

# Women in Vision UK strive for gender equality in ophthalmology and vision sciences

Helen Khan, Sarah E. Coupland and Mariya Moosajee

Gender inequality exists in ophthalmology and vision sciences. There is an uprising of women working in vision-related sciences and healthcare pioneered by Mariya Moosajee, Julie Daniels and Maryse Bailly. These women have recognized a need for change and have taken action by establishing the Women in Vision UK (WVUK). The network's aims are progressive and innovative with complete inclusivity for anyone interested, associated with or working in the field of vision. The framework encourages young women to enter the profession, and with continued support and mentorship, retain and enhance their careers. Networking, collaboration and peer support are the key attributes of the group. WVUK is integrating into a global network by holding regular meetings at the Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology (ARVO) annual conference and joining the US-based Women in Eye and Vision Research (WEAVR) group and European Association for Eye and Vision Research (EVER). Similar splinter meetings will take place nationally to allow local networks to develop, overall to promote women to the most senior positions and increase their profile. Underpinning WVUK has been the Athena SWAN charter, which recognizes the efforts to ensure gender equality in our workplace. The collaborative nature of WVUK will initiate a strong network nationally and internationally and will become a positive example of a professional shift in equality.

## A movement in ophthalmology

How is it possible that we today are writing about gender inequality in ophthalmology and vision sciences? A hundred years on from the first achievements of the UK suffragette movement, women working in these fields still do not have the same profile as men, and the reason for this is that inequality exists beyond ophthalmology, across the whole of science, technology, engineering,

mathematics and medicine (STEMM), and our profession has tolerated this with little change.<sup>1</sup> Theorists have developed terms, such as 'the glass ceiling effect' and 'statistical discrimination', as reasons why women are not considered equal to men in the workplace. The glass ceiling effect poses an impenetrable barrier to women (and minorities) reaching senior positions,<sup>2</sup> whilst statistical discrimination examines prejudice between demographic groups. According to the Gender Equality Index Report 2017,<sup>3</sup> the UK has been slow to progress in employment equality. However, the report outlines that the issue is EU-wide, with a 'wide and persistent' gap between men and women in the workplace. On average, across the EU, women earn 20% less than men.<sup>3</sup> These theories and reports have been important in understanding the issues, but action is the only key to changing the situation at the 'ground level'.

Ophthalmology is dominated by men, and according to the Royal College of Ophthalmologists Workforce Census 2016, 74% of consultant ophthalmologists in the UK were male.<sup>4</sup> This is echoed at higher institutional and academic levels across the country. There has been a recent shift: a movement in ophthalmology and the vision-related sciences to create a supportive working environment. This has been partly driven by the Athena SWAN initiative in the UK, which aims to encourage and support the careers of women in STEMM employment in higher education, professional services and research. Notable advances have already been made in ophthalmology and the vision sciences in improving work-life balance, mentoring and career development, child-care facilities and parental leave. However, three progressive women in ophthalmology felt the large number of talented women in our profession deserve more. Everyone, regardless of sex or ethnicity, should be rewarded and recognized for their achievements, allowing them to climb the

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Correspondence to:

**Mariya Moosajee**  
Development, Ageing and  
Disease, UCL Institute  
of Ophthalmology, 11–43  
Bath Street, London EC1V  
9EL, UK  
Department of Genetics,  
Moorfields Eye Hospital  
NHS Foundation Trust,  
London, UK  
Department of  
Ophthalmology, Great  
Ormond Street Hospital for  
Children NHS Foundation  
Trust, London, UK  
[m.moosajee@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:m.moosajee@ucl.ac.uk)

**Helen Khan**  
National Institute for  
Health Research (NIHR)  
Biomedical Research  
Centre at Moorfields Eye  
Hospital and UCL Institute  
of Ophthalmology, London,  
UK

**Sarah E. Coupland**  
Department of Molecular  
and Clinical Cancer  
Medicine, Institute of  
Translational Medicine,  
University of Liverpool,  
Liverpool, UK

academic and/or institutional ladders and push through the perceived 'glass ceiling'.

