

[Home](#) / [Perspectives](#)

Making the case for action on gender parity in science

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An equal world for both men and women benefits all. This statement is also true when applied to women's participation in the world of science.

Women's unique contribution

Women's under-representation in research and science not only undermines women scientists' efforts to reach their full potential, but it also affects the quality of scientific knowledge. With different but equally valuable perspectives, women can bring diverse insights to research that transform the very practice and expand the boundaries of knowledge.

Addressing gender biases has been a focus of the [Innovating for Maternal and Child Health in Africa \(IMCHA\) initiative](#), jointly funded by IDRC, Global Affairs Canada, and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. IMCHA's approach is predicated on the belief that gender is an important determinant in a person's

access to and use of health systems. The initiative has also been aware of the need to promote women's participation in research teams and policy engagement activities.

Lynette Kamau's role as the senior policy and communications officer at the African Population and Health Research Centre is to support the IMCHA team with introducing research results into policy and practice. She stresses that "To inform policies and programs and drive change in this area, we need to bring women's voices as leaders, not just as users and beneficiaries."

In the ranks, not at the top

In 2018, the [UNESCO Institute of Statistics](#) reported that women make up only 31% of professionals in all sciences in sub-Saharan Africa — ranging from less than 5% in Chad to 44% in South Africa.

In various parts of the world, women outnumber men in the early years of their university education. However, data from high and low-income countries alike show their ratio declines over time because women tend to exit their scientific careers earlier than men. Compared to men, fewer women occupy leadership positions at universities, science academies, think tanks, and public research institutes. For example, women head just three of 18 research organizations in Kenya.

Barriers to women's leadership in science extend well beyond Africa. A 2017 McKinsey Global Institute report shows that women constitute only [28% of graduates](#) in sciences and engineering in Canada, a figure that's barely changed [in 30 years](#). Two recent studies published in the [Journal of the American Medical Association](#) and [Nature](#) report that women biomedical researchers receive smaller grant amounts and less prize money compared to men.

"If you want your voice to be heard, be passionate and be prepared to work hard," says Lorretta Ntoimo, an associate at the Women's Health and Action Research Centre and lecturer at the Federal University Oye-Ekiti, Nigeria. "As women, we're still considered to be responsible for the home," the IMCHA-supported researcher adds, explaining that gender biases and stereotypes persist and that the dominance of men in the workplace can be intimidating.

Studies have also shown that women academics publish less and receive fewer invitations than men to speak about their work at scientific conferences. This robs women of opportunities to raise their profile, share ideas, and find jobs and funding opportunities — opportunities that are even fewer if they decide to have children, which can effectively put their career on hold.

Funders have a role to play

To mitigate these structural barriers, IMCHA has focused on the gender balance in its research teams: close to 40% of project leaders and co-leaders are women. To ensure adequate capacity for gender analysis, IMCHA's 28 research project teams completed gender training. Some teams went further by bringing in specialists to strengthen their expertise.

Research-funding organizations like IDRC have a responsibility to lead change in this area. IDRC is doing so, for example, by [supporting research to understand and break systemic barriers to women's participation in science](#). To launch this initiative, we were able to draw on Canadian experts in granting councils and the wider research community, who acted as advisors and reviewers.

Celebrating women's accomplishments, [as does the African Institute for Mathematical Science \(AIMS\)](#), is also important to promote gender equality. Since the opening of its first centre in 2003, AIMS, jointly supported by IDRC, African governments, Global Affairs Canada, and other donors, has trained close to 2,000 students from 43 countries across Africa in advanced mathematical sciences. Of these alumni, 32% are women who are now making their way in this male-dominated field.

Actions to overcome persistent biases

At the 2019 Women Deliver conference in Vancouver, Kamau and Ntoimo discussed how women can overcome barriers to parity in science by advocating for each other. Women leaders need to support younger women, they said, and provide a more welcoming environment. They need to offer mentoring, while being realistic and letting young women know that it will be a struggle.

For Ntoimo, women being good advocates for women also makes them good researchers in maternal and child health. They understand the issues much more intimately, she explained.

Women and men in science need to work on broader structural determinants of gender inequalities by addressing unequal gender norms, challenging stereotypical gender roles, promoting equal gender representation in work settings, and — as scientists and researchers — generating evidence to support positive social change.

Through IMCHA, partners like AIMS, and other initiatives, IDRC and its donor partners continue to work toward changing the discourse and opening paths for greater leadership by women in science.

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