



Mechanisms of Epilepsy and Neuronal Synchronization Gordon Research Conference Power Hour Summary

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Lori L. Isom, PhD¹, Karen S. Wilcox, PhD,
and Amy Brooks-Kayal, MD

Over 100 scientists attended the 2018 Mechanisms of Epilepsy and Neuronal Synchronization Gordon Research Conference (GRC) Power Hour. Power Hours are informal sessions to which all GRC attendees are invited to discuss challenges that women face in science as well as other issues of diversity and inclusion. These programs are designed to support the professional growth of all members of the scientific community by providing an open forum for discussion and mentoring.

Approximately 90% of the attendees of the 2018 Mechanisms of Epilepsy and Neuronal Synchronization Power Hour were women and about 50% of the attendees were trainees or junior investigators. At the beginning of Power Hour, Dr Brooks-Kayal presented recent National Institutes of Health (NIH) data on the numbers of women in academia applying for and receiving grants at multiple career time points, noting the relative drop in applications from women as they progress from early stage to experienced investigators (<https://nexus.od.nih.gov/all/2018/08/07/trends-in-diversity-within-the-nih-funded-workforce/>). We then asked the group the following questions: What are the most critical factors impeding the success of women in academic medicine? How can we begin to solve these issues?

Here is the list of their responses, in random order:

1. Intrinsic male–female differences
2. Sexual harassment (#MeToo)
3. Pay inequality
4. Maternity and childcare issues
5. Internal barriers
6. Unconscious bias
7. Disparities in resources
8. Personality differences that disadvantage women
9. Effective mentorship

We next broke into working groups, with at least one senior investigator present at each table. Each group was assigned to focus on one topic from the above list. A scribe and a spokesperson were elected for each group. Lively discussions ensued and were allowed to continue for approximately 20 minutes.

We then came back together as one group, at which each small group spokesperson presented a summary of their group's important discussion points. We discussed these issues together and posted the notes from each group on a bulletin board.

Here are the summaries of the small group reports and the surrounding discussions:

Intrinsic Male–Female Differences

It's important to be aware of male–female differences because these can be strengths! Women often lack knowledge or experience in negotiation skills. What questions should you ask? Where can you get information on faculty salaries ahead of the negotiation process? Are there workshops on effective negotiation skills offered to fellows and junior faculty at your institution? Seek out a career coach who can help you practice role-playing and having difficult conversations.

Sexual Harassment (#MeToo)

Standard practices for reporting and handling of complaints should be normalized across institutions. Universities and NIH may consider adopting the National Science Foundation policy. Education is key. Women must learn how to speak up, speak out, and assist others. Compliance training across institutions should be normalized and emphasized as a priority. There is a need for greater understanding of how sexual harassment occurs outside of the institution, especially at scientific meetings. Meeting organizers should consider eliminating events at scientific meetings where sexual harassment most often occurs and thus where women students and junior investigators are made to feel uncomfortable, for example, dances, events with excessive emphasis on alcohol consumption, promotion of outside activities like swimming and relaxing in hot tubs where the entire cohort is encouraged to attend. We frequently know who the predators are at our institutions and in our scientific communities. It is critical to learn how to speak up and protect other women.



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Pay Inequality

Women often accept lower start-up packages and salaries than their male colleagues. If you start out behind your peers in salary, how much will you lose in the end in terms of overall earning power and retirement income? Learn how to negotiate. Hiring departments and units must maintain equity regardless of gender. Try to identify trusted mentors and discuss with them how to negotiate. Institutions must provide workshops for fellows and junior faculty on how to approach salary and resource discussions. Learn to express what is important to you. Include elements other than money, for example, protected time in terms of teaching, administrative or clinical duties, and ability to travel to meetings.

