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Promoting Equity for Women in Medical Journal Editing

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Credentials Display

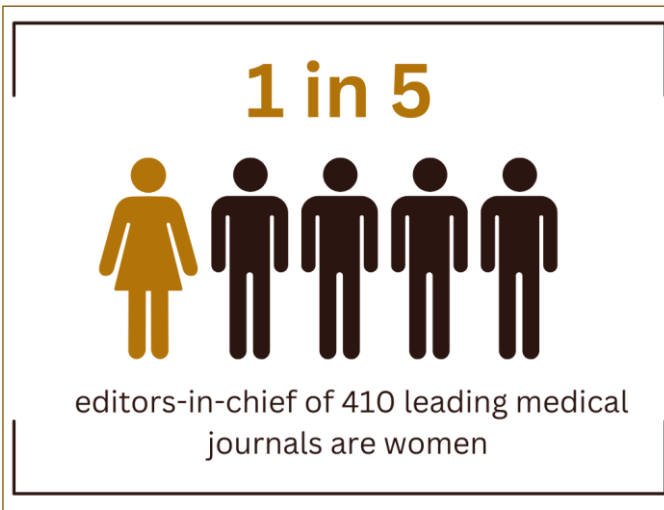
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Women are significantly underrepresented in all editorial roles across various types of medical journals (Harris et al., 2019; Palser et al., 2022; Pinho-Gomes et al., 2021). Studies of hundreds of leading medical journals found that only 21%, or 1-in-5, had a female editor-in-chief (Marabito, 2021; Pinho-Gomes et al., 2021). While some might expect women's health journals to lead in gender equity, the process of achieving gender equality (GenWest, 2019), a study of 132 journals in 2019 found that females occupied only 41% of editor-in-chief positions (Pinho-Gomes et al., 2021). This also occurs in journals related to medical specialties, where females represent the majority of providers. For example, over 60% of pediatricians are female, but zero of the top four pediatric journals employed a female editor-in-chief (Grinnell et al., 2019). One study found that three-quarters of psychology journals have majority male editors, while less than a quarter have female editors.



In one study, three-quarters (76%) of psychology journals were found to have majority male editors, while the same was true for females in less than a quarter (20%) of the journals (Palser et al., 2022). These inequalities also exist outside of medicine in areas such as ecology and evolution, mathematics, and science (Pinho-Gomes et al., 2021). This is not unique to the United States. Other studies have found a similar pattern in the United Kingdom, Germany, and Canada (Palser et al., 2022), and it can presumably be found elsewhere.

While conditions seemed to be changing in favor of greater gender equity by the late 2010s, the slight growth has been slow, and the COVID-19 pandemic has undone some of that progress (Harris et al., 2019; Marabito, 2021). The implications of COVID-19 seem to have “exacerbated longstanding gender inequalities” in academia, medicine, research and authorship, and publishing and created widespread repercussions across several medical specialties (Marabito, 2021; Pinho-Gomes et al., 2021). While there is some evidence of improvement, it is clear that female editors remain “vastly outnumbered” by male editors (Harris et al., 2019).

Importance of Gender Equity in Access to Medical Editorial Positions

While the facts are clear, some may wonder about the severity of the issue. Several factors support the importance of gender equality in medical journals. First, journals play a key role in promoting gender equity in authorship. Research has shown that women are more likely to promote other women on editorial boards (Marabito, 2021). Without adequate representation on editorial boards, policies may not exist to address barriers faced by female authors, such as flexible working patterns or administrative support (Pinho-Gomes et al., 2021). Though editors-in-chief do not make decisions alone and the gender of the author should not influence the acceptance of a manuscript for publication, more research is needed to determine if women would have greater opportunity to conduct research if there were more females in higher leadership positions (Marabito, 2021).

