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Lilavati's daughters: today's story

Neelima Gupte

Many things have changed, for Lilavati's daughters, since Lilavati's times. Even so, very many aspects of her story find resonances in their lives. First, the positives. The fact that women are underrepresented in the scientific work-force was itself not recognised some years ago, let alone seen as a worrying phenomenon.

This has changed completely. All decision making bodies, whether institutions, or academies, or government departments, now feel the need to pay attention to this issue. This is quite different from what previous generations of women experienced, even if it was mostly unintentional.

In IIT Bombay, where I was an M.Sc. student in the seventies, the faculty was happy that some of the M.Sc. batches had nearly 50 per cent of girls. Our teachers were also conscious of the fact that women were seriously underrepresented at the faculty level (one woman in the physics department then). However, they thought this was the unchanging natural order, and did not consider it a part of their responsibility to bring about the change. All this is no longer true, anywhere.

I won't say much about the problem that women face at the entry level, since this is well known and much discussed. Speaking for myself, I by-passed this problem, having had the good fortune to get a faculty position at an early stage, at the University of Pune, which not only had a very active physics department, but also had a double digit number of women faculty (I was the tenth!).

This was a unique situation, and unfortunately this still remains unique. However, those of us who were there found a great deal of support from each other. Additionally, this was a very cheerful department with people who were ambitious in their work. This really helped me to grow in my early years, and even more crucially, helped me to change fields to an area that I had zero exposure to before. It is important to note that this was neither a well-funded nor a well-known department. It just had people who had a can-do attitude. Finally, this is what counts.

All this sounds good, however, there were other headaches. My husband and I worked in different cities (Chennai and Pune, not exactly nearby) for ten long years. Here again, I must acknowledge support from both my family and my husband's. Had they brought pressure on us, I might have quit, as have so many women.

Meanwhile, the job scenario was singularly unhelpful to couples trying to work in the same place. Finally, I moved to IIT Madras, which turned out to be fortunate. The institute was undergoing a sea change, and I found my own niche there. Meanwhile, the change was painful.

I was placed at an inappropriate level, perhaps because I was not in a position to bargain, something that happens frequently to women. My surroundings were far more conservative and bureaucratic than what I was used to. The people who saw me through the change were my research students, who had moved with me. They also felt uprooted from where they belonged, but somehow, by holding each others' hands, we made it through the transition.

As I said before, the problems faced by junior women faculty are now well recognised, if far from being solved. This is not to say that women at all other levels do not face their quota of headaches. Women in middle levels fight to keep their heads above the water, both as people and as professionals. They are both se-

nior and junior at the same time! That is, they are given responsibility without autonomy. Women at senior levels are frequently expected to be compliant by their senior colleagues, and push-overs, by their junior colleagues.

Harassment issues exist in many places, and are rarely dealt with in a professional way. Serious positions taken by women on issues of importance are resented far more than similar positions taken by their male colleagues. Role models who have successfully handled these problems are few and far between. However, many women manage to cope, by developing their own networks, and relying on them for advice and support. Lilavati's daughters get by, with a little help from friends.

Finally, what would we, the women of this generation, like to see for the women of the next generation? Perhaps the ideal situation would be if they were in a position so advantageous, that they would wonder what all the fuss that we make had been about. In that case, those of us who are still around then, might have to remind them that freedoms which are not guarded jealously, have a tendency to slip away!