Maternity and Childcare Issues

Institutions should provide a wide array of high-quality childcare options with extended hours that can accommodate clinical schedules, breastfeeding support, options to extend the tenure clock for becoming a parent, and reasonable paid parental leave policies. NIH may want to consider extending grant funding periods and early career grant eligibility periods to accommodate childbearing years and time for parental leave. We need to have open and honest discussions about the challenges of parenting that extend beyond the first 3 months of a child's life and around distribution of parenting responsibilities (see "The Default Parent"). We need to determine a feasible way for women scientists to reduce their schedules for a few years, when needed to accommodate child care responsibilities, without penalizing them or putting them on the "mommy track." This is an option for many women in clinical or business positions, but is logistically challenging for a female PI with trainees and lab personnel for whom she is responsible, and who can be at risk of being considered "underproductive" by reviewers evaluating her for grants, promotions and so on.

Internal Barriers

Women often undersell themselves. Women are prone to impostor syndrome. Women must learn how to ask for higher salaries, for first or senior authorship, for promotions, for resources. Learn how to become your own advocate. Change your thought process and terminology: asking for what you need isn't "rocking the boat," it is self-advocacy and it is critical to your success. Identify successful women mentors who are willing to promote your success. Yes—there is woman-on-woman hate in science, but learn how to recognize it and avoid it. Don't repeat that bad behavior—every time you make a step forward, turn around and help someone else succeed. Sponsor young faculty in your own institution and from your professional network. Be cognizant of how you look on paper. Keep your CV current and maintain a professional online presence (Lab Website, Linked In, Research Gate, Twitter, etc). Learn to have the confidence that is often engrained in men. Be willing to leave an institution if you cannot achieve your goals—but plan appropriately and be ready to actually act on it!

Unconscious Bias

Institutions need to recognize that this is a problem and define it for leadership and faculty serving on search committees. Search committees must be trained in unconscious bias prior to search launches. There must be an institution-wide commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Faculty must be trained to understand how unconscious bias can affect writing letters of recommendation, documents for promotion packages, and the evaluation process. It is critical that we pay attention to the use of adjectives, for example, a male candidate is described as "strong and ambitious," while a female candidate is described as "helpful and kind."

Disparities in Resources

Learn how to build a strong case for obtaining resources. Be your own best advocate. Approach leadership with potential solutions rather than complaints when discussing resource allocation. Learn to conduct "the meeting before the meeting" to assemble your supporters and learn the back story of the situation. Consider rehearsing the conversation with a trusted mentor or supporter before approaching your supervisor. Turn negotiations into win-win solutions. Learn how to attract the best graduate students and fellows to your lab. Be aware that women are often pressed into "service" activities perhaps more than their male counterparts. This can be problematic if you turn out to be the only "token woman" to provide the diversity for all committees—we need to have a voice in all committees, but the same person(s) should not fill that role over and over again in a given organization.

Personality Differences That Disadvantage Women


What is your professional behavioral style? How can you become your most genuine, transparent, unique self? How can you be assertive without being seen as offensive or overly emotional? How can you avoid being so careful about how you are perceived that you deny your true self? Men are often described as assertive (in a good light), while women are described as the B word or "tough" (not in a good light) or high maintenance. Women are often scared to be open and honest about their professional needs. However, salary increases and bonuses, more and better space, release time, and leadership positions are hard to achieve without being assertive. Institutions/department chairs can help by developing clear and transparent guidelines and benchmarks for advancement that don't require women to be "pushy." Women are often expected to have certain personality traits and being tough is not one of them.

Effective Mentorship

We need more good women mentors! Most senior mentors today are men. Men often go out for a beer with their male mentor to discuss career issues. Women can run into trouble

doing the same thing with their male mentor—as well as the mentor getting into potential #MeToo trouble. Women mentees are sometimes not taken seriously by their male mentors due to differing personality styles. The few women mentors who are available are overly burdened, for example, they can't mentor an entire department.

ORCID iD

Lori L. Isom  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9479-6729>

Here is a list of recommended books and articles for further reading:

1. Blazoned M. The default parent. *Huffington Post*. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/m-blazoned/the-default-parent_b_6031128.html. Updated December 7, 2017.
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