Secondly, being on an editorial board is often viewed as prestigious and powerful because of the opportunity for career advancement and to serve as a professional influencer and gatekeeper (Harris et al., 2019; Palser et al., 2022). In addition, female representation in medical fields may encourage other

academic disciplines and the next generation of scientists (Palser et al., 2022). It could even play a role in dismantling greater systemic gender inequality, as female leaders promote diversity in the workplace overall (Marabito, 2021; Palser et al., 2022). Female editors-in-chief are more likely to promote the publication of diverse voices through their editorial board selections (Marabito, 2021). Perhaps most importantly, gender inequalities in medicine can affect all aspects of health care and result in worse outcomes for patients (Marabito, 2022).

Understanding Causes of Gender Inequality in Medical Editorial Positions

There are several reasons for gender inequality in access to medical editorial positions, which stem from imbalances for women in medicine, academia, research, and leadership positions. This does not simply mean there are more men in medicine; there is evidence that female physicians earn less money, experience greater career deterrents, and report higher frequencies of harassment (Marabito, 2021b). The gender gap in academia and leadership creates a gender gap in research (Pinho-Gomes et al., 2021). Palser et al. (2022) found that women are underrepresented at the rank of full professor and earn an average of 88% of what their male peers earn. One study found that 38% of full-time faculty were women, but only 21% were full professors (Grinnell et al., 2019). This gap also means there are fewer role models for women as leaders in academic medicine (Grinnell et al., 2019; Pinho-Gomes et al., 2021). Despite this, little change has been made because men in positions of power who can influence policy typically benefit from maintaining the status quo (Marabito, 2021).

To better understand gender inequality, it is important to note an unbalanced share of paid and unpaid work between men and women still exists. In the areas of paid work, it seems women have less time for research, authorship, and editorial roles because they spend more time than men teaching. Despite the increase of women in the workforce, societal expectations in the US still classify childcare as the woman's responsibility (Marabito, 2022). Women spend twice as much time as men on unpaid domestic duties, such as cooking, childcare, and housework (transportation is the only area where men do more unpaid work than women) (Pinho-Gomes et al., 2021). In addition, women are more likely than men to take career breaks, such as maternity leave, which may further impede professional development (Pinho-Gomes et al., 2021). Many women simply have less time for editorial roles.

Underlying this inequitable division of paid and unpaid labor is a systemic gender bias that persistently undervalues women's academic and leadership accomplishments and benefits men in the publishing process. A review of papers in which the title begins with "invited" on PubMed found that men receive twice as many invitations from journals to submit work (Grinnell et al., 2019). This is an implicit bias toward men, but again, because men occupy the majority of higher leadership positions in academia, a lack of sufficient policy change delays equity (Pinho-Gomes et al., 2021).

While microaggressions exist, men and women also seem to engage with authorship and the publishing process differently. Though men are more likely than women to serve as first author on a paper, which may contribute to lower numbers of women in editorial positions, they are also more likely to promote their own work through self-citation (Grinnell et al., 2019). While this does not count toward H-indices, it does increase visibility and is likely to increase citation in other manuscripts, which will affect H-indices (Grinnell et al., 2019). This could enhance assumptions that women are simply less active in research and editorial work. Or, maybe they are just less active. Men and women appear to make different career choices. For women, these choices seem to result in less engagement in research. Several studies have found that women tend to spend more time with patients and teaching than in research, which more

