

Challenges and Safety of Women Surgeons during Residency and Practice

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In recent decades, with an increasing number of women pursuing medical career, there is a striking contrast of women taking-up surgical specialties. Though, surgery is traditionally a macho field, the status of women surgeons has significantly improved in recent years. But, the basic challenges remain yet to be addressed.⁽¹⁾ Is surgery really appealing to women or is it appalling? Several issues drive them away from choosing a surgical carrier. These multifaceted factors include years of laborious, physically demanding, emotionally exhausting training which is compounded by male dominated work-environment, insufficient family time, poor quality of personal life, negligible prospects in career advancements and less financial perks. While most of the women doctors chose relatively cooler, family-friendly, less demanding or even 'feminine specialties', only a few (including me) take-up surgery with great passion.

Transition from Motherhood to Hardihood

Balancing between a surgical career and a family life is often a tight rope-walk for woman surgeons. In the current socio-cultural milieu of the SAARC countries, child-bearing and rearing undermine their surgical and academic performance.⁽¹⁾ Many of the woman surgical-residents postpone their marriage and pregnancy in favour of professional career, and as a consequence of this, few of them

embarking on marital life in their fourth decade need assisted reproductive techniques. They often have the dilemma of "whether family first or practice first?" and face the dual guilt - the guilt of neglecting the career and the guilt of being an inadequate mother. While male surgeons are perceived as 'dedicated', ambitious female surgeons are frequently labelled as 'bossy and aggressive' at workplace and 'negligent mom' at home.⁽²⁾ To be a successful 'she surgeons', it is essential to exhibit remarkable resilience in the arduous work-life journey.

Role of Robust Support System

There is a need to build a robust support system to empower female surgeons. Involvement of spouse in child rearing is crucial. Only a few are fortunate to have a strong parental and spousal support in child rearing. Many have to opt for the help of a paid maid. I have seen children of many female surgeons are being raised up not at home, but in the hospital corridors! A difficult child rearing can significantly alter the career trajectory of woman surgeons.

De-skilling, Re-skilling and Up-skilling

Due to the career breaks of pregnancy, women are perceived to be at the risk of 'de-skilling'.⁽³⁾ Fear of incompetence, failures and repercussions together

with the lack of a good support system are the common causes of attrition. Women are often disgruntled in an isolated and male-dominated work-environment. A female surgeon has to pull her weight like a man, to receive the same privileges and respect as her male colleagues and be “re-skilled” to achieve professional competence. “Up-skilling” can be attained by attending trainings, workshops or fellowship programmes.

Gender Disparity and Equality

Gender plays a major role in career challenges faced by female surgeons.⁽¹⁾ Though gender gap is closing fast, there is a gender bias, with major a favouritism towards the males thereby limiting the opportunities of woman surgeons. Many of them face scepticism about their competence and end-up with professional frustration and dissatisfaction. It is important to work towards gender equality to attract brilliant women to surgery who will break the vicious cycle of lack of mentorship and leadership.

Pressing Safety Concerns

Workplace harassment, be it sexual or otherwise, prevails throughout a woman’s career impacting her mental and emotional well-being. It is only the people around her most of the time, who create a hostile work-environment.⁽²⁾ Many of the woman surgeons face micro-aggression from colleagues which affects self-esteem thereby leading to burn-outs, depression and a tremendous gap in the confidence level. Proper accommodation at the workplace and safety during travel and night calls are needed to protect the dignity of women in surgery.

Mentorship and Sponsorship

Proper guidance and hand-holding is crucial for woman surgeons to navigate through her career. Women prefer gender-concordant mentoring relationships, one for their admirable distinction in the surgical field and another for their advocacy on the integration of work-life balancing. ‘Spon-

sorship’ goes way beyond mentoring, where a senior colleague actively supports her career growth by providing recommendations and by promoting her in the highly competitive surgical field. This is hardly ever seen among the female surgeons and the struggle is real.⁽²⁾ Incorporating mentorship and sponsorship programs will definitely help the brightest category of women who are stuck-up in mediocrity.

Pipelines and Pathways to Leadership

The increasing number of women in surgery are not been matched by the increasing number of women in leadership positions. This may be due to the ‘pipeline effect’.⁽¹⁾ The numbers drop off at startling rates as one look at the ascending ranks. Male surgeons are able to take unilateral decisions, adapt to changes, explore new opportunities and move to the next level of career progression. But, women surgeons prefer ‘safety cum security’ and work-life stability. Apprehensive of working with a new team or workplace, they often resist changes, resulting in career stagnation. It is important to break the proverbial glass ceiling and enter the ‘growth zone’ to attain leadership positions.⁽³⁾ Without restructuring the surgical career advancement scheme, the profession will leave women behind.⁽²⁾

Your network is your net worth

Building a strong social network is of utmost importance to break barriers, build confidence and to provide support system among the aspiring woman surgeons. The ‘*Wonder Women Pediatric Surgery*’ group in the Whatsapp, the ‘*Association of Women Surgeons*’ (AWS) group in the Instagram and the ‘*Association of Surgeons of India - Women in Surgery (ASI-Win-S)*’ are few such social networking platforms that are of great help in connecting the woman surgeons around the globe. They play a crucial role in voicing out their needs and views.

Lastly, I remember one of my mentors saying, "Let your degree not be a jewel in your crown; let it be a passion in your heart".

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