ophthalmology was Dr. Narayani Shrestha in 1978. In 2008, 26% of the Ophthalmologists were female (Upadhaya et al, 2010). In the last 11 years, 138 women Ophthalmologists joined the Ophthalmic workforce of the country.

In the UK, workforce census conducted by The Royal College of Ophthalmologists in 2018 showed that 69% of the consultant workforce are male and 31% female. In 2016, 21% of Australian and New Zealand ophthalmologists and 35% of ophthalmology trainees were female (Jain et al, 2019).

As more medical colleges established in the country, there are more females willing to join the medical field. The inclination of females towards Ophthalmology may be due to availability of residency programs at various medical colleges and post graduate institutes within the country. In addition to that several eye hospitals have started fellowship programs in different subspecialties in the country. This has attracted many women in Ophthalmology as the majority can pursue further training in Nepal itself without the need to go abroad. The Medscape survey on lifestyle and burnout conducted in 2018 revealed that ophthalmologists have the lowest rates of burnout and depression and are one of the happiest specialties at or outside work (Grisham, 2018).

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This may be one of the factors for inclination of females towards Ophthalmology.

The number of super specialized women ophthalmologists according to the subspeciality has also increased. There are 11 vitreo retina specialists (medical and surgical), 11 cornea specialist, 12 glaucoma specialist, 15 paediatric ophthalmologists, 18 oculoplastic surgeons,



6 Uvea specialists, 1 refractive surgeon and 1 neuro ophthalmologist (NOS directory, 2016). However, there is huge rise in the numbers of women sub specialists with nearly double fold in each although there is no proper statistics to prove it as NOS directory is being updated.

Besides the scant increase in numbers in clinical Ophthalmology, there is also a rise in women representation in academic positions. In recent years, we have more women ophthalmologists as faculty in medical colleges and post graduate institutes. Currently there are 4 professors, 12 associate professors, 12 assistant professors and 24 lecturers (Nepal Medical Council). Women make up 40% of all ophthalmology faculty in our country in 2020. Even though senior faculty positions are less compared to male, we can see a large younger cohort in academics.

In the US, almost half of the assistant professors in ophthalmology are women but only about 22% of full professors and even fewer (15%) heads of department are women (Tuli, 2019).

As women have attained greater strides in academic medicine, they have also become more prominent in executive leadership positions. Nepal ophthalmic society which is the leading professional organization of the country, was established in 1985 AD. Dr. Reeta Gurung was elected as its first female president in 2012, after twenty-two years of its establishment. Currently, women hold the leadership position in various subspecialty societies such as Nepal vitreo retina Society as Dr Eli Pradhan, is the first president after its conceptualization in 2016. Female ophthalmologists hold executive positions in various hospitals too.

Women are involved in the field of research too. In one observational study, trends in the gender distribution of authors in six ophthalmology journals between January 2002 and December 2014 were reviewed and it showed that contribution of female authors

was 34.7% in clinical journals, 36.8% in basic science journals, and 30.6% in subspecialty journals in Ophthalmology (Mimouni et al, 2016). In the US, women authorship accounted for 32% and the proportion of female first authors significantly increased for all journals and subspecialty journals as well (Kalavar et al, 2020). We don't have such data on female authorship in our country but we have been witnessing the rise in the number of female ophthalmologists involved in publication in scientific journals.

While it is encouraging to see more and more female ophthalmologists being added to the ophthalmic workforce of our country, we cannot deny the fact that they have to face certain barriers in comparison to their male counterparts. Due to our socio-cultural norms, biological reasons and assumed gender roles, women face challenges in balancing their family life with their professional life. There are several issues like maternity leave, upbringing of children, running the household and other family responsibilities which females have to fulfil. Many times, they have to overstretch themselves to balance the work and family. Many female ophthalmologists curtail their working hours to fulfil their greater family commitments. Some of them have to let go of the opportunities at some point due to preference given to the family over the career.

As world views are changing, many of the traditional barriers that prevented women from getting into the medical field are now behind us. Many men are willing to share responsibility with women that were traditionally considered to be women's task. This gives women both time and opportunities to learn, research, innovate, network and excel in their field. With this we hope that more women will be able to join Ophthalmology and it would be an example of "gender balanced" specialty in the medical field.

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