

A year of uphill struggle

EDITORIAL

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What makes a team smarter? More women. This is according to the Harvard Business Review [\(1\)](#).

'And it was 12.06 pm,' one of the four other people in the room commented. The infection control officer had just stood up and said: 'I have made up my mind.' Part 2 of the Oppdal Week, i.e. eight different training courses with a total of 307 general practice trainees and 65 teachers, was cancelled on the spot and went up in smoke. It was 8 March – International Women's Day – and the start of the most turbulent year we have experienced for the entire country. The evening before, the same infection control officer, a woman, had broken up a large wedding party, sent her fellow villagers home and interned 50-odd guests from both Norway and abroad. Altogether eight of the attendees tested positive, and four days later the pandemic hit us all.

Through 2020, changes have occurred with regard to who keeps the academic production going. Despite some early warning signs, it took some time before our colleagues became aware of the unforeseen and unfortunate side effects of the pandemic [\(2, 3\)](#). Later, however, these became increasingly evident. Who were the authors, and what did they write about? In certain quarters, a significant reduction and reallocation of access to research funding took place [\(3\)](#).

The mass media and scientific journals were rapidly caught in the wave of infection and quickly readjusted both their content and publishing procedures; The Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association was no exception, since the pandemic pervaded its content for the best part of the year. The characteristics of the authors and their topics will not become clear until later.

The question about who is doing the writing could just as easily be changed to a question about who is *not*. The answer is as simple as it is disconcerting: women in academic medical research, in other words, a 'typical Norwegian doctor', i.e. a woman a little under 40 years of age. A related question concerns those who rarely participate in open debate, write commentaries, participate in advisory committees or promote their views through other channels. The answer is the same (4).

An original article in the Journal of Women's Health last autumn presented the negative effects of the pandemic on women in academic medicine (5). A survey among academic staff in universities in the United States (67 % women; 57 % with children under the age of 18) showed that men and women reported approximately the same long weekly working hours. However, women with children under six years of age were a clear exception; they reported a steep decline in the number of hours devoted to research in the period from January to March 2020. This meant that they had fewer publications of their own, but also less peer review work, and they attended administrative research meetings less frequently. Their male colleagues reported no such changes. These findings should interest both management and funding sources (5). A publication in *Nature* from December 2020 clearly illustrates the same points; a steep increase in the number of publications for all categories of positions from PhD scholars to professors, but with a clear parallel upward trajectory in favour of men (6).

«The question about who is doing the writing could just as easily be changed to a question about who is not»

Many of the references below are secondary publications that report findings made by others (2, 3, 7)(7–9). Overall, they describe a general increase in the number of publications from 2019 to 2020, among researchers of both genders, but most prominently men. Male researchers had published significantly more articles on the COVID-19 pandemic, while women had fewer publications where they were listed as first, single or contact author (5). Men and women served as peer reviewers equally often, in contrast to the findings made by Krukowski and colleagues (5).

Women researchers attended their workplace less often than men, and were more likely to be allocated to ad hoc teaching assignments (3). Likewise, women had a looser affiliation with their positions, and more often risked being made redundant in cutbacks caused by the pandemic. Women in higher academic positions had shorter seniority and greater responsibilities for children and the home when compared to men at the same level. Combined with fewer publications, this had a negative effect on their further career development. A reasonable result of the pandemic would be to postpone the application deadlines for scholarships, submission of reports and applications for renewed research grants (5–9). The rector of Oslo Metropolitan University has argued that women should be released from their home offices and return

to work before men (3). In that case, more latitude for mothers would also help ensure that fathers take more responsibility in the home, including teaching their own children in home schooling (10).

Few things have brought me more joy lately than seeing an automatic email reply from a former PhD scholar telling me that he is on paternity leave until June 2021. In practice, this means that the child's mother is back at work as a post-doc in molecular biology. This is the best vaccine against many of the conditions that I have described above.

LITERATURE

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