

Less Labeling, More Action

A female cardiologist's guide to combating gender inequality through advocacy

By **Toniya Singh, M.D., F.A.C.C.**

**"You're not a feminist.
You're an individualist."**

My son recently said this to me, and it made me think. His explanation was that I am an advocate for the individual rights and remunerations of a person based on his or her indepen-

dent actions, regardless of gender. I dislike arguing about the definitions of feminism versus individualism or discussing which movement is more valid. I am well aware of the many nuances that inherently come with each ideology, and I believe that feminists and individualists all over the world have made—and continue to make—this world a better place. But I have never liked labels because labels don't matter—facts do. And here is a sobering one:



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Women are not treated as equals in the workplace. Despite the monumental progress that has been made throughout history, women's earnings and career advancements continue to trail those of men with comparable education and experience. I see this firsthand; only 12% of the car-

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diologists nationwide are female and I'm one of them. According to an American College of Cardiology survey, 63 percent of my female peers have experienced discrimination in the workplace, such as receiving a lower salary than others in their cohort or being passed up for promotion. The statistics are similar across industries; the Census Bureau calculates

that the average woman in the United States makes 79 cents for every dollar paid to a male counterpart. **Women in Missouri, specifically, are paid 77 cents for every dollar paid to men.**

Medicine is not exempt—and is the industry with which I am most familiar. Reshma Jagsi, M.D., D.Phil., conducted a study which provided evidence that gender differences in compensation continue to exist in academic medicine. Jagsi states that, "efforts to investigate the mechanisms by which these gender differences develop and ways to mitigate their effects merit continued attention."

I feel compelled to do just that—investigate ways to mitigate gender disparity in cardiology and in the workplace in general. Despite the fact that more CEOs, heads of state, and university

leaders are committing themselves to gender-equality goals than ever, progress remains slow. This is why I'm not concerned with labels. I'm not interested in complaining about the opportunities that my female peers and I have not been given. And I am certainly not here to label society as unfair or demand help.

As a solution-oriented person, I am much more interested in the answers to these questions: Did the women who have experienced pay inequality ever ask to be paid better? Did they negotiate as fiercely as their male counterparts?

More importantly, were they given the tools and confidence to do so? What I'm here to do is empower women to be their own advocates.

The solution
It's time to change the conversation. It's time to teach the next generation of women that the more we accept personal responsibility for our own lives, the more successful we can be. It's time to stop labeling and start acting.

Here's how you can become your own best advocate:

- **Be informed.** Whether you're negotiating salary or asking for a promotion, it's important to know what those in similar positions are making and what kind of experience they have. While your peers don't necessarily define your worth, having this information in your back pocket—should you need it—makes for a much more compelling argument. There are plenty of resources online that allow you to research median salaries for almost any position in every industry. Or, better yet, ask your more experienced colleagues. You'd be surprised at how many women are willing to discuss these things openly in order to help younger generations succeed.

- **Be confident.** It's been said that men will apply for a job if they meet only 60 percent of the qualifications, but women will only apply if they meet 100 percent of the qualifications. What does that tell us? Women need to be

- **Operate under the assumption that you are being treated as an equal.** During any conversation about advancing your career, your goals and skillsets should be your main arguing points. Don't even bring gender into the equation. If you want to be treated as an equal, it's best to operate under the assumption that everyone already sees you as an equal. Conversely, know that no one has the right to ask you any gender-biased questions in a professional setting. There is rarely a reason for you to discuss your children, relationship, or plans for pregnancy while applying for a job or negotiating a raise.

- **Find a mentor/sponsor.** There is perhaps nothing more valuable than soaking up the wisdom of others who have been in your position or who are in a position in which you want to be. And having an ally who is invested in your career will only increase your chance for success. Finding the right mentor or sponsor doesn't have to be difficult or intimidating. Start by making a list of people whose career track you'd like to follow, and reach out to them. If no one comes to mind—get out there and network. And remember, your mentor and sponsor may be the same person or different people, and you may have various expectations from them according to the role they are assuming. Keep in mind, too, that as your career goals and plans change, so may your mentors and sponsors.

- **Be realistic.** Earning the respect you deserve is one thing, but getting what you want just because you want it is entirely different. Be honest with yourself—you can't negotiate if you don't have the required experience or skillsets. It's also important to understand that you can't have it all. In an ideal world, we would all have time for our careers and families and social life and hobbies. But realistically, work-life balance comes at a cost. You won't get paid for 50 hours when you only work 30, no matter how talented you may be. You must be realistic about your own priorities and capacity before demanding more.

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• Take risks.