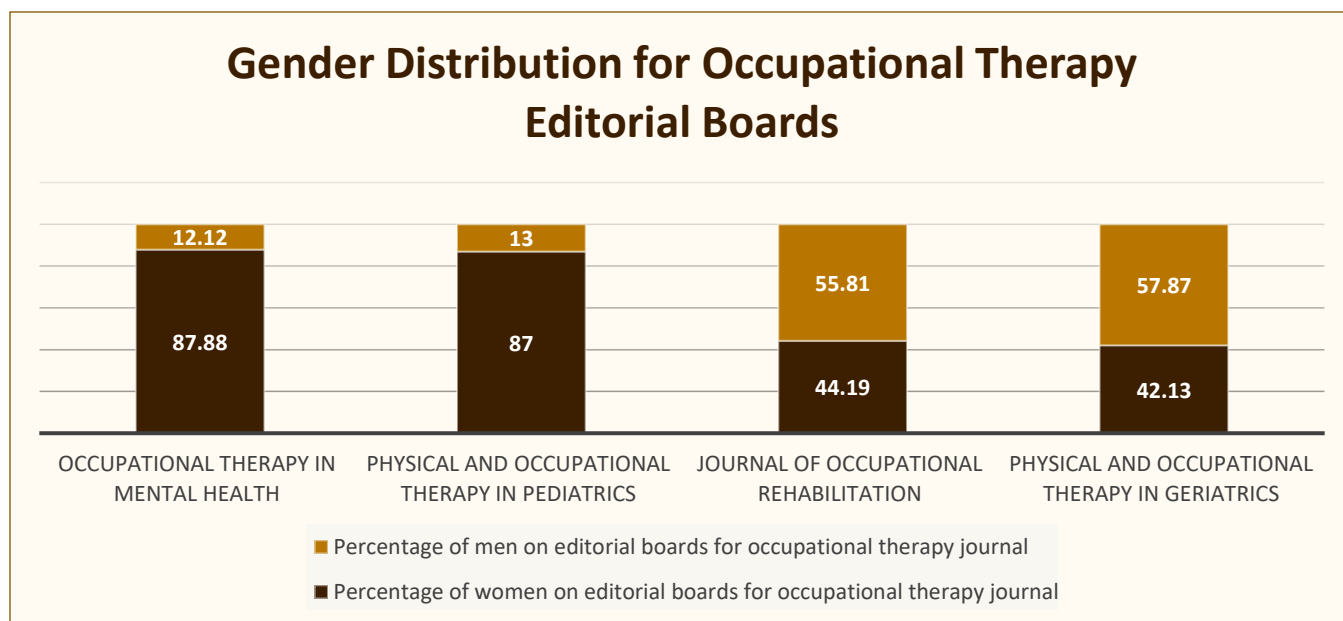
often leads to advancement in editorial and other leadership positions (Grinnell et al., 2019). Further research is needed to determine the reasons for these choices.

Gender Disparities in Occupational Therapy Journals

The percentage of women in editorial positions in occupational therapy journals is better than in other medical journals. However, women are still underrepresented compared to the gender composition in the profession. Even though women constitute 80.3% of the global occupational therapy workforce (WFOT) and 83.2% of the occupational therapy workforce in the US (www.zippia.com, 2022), their representation in editorial positions is not equitable to these percentages.

Mendoza-Holgado et al. (2023) examined the gender composition of occupational therapy journal editorial boards globally using three categories: editorial leaders (editor-in-chief, editor, co-editor), associate editor, and editorial board members. They analyzed 17 journals and found that women held only 65% of editorial leadership positions, 74.28% of associate editor positions, and 68.46% of editorial board membership. Four of the 17 journals did not reach parity, with women representing below 50% of editorial board membership. Of the journals they examined, the ones with the highest percentage of female representation were *The Journal of Occupational Therapy, Schools, and Early Intervention* (91.89%) and *Occupational Therapy in Mental Health* (87.88%). The journals with the lowest female representation were *Physical and Occupational Therapy in Geriatrics* (42.31%) and *The Hong Kong Journal of Occupational Therapy* (42%). Overall, the journals focused on pediatrics and mental health had higher female representation than the journals focused on rehabilitation and geriatrics.

A similar pattern of gender composition is found in occupational therapy journals published in the US. Of the seven journals we examined, the overall percentage of women on editorial boards was 68.25%. The journals with the highest female representation were *Occupational Therapy in Mental Health* (87.88%) and *Physical and Occupational Therapy in Pediatrics* (87%). The journals with the lowest female representation were the *Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation* (44.19%) and *Physical and Occupational Therapy in Geriatrics* (42.31%). Again, the specialty areas of pediatrics and mental health had the highest female representation, even when we included the profession of physical therapy, which has only 67% females.



We also examined ourselves. *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT) is based in the US but has editorial board members and readership globally. The editor-in-chief, associate editor, managing editor, copy editor, art editor, and assistant copy editor positions are all currently held by women. The gender composition of the OJOT editorial leadership is 87.37% female, and the composition of the editorial board is 81.25% female. These numbers exceed the percentage of women who are occupational therapists globally and closely match the percentage of women who are occupational therapists in the US.

