

The Glass Ceiling

Priya Radhakrishnan, MD

There has been an uptick in social media buzz around women, the workplace, and work-life balance. Justice, race, gender, and equality are dominant themes in our conversations. Perhaps celebrating the anniversary of the March to Washington has reminded us to re-examine our social fabric.

When Marissa Mayer, the chief executive officer at Yahoo, revoked permission for staff to work from home, many saw her as anti-woman and anti-family. Then came the uproar around her upside-down photograph on a playground slide. Opinions flowed back and forth on the meaning of the photo—women's rights activists bemoaned the many steps back the women's movement would take. Others claimed that it was a good picture, nothing more or nothing less.

What is fascinating is the fact that, today in 2013, very few people think that these concerns are irrelevant. When Alexander Putin poses bare-chested with wild horses, he's just being the machismo president. Yet when Mayer poses fully clothed on a slide, we question her judgment.

You may wonder why I am writing about Mayer and Putin in the *Forum*. First, work-life balance has great importance to us and our profession. Many medical schools have reported a significant increase in female applicants, yet the number of women in leadership positions in medicine has not changed much. In another decade, as more highly educated women enter the workforce (undergraduate and medical school admissions are increasing), we do stand a chance of gender-based "affirmative action" developing. Still, women who train the same number of years and have the same student loan burden as men

most often are paid less. While the total number of women physicians has been steadily increasing, women physicians tend to work fewer hours. Estimates of patient care hours worked per week from an unpublished Health Resources and Services Administration survey (2002 data representing approximately 46,800 physicians) show that even when controlling for age and specialty, women tend to work fewer hours per year than men. After adjusting for age, training, and practice characteristics, there still remains *an unexplained 14% disparity in earnings*.

Why are we not savvy enough to address this issue head on? Do leaders of academic institutions really believe that the value of women physicians' work is less than that of their male counterparts? As a community are we not able to address these disparities?

The lack of women in the top echelons of leadership is a reality. I wonder why some women climb up the ladder and others don't. Is the basic issue that fewer women aspire to climb the ladder, or is the journey so hard that only a few attempt to grab the first rung? Perhaps women physicians choose not to go the extra mile at work so that they can invest time elsewhere in their lives.

Can we see the forest for the trees? Some might argue that women choose the role of caregiver and let their careers take a back seat. As a parent of young children, I know that early-career women physicians often fall into the trap of managing day-to-day existence. When the sheer physicality of the routine is amplified by chronic sleep deprivation, there is a grave danger of losing happiness from work. Once lost, the joy is hard to get back. I remember the

best advice that I received from my mentor was "to keep what you love in sight." I have found that following that advice helps me focus. When I find myself being deafened by the background noise of my day-to-day routine, I hit the reset button. Simple goals like developing a curriculum, a project, or—my favorite—submitting an SGIM workshop help ensure career progression. Once in the habit of thinking this way, you will ensure that every year your "fun at work" continues. It no longer becomes "work" but something that nurtures you during lean periods.

Do we celebrate us? In general women do not self-promote. Celebrate your academic successes with your peers and your supervisors—no one will know of your successes unless you share. I have a folder titled "It's all about me." It contains anecdotes, patient and mentee thank you cards, and snippets of my workshops and papers. Make a whole wall if you need to. Nothing succeeds like success. This will sustain you even on the days when someone pulls you to the side and prepares to give you some "formative feedback."

At the end of the day, as women, we have to want to lead. Leadership must not be foisted upon us but aspired to over time. Once that happens, the glass ceiling will give way to opportunity. There are enough of us in mid-level positions to band together, make critical decisions, and gradually achieve recognition for the work that we do. While there may be finite limits to a job, there should be no limits to rising to the top of one's field. It is time for women to seek, achieve, and move up.

Now I'm off to get my photo taken. I will keep the details secret!