



Better together: the experience of Women in Surgery Italia

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“Another disease has become epidemic. “The woman question” in relation to medicine is only one of the forms in which the pestis muliebris vexes the world.” (1).

These words were pronounced by Stillé during the inaugural address delivered at the opening of the twenty-second annual meeting of the American Medical Association, in 1871.

Since those times, many changes have occurred. Today, in Italy, women account for the 46.2% of surgical residents of any specialty (2).

Such changes in our perception of women’s role have not occurred effortlessly. During the years, “the woman question” have been addressed by many activists, physicians and politicians, who advocated for gender equity in medicine and in society in general. In this setting, surgery represented for many decades a particularly delicate field. Up until the 90s, women represented only an extremely limited share of surgeons worldwide (3,4). This was due to practical issues, such as the well-known difficulties in managing a complex work-life balance, but also to the lack of female role models and to the existence of an important perceived discrimination in a male-dominated field (5). Even though more explicit forms of discrimination have been progressively put aside, we are still far from where we need to be when considering gender equity in surgical wards: insulting and diminishing behaviors towards women surgeons have been consistently reported up until the recent years, and surgery is still considered as a woman-unfriendly career by many medical students of both sexes (5,6).

In order to address these issues, national and international women surgeons’ organizations have been founded all over the world. In Italy, Women in Surgery Italia (WIS Italia) has been founded in 2015, answering to

a need for representation of women surgeons, and aiming to promote female leadership and mentorship. Accepting to be part of a disadvantaged community for many of them was an obstacle at first; nevertheless, during the first 5 years from its foundation, the association has spread among Italian women surgeons, also thanks to the support provided by some prominent Italian surgical societies, such as the Italian Society of Surgery (SIC). The aims and instances of women surgeons have soon become a matter of debate during national scientific meetings, and their issues and proposal have reached the highest representatives of Italian Republic. WIS Italia has also undertaken a research activity aimed at objectivize the perception of gender-related discrimination among women surgeons of any specialty, and to identify the most problematic issues affecting life-work balance and job satisfaction. Finally, many female medical students have been given the opportunity to discuss their career opportunities with women surgeons of all specialties, and mentorship programs have been implemented directed to both medical students and residents, in order to promote opportunities for professional growth and to create a network between women surgeons all over the Country.

In a world where many forces are still struggling to ensure to women and girls equal rights respect to their male counterpart, we strongly believe that we, women surgeons, are better together. Our goal to ensure a respectful environment and a satisfactory career to those who choose to pursue surgery, should be a shared one. Everyone, surgeons of both sexes, residents and patients, will benefit of a more equal environment, in which women are empowered and can express their full potential. With this in mind, we move forward to the next five years of our association.

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