What is gender equality in science? Common solutions may not be solving the problem

March 27 2019

Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Despite the scientific community taking action on gender inequality, the problem persists. In a review published March 27 in the journal *Trends in Ecology & Evolution*, researchers say that achieving equality for

women in STEM requires us to ask, "What is equality?" To create authentic equality, and not only regarding gender, the authors promote a simple first step: define the problem before finding the solution.

"The number of women in STEM, the gender pay gap, female leadership are only three aspects of equality," says lead author Katherine O'Brien, a chemical engineer at the University of Queensland. "We give eight measures of equality in our paper, but there are many more. You can't assess equality with a single number."

Focusing on narrow definitions of gender inequality can unintentionally undermine attempts to address issues effecting women in science. For example, statistics often focus on the highest-achieving women to gauge how far science has come with equality. Men's contribution to household labor is also important for equality, but it is considered far less often.

"Work-home conflict is a major cause and effect of gender inequality, and not just in STEM," says O'Brien. "But it's often avoided because it's a controversial topic. We need to stop ignoring the hard parts of equality."

"Everybody has heard of the glass ceiling, but there's much less said about the sticky floor," says O'Brien. "Our article focuses on women in science, who have a better chance of being heard than many other women. But this doesn't mean we should ignore problems that are happening on the other end of the pay-grade."

Many of the underlying causes of gender inequality are interconnected with other types of inequality, which makes it difficult to pinpoint what actions will affect change in the right direction. For example, as represented by the pay gap, the differences in task assignments, and the higher number of accolades men receive, there is a disparity between how much men's work is valued as compared to women's work.

"We often talk about equality in the sense of women taking on positions traditionally held by men, but there is much less focus on men taking on positions traditionally held by women," she says. "Do men make more money and achieve more recognition because they perform more valuable tasks, or because we value the tasks men perform more than those that women perform?" O'Brien says.

Moving forward, O'Brien and her colleagues are interested in how the skills gained in traditionally female activities might benefit the workplace, and how that could change the way we value these roles. "If we could show the value of activities often dismissed as 'women's work,' it would be one more step toward gender equality in science."

More information: *Trends in Ecology & Evolution*, O'Brien, K.: "What is gender equality in science?" www.cell.com/trends/ecology-ev … 0169-5347(19)30056-4 , DOI: 10.1016/j.tree.2019.02.009

Provided by Cell Press