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African women working in global health: closing the gender gap in Africa?



Improving global health and gender equality are integral components of the 2030 agenda for the Sustainable Development Goals.¹ However, women in research are still under-represented.² The lack of female researchers in sub-Saharan Africa reduces the diversity of scientific perspectives on gender dimensions of health, and curtails the ability of the society to advocate for maternal and reproductive health research agendas.

Although the number of women entering higher education in sub-Saharan Africa has increased, gender disparity remains. Only 30% of science professionals in sub-Saharan Africa are women.² The challenges for women begin early; even though nowadays the number of girls attending primary school is similar to the number of boys in many African countries, the chances of getting into university are five times lower for women than for men in countries such as Nigeria.³

Young women raised in societies in which they are the primary caregivers both for children and elderly family members typically regard a successful career and raising a family as mutually exclusive. Although opportunities for scientists to travel to other countries to expand their knowledge are integral to career development, the impact on family, pregnancy, and breastfeeding often deters women from pursuing these.

Additionally, the scarcity of local female role models in sub-Saharan Africa has been shown to affect career choice.⁴ Globally, outstanding women have overcome gender barriers and achieved success, but in sub-Saharan Africa, young women have to pioneer their own success.

Elsewhere, flexible working hours, generous maternity policies, and access to quality childcare have facilitated the integration of women into the workplace. For example, the Athena SWAN charter in the UK encourages universities to promote equality.⁵ International agencies have also undertaken activities to bolster women in science, including programmes and

frameworks that actively promote leadership such as the Women Leaders in Global Health Conference.⁶ However, policies aimed at integrating women in African public and private research sectors have not been prioritised.

We argue that to help close the gender gap in sub-Saharan Africa, women and men need to perceive women as intellectually equal. Moreover, female and male scientists need to work in partnership to enhance the availability of flexible working hours, maternity benefits, and access to quality daycare, both for young children and elderly people. We believe that access to these benefits and services would enable African women to play a more prominent role in science and consequently improve the health and wellbeing of all people living in sub-Saharan Africa.

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