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# Empowering Women for Medical Academic Leadership Roles



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**A**s the first woman elected Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Prishtina in Kosovo, I understand the importance of women's representation in academic leadership. I am currently enjoying my second term as Dean and have previously served as Vice President of the University. In my time as a leader within this organization, I have always aimed to be a driving force towards a brighter and more inclusive future. Although our University has made great strides in recent years, the fact remains that, prior to my appointment to the role of Dean, the University went fifty years without a female Dean of Medical Faculty. The reiteration of this fact is not an act of self-aggrandizement, but rather it serves to highlight the magnitude of an ongoing societal issue. Suffice it to say, I am both honored and eager to share my

thoughts on a topic that will remain at the forefront of public dialogue for years to come.

While my reflections on gender inequality are drawn from my own personal experiences in medicine and academia, it is my hope that the insights I share will be valuable to individuals in other professional communities. After all, the barriers to women's advancement in medical sciences and academician leadership are not entirely unique to this industry. Women are severely underrepresented in medical academician leadership roles, just as they are underrepresented in leadership roles across all sectors of society. At the University of Prishtina, the initiative to include strong female voices was born out of the need and desire to strengthen our future outlook. As a medical community, we face a multitude of challenges, both new and old. We need fresh voices and new perspectives in order for our University to meet these challenges with ingenuity and rigor.

Although the shift to gender equality in academic leadership will not happen overnight, overcoming a gap that is so ingrained in the fabric of our society will require the collective efforts of all members of our community. True progress in medical academia will be a function of transforming the cultures of the academic and medical communities. It is vital, both for myself and my peers at

the University of Prishtina, to build a culture that empowers current and future leaders to share new ideas, to seek new knowledge, and to motivate others. Novel thinkers and individuals with strong leadership qualities must be rewarded, regardless of gender. As author and educator Phillip C. Schlechty once said, “shared leadership...is less like an orchestra, where the conductor is always in charge, and more like a jazz band, where leadership is passed around...depending on what the music demands at the moment and who feels most moved by the spirit to express the music.” Schlechty’s quote is one I reflect on often as I continue my journey at the University of Prishtina. It motivates me to keep searching for those whose voices are ready to be heard, many of whom are brilliant women fully capable of bringing the jazz.

At the University of Prishtina, we have progressed towards a culture free of gender bias where both men and women share equal opportunity to influence and lead. We are fortunate to have many like-minded individuals on our team, all of whom share a vision for our University’s future. However, change within an organization requires more than just the willingness of the organization’s members; it requires direct action and, often, risks to be taken. While I cannot recommend any specific set of steps that will guide a cultural overhaul, I can share some of the decisions and initiatives that have been enacted during my time at the University of Prishtina in hopes that these accomplishments will inspire others who wish to influence change. One of the University’s most significant strides was the 2007 establishment of the Gender Equality Office, which occurred during my time as Vice President. The office was created with the objective of increasing the ratio of female participation in leadership roles, decision making processes, and scientific research. Further, the office was tasked with forging regional and international partnerships to ensure that mechanisms of women’s advancement were incorporated into academic frameworks both at home and abroad. Following the office’s inauguration, the University saw an influx of female voices in key roles. During my first term as Dean, professorship appointees were majority female and, in my second term, several females have been appointed to influential committees and leadership roles, such as Vice Dean, Heads of Divisions, and Heads of Departments.

As our University’s leadership continues to grow, we face our duties as academicians with re-

newed energy and vigor. As leaders in an academic community, we are uniquely positioned to bolster the advancement of our country’s future female leaders in science. At the University of Prishtina, we take pride in providing incredible learning experiences for our students and residents both in and out of the classroom setting. We believe that research opportunities and diverse clinical experiences are instrumental to an individual’s professional and personal development. Our students and residents are motivated to engage in research projects and to publish in international journals listed in well-established databases such as Scopus and Web of Science. Furthermore, students are encouraged to take part in exchange programs with outside universities as a means of understanding clinical practices in other scientific communities within Europe and the United States of America. For example, one student each year has the opportunity to travel to the Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth College, located in northeast United States, to gain clinical experience in a variety of medical specialties, including pediatric and obstetric medicine. Likewise, select Dartmouth College students join us at the University of Prishtina to conduct collaborative research on palliative care in Kosova. The result is a wonderful exchange of ideas and perspectives between two scientific communities separated by over 7000 kilometers of land and sea.

Going forward, the onus is on our evolving leadership to ensure that female students and residents continue to share equal opportunity in taking advantage of the fulfilling projects and programs offered by our university. Without question, the number of intelligent and driven young women in the scientific community is growing at an exponential rate. I am extremely proud to work alongside the incredible women that have joined the University of Prishtina family as staff, residents, and students. I am overwhelmingly excited by the direction our University has taken but am nonetheless aware that there is still work to be done, by all of us. As academicians, we have the power to effect and fight one of the globe’s oldest and most important crises, one decision at a time. Although the influence of women in science has reached greater heights than ever before, it is pertinent that we not become complacent. Now is not the time to press the brakes and enjoy the fruits of our past accomplishments; it is the time to band together and press on full-steam ahead into a better future.