In her Ted Talk, Reshma Saujani explains that most girls are taught to avoid risk and failure in order to pursue perfection, while boys are taught to take risks and be brave. "And by the time they're adults," Saujani says, "whether they're negotiating a raise or even asking someone out on a date, they're habituated to take risk after risk. They're rewarded for it." The lesson to be learned here is that in order to get what you want, you must get comfortable being uncomfortable. Taking risks will always get you further than the "be complacent and complain".

• Tune out negativity.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the second female U.S. Supreme Court Justice, recently published an article in which she explained

how she has been so successful in a male-driven world. One piece of advice she offers is that "it helps sometimes to be a little deaf." She explains that when a thoughtless or unkind word is spoken, it's best to tune it out because reacting in anger or annoyance will not advance one's ability to persuade. I couldn't agree more with Ruth. No matter how far you make it your career, there will always be someone who is convinced you don't belong there. Rather than telling them why you do, let this serve as motivation to climb even higher.

• Take action.

I can't tell you how many times I have heard female colleagues complain that they are never given the opportunity to be in a position of authority. Yet, when industry organizations are seeking volunteer speakers or representatives,

they are not the first to volunteer. If you want to be respected, you must put yourself in a position that demands respect. Volunteer. Be responsive. Put yourself out there. Let the world know that you will be taken seriously.

It is not easy, but nothing good ever is.

My hope today is that every woman, at every stage in her career, will adopt this mindset of empowerment. Let's empower each other. Passing on opportunities (that may not be right for us at the moment) to other competent, capable women allows us to empower them, which puts us in a position of power as well. Let's teach the next generation that they need not be defined by gender disparities in the workplace, but rather their talent and willingness to succeed. Let's effectively advocate for ourselves, take risks, and take action.

Dr. Toniya Singh is an invasive, non-interventional cardiologist and a managing partner at St. Louis Heart and Vascular. Passionate about empowering and mentoring medical students and young professionals nationwide, she currently mentors two cardiology fellows. Dr. Singh is also the founding President of the Missouri chapter of Women in Cardiology (WIC) section of The American College of Cardiology. Trained as a cardiovascular disease specialist, she has been in practice since 2003. Licensed in both MO and IL, Dr. Singh is board certified in Internal Medicine, Cardiology, and Adult Echocardiography. Dr. Singh received her MBBS degree from Lady Hardinge Medical College in New Delhi India, and completed an internal medicine residency and a Cardiology Fellowship at St. Louis University Hospital.

Ms. Missouri Senior America Pageant Seeks Contestants for July 9, 2017 Pageant

If you, or someone you know, will be at least 60 years old by July 9, 2017, we invite you to participate in a rewarding and memorable experience!

In the pageant, contestants will:

- Recite a personal philosophy of life
- Be interviewed by a panel of professional judges
- Model an age-appropriate evening gown
- Perform a 2 ½ minute talent presentation

Initial screening interviews are February 15, 2017 and talent auditions are February 23, 2017.

A queen will be crowned, as well as a 1st and 2nd runner-up selected. After the pageant, all participants are invited to become members of the Missouri Pageant Alumnae Club which is dedicated to enriching the lives of all seniors by performing showcases at senior and veteran facilities throughout the St. Louis metro area.

For more information, please contact Susan Pellegrino at msmosenior16@gmail.com or 314-640-5789 or visit www.msmissourisenior.org

Keeping Mentally and Physically Healthy in the Winter

If you experience muscle weakness or bone pain in the winter, you might have a Vitamin D deficiency, according to experts at the Mayo Clinic.

Vitamin D deficiencies are most common in the winter months and some studies suggest an association between low Vitamin D levels and certain mood disorders, especially Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), which cause mood changes and depression. Vitamin D is naturally produced by sunlight, which is rarer in winter because of shorter days and increased cloud cover.

Here are some tips for coping:

Get outside.

Even walking a few blocks on a sunny day can help keep your muscles, bones, and joints strong and flexible. In cold, icy weather, however, not everyone wants to go out for a walk, even if it is sunny outside. The next best strategy is:

Take Vitamin D supplements, preferably Vitamin D3.

Vitamin D is beneficial for increasing the sense of well-being, improving

sleep patterns and contributing to bone health. Some research indicates that Vitamin D supplements may improve symptoms of depression associated with SAD, but additional research is needed before a conclusion can be made.

Take vitamins B6 and B12.

These two vitamins help maintain serotonin levels, which may in turn help reduce irritability, moodiness, and insomnia. Consult your health care provider regarding appropriate doses and to insure that supplements and medication you are taking will not be a concern when also taking Vitamin D.

Consider using a light box.

Light therapy can help keep your "internal clock" in synch with your needs and not at the mercy of the winter weather. The theory is that the artificial daylight will keep you alert and awake during the day but ready to sleep at night. Placing a natural light box in the living room or other common areas can help give your body the natural boost it needs to fight SAD.