

SPECIAL FEATURE: Women in Science

Plenary Address on 8th Nov. 2009, for Session on Speech, Language & Hearing Sciences and Disorders at the 2nd National Women's Science Congress hosted by AIISH, Mysore

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Abstract

Speech language pathology has largely been viewed as a 'woman's profession'. Support for this view is found in the fact that women form the majority of field workers in the profession. Yet the prevalence and impact of women, be it in positions of power within the field, or as speech language pathology scientists, has been negligible. The paper explores the possible reasons for the same and how this needs to be and can be changed in the future.

Friends,

It is indeed a pleasure to be presenting this plenary note in the area of Speech and Language, at this prestigious congress on 'Women in Science' and my sincere thanks to the organizers for having invited me to do so. The gender bias in the professional arena even in one in which the number of women has consistently outnumbered men, has been a matter of concern through out my professional career and I am indeed delighted that I now have a platform to voice these concerns, not only with reference to my own personal experiences and sphere of activities, but with reference to the larger scope of the profession of Speech Language Pathology across the globe.

In my four decade long career as a Speech Language Pathologist (SLP) in India, I have often experienced and witnessed, how gender has been an unwarranted factor in both my own professional trajectory as well as the many women colleagues and the even more women students that I have had the privilege of knowing and training. Over the years there has been many a bright eyed, sharp minded, aspirant female SLP with excellent academic credentials, getting into the profession largely on the basis of her academic strengths and continuing to fare similarly in the profession. A few years down the line many of them are not to be seen or heard from and in the professional arena the markedly skewed gender divide seen in the student population reverses itself. While admittedly some of this is due to already acknowledged contributory factors of attrition such as marriage and childbirth, there are also other

insidious factors that have and continue to operate, factors that need to be recognized and acknowledged in order that women in the science of speech-language pathology rightfully gain their due.

Traditionally, the speech-language pathology profession has been viewed as a 'woman's profession'. The number of women enrolling for courses in speech-language pathology across the world is decidedly tilted in favor of women and women represent a majority of the field's total workers. According to a recent report by Forbes, the profession is reported to be among the top ten highest paying jobs for women in countries like the US; after pharmacists, women physicians and surgeons, and women human resource managers, but ahead of women systems analysts and computer programmers (forbes.com, 2009 based on a U.S. Department of Labor Women's Bureau 2008 analysis).

Impressive as this may seem at first glance, it is important to note that the list compiles the top ten paying jobs for 'women', not 'the' top ten paying jobs. So it really doesn't say much about women's position in the world's top paid jobs and professions. If one looks closely at this list of professions in which women earn the maximum as compared to other professions that other women are employed in, it appears that the key factors that influence the choice of these jobs by women are high-paying work (relatively that is) and flexibility with manageable schedules indicators of the many other demands that women have to accommodate, while choosing jobs.

What is it that contributes to the perception of SLP as being a profession that is suited for women? The following are a few possibilities -

- 1) Rehabilitation in India and elsewhere has, until recently, developed under the 'charity model' and was primarily non paying/poorly paying charitable work. Therefore a woman's job?
- 2) SLP is among the caring, clinical professions therefore for women?
- 3) The practice of SLP requires patience and is slow to show results ideally suited for women?

In short, the perception is that, the profession of speech language pathology is ideally suited for women because it is nurturing in nature, requiring loads of patience, economically unimportant with final outcomes that are not too dramatic and therefore feminine in nature! Within the profession anyone who disagreed or failed to fall in line with these socio cultural perceptions were seen as those who are loud and aggressive unwomanly characteristics most women are culturally trained not to want to be identified with. Interestingly within the broader combined field of Speech & Hearing Sciences, speech (SLP) was perceived to be the 'soft science' more suited for women and hearing (Audiology) the 'hard science' for men.

Further, while speech-language pathology is universally acknowledged as a 'woman's profession' and is dominated by women in terms of numbers, this has not necessarily converted into a dominance of women in the profession, in terms of their professional status. The ratio of women to men in the higher rungs of the profession progressively declines. One of the reasons for the same is that as in many other professions a sizeable number of the female work force cannot or do not persist in the workforce because they are tradition-bound and opt out of the workforce to dedicate themselves to the role of home makers. However it is also a fact that selections of women to higher positions are not only suppressed on the assumption that women can't multi-task but are often influenced by considerations of the husband's job and or location, not by the woman herself but by the selectors and administrators. This despite the fact that the academic and professional record of the woman candidate is more often than not superior to that of her male colleague and the

fact that she has chosen to apply for the job knowing fully well the requirements of the position as also presumably her particular circumstances in terms of family needs!

