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WOMEN RESEARCHERS IN STEM

More women needed to power research

NOT ENOUGH Even though UGC has announced initiatives to encourage women to take up research, under-representation of the fairer sex in STEM needs to be addressed urgently

Gauri Kohli

gauri.kohli@hindustantimes.com

Earlier this month, the University Grants Commission (UGC) relaxed the criteria for women pursuing MPhil and PhD degrees. They will now get one extra year to complete their MPhil degree and two years for PhD.

In March this year, UGC also announced grants for women under its prominent fellowship and scholarship schemes.

Are these initiatives, however, enough to encourage more women to take up research? Meenakshi Gopinath, former member, UGC, says, "Overall, at the official level, there is a strong emphasis on acquiring PhD degrees for those who opt for a career in academics. Encouraging research, per se, is a welcome trend so long as the quality of research receives attention. Are the conditions and facilities for research, especially in the sciences, equal for men and women in our universities? For a variety of reasons, I would say it is not a level-playing field yet."

According to Lakshmi Lingam, deputy director, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Hyderabad, giving relaxation to women scholars is a good move. "It is always useful to complete your research as per schedule. This will help the researcher maintain the quality and freshness of data."

Currently, a relaxation of five years is provided to women applicants for Junior Research Fellowship. There is no upper age limit for applying for the post of assistant professor.

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MEENAKSHI GOPINATH, former member, University Grants Commission

More fellowships and scholarships are needed for women researchers and scholars. Gopinath says, "We need more scholarships, but there are a large number of scholarships that do not get adequate numbers of applicants. The real challenge is to put this information out in a transparent and accessible manner and also reach out to those who will benefit the most. Mentoring will also help women scholars. We are aware of a large number of young women scholars who discontinue their research because the responsibilities of homemaking often leaves them with little space for serious academic engagement and requirements of consistent study, field or laboratory work."

Overall, there is need to facilitate an enabling environment for those facing obstacles to engage with the world of thought to come up with innovative practices in both teaching and research, she says. Another important aspect is representation of women

researchers in social science and humanities as compared to science and technology. Lingam says, "Women's participation in research in social sciences, humanities, engineering and sciences varies. It is linked to the overall numbers and percentage of women in these disciplines at the master's level. While overall numbers of women in higher education is increasing, there are fewer women in pure science labs that require long hours of laboratory work for results. Professors who get funding for setting up labs undertake research work towards deadlines and publications in a competitive world of 'publish or perish'. That's why professors are inclined to hire single men and women and often are concerned about discontinuation of women who get married during their research work."

Having more women in the field of research can make a lot of difference. "The entry of women brings in fresh questions on institutional support mechanisms and practices. In the case of humanities and social sciences, the landscape has changed with the entry of women. Humanities and social sciences have qualitatively transformed and we see that it is heralding a sea change in the everyday discourses on equality, equity and justice in the country," says Lingam.

However, India has few specific programme to encourage young women into science. The US has made a number of attempts under STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths), though these have



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not been very successful. The under-representation of women in STEM at all levels and also in research needs to be taken up, adds Lingam.

Deepika Bhaskar, deputy dean (research), Delhi University Research Council, says, "I do not see any separate rules or law to encourage women researchers except some schemes by department of science and technology and UGC which are quite encouraging. More can definitely be done for social sciences and humanities."

FELLOWSHIPS/SCHOL

- UGC Post-Doctoral Fellowship for Women
- Dr S Radhakrishnan Post-Doctoral Fellowship for Women in Humanities and Social Sciences, including languages
- Swami Vivekananda Single Girl Child Fellowship
- Women Scientist Scholarship, Department of Science and Technology

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- Women Scientist Scholarship, Department of Science and Technology
- National Award for Senior Woman Bioscientist, DST
- National Award for Young Woman Bioscientist, DST
- Postgraduate Indira Gandhi Scholarship for Single Girl Child
- Dr APJ Abdul Kalam Single Girl Child Fellowship to pursue PhD in science (to be launched)

The list is not exhaustive

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