Overall, women fulfill a majority of the editorial roles in most journals in the occupational therapy profession. However, in our professional journals, “the proportion among leadership roles in occupational therapy remains significantly underrepresented” compared to the percentage of occupational therapists in practice (Mendoza-Holgado et al., 2023). The reason for this disparity and whether there is gender-related bias in the profession is unknown (Mendoza-Holgado, 2023). There may be a bias toward males in the profession, but the reason also may be the choices that women make in their lives to focus on other roles, such as fulfilling family obligations or pursuing other occupations.

Promoting Gender Equality

As more women pursue science-based professions, the number of women editors will increase, especially if they attain leadership positions and contribute to scholarly research and publications in their professions (Harris et al., 2019). This process requires removing barriers and promoting career advancement for women and may start with the promotion of women to leadership positions in academia. Although women make up 83.2% of the occupational therapy workforce in the US, only 46.7% of occupational therapy professors were women as of 2022 (<https://www.zippia.com/occupational-therapist-jobs/demographics>). Ginnell et al. (2019) found that having a female department chair increased the number of female faculty and doubled females’ chances for promotion. These promotions often depend on research and publishing, and yet barriers to publishing still exist for women. There is gender bias in the selection of manuscripts for publication, as evidenced by the fact that using double-blind review in which the reviewers do not know the gender of the authors significantly increased the representation of female authors (Ginnell et al., 2019). In addition to using double-blind review, structuring diverse editorial boards that reflect the profession minimizes biases extrinsic to the merit of the manuscripts submitted for review (Palser et al., 2022).

Removing these barriers and promoting the publication of scholarly works by women creates a pool from which the selection of female editorial board members can occur. “Because editors-in-chief are often selected from editorial boards or have experience as associate or section editors, addressing women’s underrepresentation in editorial boards seems a priority to foster gender parity at the level of editor-in-chief” (Pinho-Gomes et al., 2021). There is a cyclical process in which women who serve on editorial boards become more qualified for editor-in-chief positions, and female editors-in-chief have been found to select and mentor more women to serve on editorial boards (Pinho-Gomes et al., 2021). Increasing the representation of women in top editorial leadership positions, therefore, is critical for addressing longstanding inequities at all levels of the publication process, including at the upper echelons, such as the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of publishing companies. For example, Elsevier, a global publishing company focused on research in the health care professions, recently appointed their first woman CEO in Elsevier’s 140-year history.

Although the representation of women in leadership positions in medical journal publications still demonstrates disparities, there are trends toward gender equity and several examples of progress (Harris et al., 2019). Pinho-Gomes et al. (2021) found that “the representation of women in some journal categories was equal or higher than 50% (e.g., microbiology, primary health care, genetics and heredity), thus demonstrating that gender equality is achievable.” The profession of occupational therapy has also demonstrated that gender equality in publishing leadership is possible. There are several examples of occupational therapy scholarly publications that demonstrate gender equality. Journals such as *The Journal of Occupational Therapy, Schools, and Early Intervention*; *Occupational Therapy in Mental Health*; *Physical and Occupational Therapy in Pediatrics*; and *OJOT* all have percentages of female editorial members that exceed the global percentage of female therapists.

Progress for women in leadership publishing positions has been slow, but there is evidence of increasing equity. Harris et al. (2019) suggest conditions are improving for women in publishing, but work is needed to achieve true equality. Efforts need to be made to minimize barriers to career advancement in academia, health care, and research. More work is needed to ensure equity in the publication process and increase women’s representation on editorial boards. Increasing female editors-in-chief will have a trickle-down effect on editorial, advisory, and editorial review board presence, thereby increasing representation and mentorship and fostering future equity in publishing. Here at *OJOT*, we are committed to promoting equitable publishing practices through double-blind peer review; the inclusion of women in editorial leadership positions; a diverse composition on the editorial review board; and mentorship of women authors, editorial review board members, and editorial leaders.

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