There is a further gender divide, the divide of the 'upstairs' and 'downstairs' people. While the 'upstairs people' carried out the more onerous work of teaching, research and administrative positions, the 'downstairs people' consisting of clinicians carried out the more 'mundane' or 'routine' clinical work, the unwritten and unspoken rule being that the former was essentially to be peopled by men and the latter by women. It is needless to point out that the pay packets, domination and 'prestige' of the former is considerably higher than that of the latter. On a concessional note, there was a feeble attempt at creating positions of 'clinical lecturer' and 'clinical readers'. The fact that in its nearly 5 decade history the current Director of AIISH is only the second lady to occupy this position stands testimony to the above. Even a cursory look at the academic records of the male and female students that have passed through the institution would clearly throw up how disproportionate the ratio is in comparison to the relative ratio of 'promise of academic excellence' across the genders in their student days.

The situation in the more advanced / western countries, was no different until recently.

Despite their higher numbers on ground, women speech language pathologists remain under-represented in science and in decision-making bodies concerned with scientific issues, as in many other disciplines in which women are not predominant. That, things are a changing is evident in that, Speech-Language Pathology is singled out in the Forbes list as the only occupation that currently showed no gender pay gap (forbes.com, 2009). It is equally gratifying to observe that many of the professors and teaching faculty of AIISH today are women, reflecting the gender bias in the proportion of men and women who take up this profession.

And what of science and women scientists in the field of speech language sciences and pathology in India? While in the west there is an increasing presence of women scientists in the field, this is not true of India, as yet. Regrettably, as in many other scientific and clinical disciplines in India, speech language pathology too has borne the brunt of the phenomenon of brain drain, perhaps even more so

since it is a science in its nascent stage. Scientific research and development in the field has barely begun and is yet to take root, despite the enormous potential that our socio cultural and linguistic milieu holds for such research. Much of the research that has been carried out so far has been in the nature of fulfilling requirements for obtaining degrees and jobs. Long term research positions and grants have neither been readily available nor sought after. It is only in the last decade or so that a handful of scientists have emerged in the field, with a serious commitment to science and research.

It would not be amiss to observe that the reason why we are only now beginning to see some serious attention, being paid to sustained research in the discipline, could also be linked partially at least, if not totally, to the predominance of women in the discipline. As in most other professions, women in SLP too end up having checkered career graphs, because of the prioritization of marriage, family and children. It is not until her forties, if then, that the woman professional pursues her career more single mindedly and in the absence of readily accessible research positions or funds, a larger commitment to science and research becomes the last priority. The absence of any real presence of scientists among us should therefore be seen in the context of the short history of SLP in this country as well as the predominance of women in the workforce.

The decreasing number of women, from enrolment in undergraduate courses to PG courses and research programs contributes and strengthens the identification of science with masculinity. Nevertheless it is noteworthy that as in other areas, the young woman SLP of today takes a more informed decision on her choice of career and in charting the course of her career vis a vis her personal life. Even so there are aspects of a career in speech language pathology that can be turned in to an advantage and a basis for good science, with some thought and preplanning.

The potential that clinical practice holds for science in SLP is one such. Given the largely unexplored course of scientific investigation in SLP, because of its very brief existence as an independent scientific discipline; it is the clinical work that will provide the questions and pointers for further research, provided that one approaches the clinical work within this scientific perspective. Research and

science in the discipline has to stem from clinical work and feed back into it. Given the nascent stage of the discipline good clinicians could well be among our best scientists. The challenges of clinical work and results are in my personal experience and opinion, far more than those in teaching and 'pure research' in this applied clinical discipline. And it is time that we broke the myth of the superiority of teaching and research over clinical work.

Good science in speech language pathology does not require one to be wearing a white coat and sitting in a laboratory. Child rearing which is so much a part of a woman's preoccupation and takes up so much of her time, for instance, could easily provide a unique opportunity for providing a basis for good science in this discipline. There is so much that awaits scientific investigation in the science of child language acquisition and disorders. Incidental science and scientific thinking during the long years of child rearing, within the vantage position of a ringside look, can lead to the very questions that need to be looked in to empirically in controlled studies at a later date. Provided of course there is a scientific mind and scientific framework for your thoughts and ideas and the scientific discipline and drive to take it further, subsequently.

Speech-language pathology is expected to grow faster than average through the year 2014 (ASHA website) and there is room for many a woman scientist within this growth. To go by this years Nobel Prize list for science, the abysmal ratio of outstanding women to men scientists, shows signs of changes. Differences across boys and girls in performance on math whizzes and other traditional 'masculine subjects' are reported to have declined to 1 to 1 in gender equal countries. Leading scientists such as Stanford University neurology professor Robert M. Sapolsky, the author of "A Primate's Memoir," among other works; emphasize how 'the brain is constantly reshaped by environment and as we contemplate findings like these, it's worth appreciating how powerfully the brain is sculpted by society's values and beliefs". A reaffirmation of our belief in us and our honing of our capacities as rational thinkers and scientists will augur well for women among the speech language scientists of the future.

References:

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