### **The lightbulb moment**

Mariya Moosajee, Maryse Bailly and Julie Daniels are leading this movement in the UK by founding 'Women in Vision UK' (WVUK). This group of specialist women convened initially to create a female speaker list to ensure that women were being equally represented on grant panels and as speakers at conferences. Recognizing that this was not sufficient, the concept expanded to become the growing network that it is today. The need for this group has become clearly evident. An overwhelming response to the inaugural meeting in December 2017 in London provoked a sense of passion and determination for this group to exist, grow, promote and support women working in the field. Many of the members at the inaugural meeting have had a negative experience of gender imbalance at some point in their career. These experiences commonly involved being misjudged as particular gender stereotypes or being impeded in progression. This was not only executed by elder colleagues but disappointingly also by peers and the general public. This is echoed by the findings in the US-based Pew Research Center Survey,<sup>1</sup> also cited in *The Lancet* editorial 'Year of reckoning for women in science'.<sup>5</sup>

WVUK is aligned and adheres to the tenets of the Athena SWAN Gender Charter and the Equality Challenge Unit Race and Equality Charter. One of WVUK's core values is to encourage young women to enter into vision sciences at various stages of their training and working lives. Providing an infrastructure that will support and promote the rising stars to the most senior levels will boost retention of the best talent and ultimately achieve the highest quality of clinical and research advancement.

Over 250 people are now part of WVUK and although the network is only a few months old, the interest across the wide range of vision science specialities is staggering. A multidisciplinary WVUK board has been formed with responsibilities and capabilities being harnessed appropriately to outline short-, medium- and long-term objectives. Activities include networking opportunities, travel grants and childcare allowances to support attendance of international meetings. WVUK members are empowered to take more active roles in the workplace and join professional

and community organizations in demonstration of their abilities and careers.

### **Collaboration for success**

The WVUK initiative has gained the support of well-established organizations. This support provides unprecedented equal opportunities, for funding, access to resources and facilities, and representation. Fight for Sight, the UK's leading eye research charity, has partnered with WVUK. They have contributed to the development of the female-only speaker list, which highlights women with specific expertise who are willing to participate in meetings, public engagement, peer review and contribution to decision-making panels, such as those for grants and policy making.

WVUK will hold regular meetings at the Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology (ARVO) annual conference, with nearly 12,000 researchers from over 75 countries attending. Members will also join the US-based Women in Eye and Vision Research (WEAVR) group, established to develop and strengthen the career paths of women in eye and vision research. WVUK aims to work with similar organisations overseas, including the European Association for Eye and Vision Research (EVER), to create an effective global network. It plans to provide other countries experiencing parallel challenges the support and guidance on setting up a comparable framework.

### **Cross-country representation**

At a local level, the focus is for WVUK representatives to influence practice across the UK. Group meetings will be encouraged so that women on the 'front line' feel supported by their peers and mentors. Findings, opinions and successes from these local initiatives can then be fed back to the wider group, to initiate change where necessary and appropriate. The success of the network will be measured not only from the larger outputs and annual WVUK meetings, which will rotate around the country, but also from the feedback and support received at a local level. The second annual WVUK meeting is planned for 14 December 2018 at the University of Liverpool.

### **From foundations to the future**

WVUK has been formed on the foundation of years of gender bias and workplace inequality. The

intention is to address the issues ‘head on’, making recommendations and inroads into tackling the issues while promoting a gender-inclusive research and clinical specialty. By having a strong nationwide network that extends into local communities and internationally, WVUK can work with its partners to promote, support and mentor women, thereby acting as a beacon of positive change. Professionals working together on an international scale have the capacity to pursue gender equality and enhance the profile of women in vision sciences. In doing so, these efforts will improve the understanding and treatment of eye disease, and thereby benefit patients and their families.

To join WVUK, please contact Maryse Bailly

Email: [m.bailly@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:m.bailly@ucl.ac.uk)

Website: [www.ucl.ac.uk/loo/women-vision-uk](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/loo/women-vision-uk)

Twitter: [@womeninvisionUK](https://twitter.com/womeninvisionUK)

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### Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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