

Pushing the glass ceiling

Is Indian science losing its 'scientific womanpower'?

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BANGALORE: "You really do not need a study to prove that women are under-represented in Indian science. What we need to know is why," says Rohini Godbole, Professor, Centre for High Energy Physics at the Indian Institute of Science.

The results of a pioneering study she conducted in 2004 for the Indian National Science Academy had confirmed what she already knew: while the number of women enrolled for PhDs in science is substantial (37 per cent of all science PhDs) and increasing, less than 15 per cent make it to faculty positions in top scientific institutes.

In some institutes such as the IISc, women comprise only 6.6 per cent of faculty. In short, "women study science, but few do science," Prof. Godbole concluded.

Top posts

Only between 3 to 5 per cent of fellows elected to the three national science academies are women, and only two top national institutes are headed by women.

So why is Indian science losing its "scientific womanpower"?

What constitutes the proverbial glass ceiling that prevents women scientists from occupying the top positions in science institutes? The "Women in Science" panel at the Indian Academy of Science, chaired by Prof. Godbole, is now looking for answers to this question in a survey of 1,000 women PhD holders.

Even as hundreds of women scientists begin to register for the survey, which was advertised in *Current Science* in August 2007, Prof. Godbole anticipates that the reasons for this gap will reflect the "triple burden" of professional work, domestic work (raising a family) and patriarchal attitudes.

"The glass ceiling manifests in subtle forms," says Prof. Godbole. She cites her own

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Yet another International Women's Day is upon us. Success stories jostle for space in the media, even as issues of disempowerment refuse to abate. Violence against women is growing in Karnataka, with 7,103 cases of crimes against women recorded in 2007 as against 6,652 in 2006. The child sex ratio continues to fall — from 960 in 1991 to 946 in 2001 — a sign of the growing phenomenon of sex selection. On this occasion *The Hindu* has drawn together a sampling of some facets of the many-layered experiences of women in a changing milieu. The voices of the sleep-deprived and overworked, yet upbeat, garment workers from around Bangalore; the glass ceiling phenomenon in the rarified world of science; a look at the Bhagyalakshmi insurance scheme for girls; and profiles of courage of women who have fought back against desperate personal odds. This mixed bag of writing on women is hardly comprehensive, but does suggest how diverse and complex the woman's question is.

example: when she joined an Indian university in 1980 as the first woman faculty at its physics department, her head of department expressed a distinct doubt about her ability to teach the Mathematical Methods course, even though she had been a successful theoretical particle physicist with a Ph.D. from a top U.S. university. "The most charitable comment I can make is that this was due to the department head's unfamiliarity with women teaching physics," she added.

Questions posed

"Are you married? Do you plan to have children? Who will look after them?" This sequence of questions, not infrequently posed to women scientists applying for faculty positions, should be "explicitly banned," says Shobhana Narasimhan, physicist and member National Task Force for Women in Science. "Men are never asked these questions," she adds.

Indeed, one of the biggest hurdles for women is that they lose precious time when they take a break to start a family, which coincides often with a crucial part of their early career, says Prof. God-

bole. To enable the process of returning to their careers, institutes must consider the academic age, not the physical age when making evaluations, she says. "But then again, why should women be expected to take an extended break at all?" she adds.

Initiatives

Prof. Narasimhan believes that some recent initiatives of the Department of Science and Technology have been imaginative. "The DST's Women Scientists' Scheme encourages women scientists through a fellowship, to help their return to their careers after a break. But it remains to be seen if institutions will absorb them," she adds.

Roddam Narasimha, Chairman, Engineering Mechanics Unit, Jawaharlal Nehru Centre for Advanced Scientific Research, believes that while societal attitudes about women's roles need to change, institutions also need to strengthen support structures.

"Whether day care centres on campus or the options of part time jobs and flexible timings, institutes need to be more tuned to women employees," he believes.