

Gender discrimination holding women back in veterinary practice

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Women face discrimination and occupy fewer places in the higher reaches of the veterinary profession, even as they begin to outnumber men in the field.

Research conducted by Lancaster University Management School and Open University Business School, published in *Veterinary Record*, shows that sexism continues to be a big issue with clients, while managers fail to recognise or understand [gender issues](#).

Women are increasingly dominating the profession, with 76% of vet school graduates female—but disproportionately few reach the higher echelons of practice, with their employment much more likely to be as an assistant than as a director or partner.

The researchers carried out 75 interviews with both male and female vets from across the UK, speaking to practitioners in junior and senior roles, aged between 25 and 63.

While the questions did not focus on gender-related issues, interviewees frequently raised the subject both directly and indirectly, with the prevailing perception of female vets synonymous with limited intellectual and physical strength and seen as subordinate to males in the profession. Clients are often explicitly sexist, insisting male vets treat their animals.

The team also found a widely held belief that women would not seek

promotions as they only wanted to work [part-time](#), a statement repeated both by those in power and also the victims of such a perception.

Co-author Professor David Knights, Distinguished Scholar in the Department of Organisation, Work and Technology at Lancaster University, said: "On the surface, it could appear that the trend for fewer women climbing the hierarchy is because they sacrifice [career](#) for family. But it is much more complicated than this stereotypical view implies.

"Many of the women we spoke to, especially those in their early career, reported experiences of clients—or even their own practices—treating them as having limited competence and credibility, thus threatening their professional identities. They were also automatically presumed to be potential mothers, and this was treated as problematic for long-term careers."

While many women with families opt for a partial exit from the veterinary profession through part-time work, the researchers found this only reinforced the established hierarchy of young women dominating the lower ranks and old men the senior ranks of the profession.

Those women who have children and/or go part-time are seen to have chosen family over careers and are often not taken seriously at the practice any more, no longer being considered for promotions

"Part of this must be due to the limited gender awareness of those men occupying the senior positions in practices," said report co-author Dr. Caroline Clarke, of the Open University Business School. "As a result, women—or at least their career ambitions—become sacrificial lambs."

Among the interviewees, the team heard from one female farm vet whose client demanded a man come out to see her because she was not

happy with the treatment she had delivered—even though the male vet then did the same thing. Another spoke of the need to prove herself to clients and starting at a disadvantage as a result.

"Such blatant sexism is rarely challenged by senior vets," added Professor Knights. "This is partly because they are oblivious to the problems, but also—even when they are aware—they fail to intervene for fear of upsetting clients who perpetuate the sexism. This [lack of support](#) can create a downward spiral, where women vets begin to doubt themselves, threatening their confidence early in their careers.

"Even when we came across example of senior vets who appeared to be sensitive to gender issues, there was often a reproduction of the chauvinistic attitudes being criticised, with one speaking of the need for female vets to use their charm to make up for a lack of physical strength.

"Veterinary medicine is still entrenched in a masculine culture. Both sexes subscribe to a narrative of females having to choose between a career or a family, a situation exacerbated by the culture of long working hours which militates against women who subscribe to the culture of caring, with these constraints giving the impression of a lower commitment to the organisation."

Despite their grievances, [women](#) are not challenging or disrupting the limitations in place or the masculine culture entrenched in veterinary practice. Instead, they tend to leave the profession or go part-time. The issues highlighted by the research are likely to come back to haunt senior vets and corporate managers since recruitment and retention is increasingly a serious problem that is exacerbated by the failure of the profession to see these gender issues as in need of attention.

More information: *Veterinary Record* (2019). [DOI: 10.1136/vr.104994](https://doi.org/10.1136/vr.104994)

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