

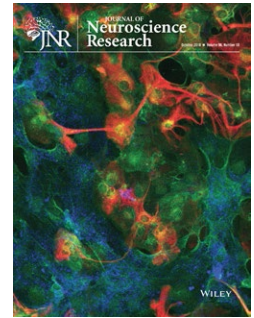
## COMMENTARY

# Voices of women in neuroscience

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Women in my family have always been resilient, successful, living their lives to the fullest. My maternal grandmother came to Athens as a war refugee from Constantinople (today Istanbul) in 1919—after having been separated from her parents. She had a full life and died at the age of 96 having supported her daughter to study Law and follow an academic career in bioethics. She also helped to raise her grandchildren, my two sisters, and myself, thus allowing her daughter to lead a successful academic career. I remember my grandmother always being a positive force empowering us to pursue our dreams. My mother, an orphan from father, was raised with limited financial resources, but was dedicated to get an education and succeed. She gained a high school scholarship to the United States and then returned to Greece where she studied law, received a PhD in Bioethics and built a renowned career in Europe as an expert in bioethics and policies. She died from cancer at the age of 58, passing the family torch to my sisters and me. She has truly been ever since my inspiration to live and work giving my best self and valuing every moment of it.

I followed an academic career, as a neuropsychopharmacologist and established an independent research program that focuses on studying sex differences in models of depression and antidepressant response. In the past year, I had the pleasure to be involved as a scientist expert in the European Union's Research Integrity and Bioethics Unit. In this role, I myself have broadened my scientific horizons and reconnected to my upbringing in a house of lawyers who frequently discussed about advocacy and policies that safeguard the ethical conduct of the scientific enterprise. Thus, reflecting on my career I have to admit that I had the best role model that anyone can ask for: my mother. I hope I can be the same for my daughter, Dione.

In my career, I was fortunate to have met important women scientists who mentored and supported me. My PhD thesis advisor, Dr. Z. Papadopoulou-Daifoti, a professor in the Medical School of Athens, introduced me, in 2000, to the novel field of sex differences in neuropsychopharmacology. During my career, in Greece I was always surrounded by strong and successful women, as female scientists have a strong presence in the Hellenic Society for Neurosciences.

Later, in 2005 when I moved to Rutgers University in New Jersey for my postdoctoral studies having a Marie Curie fellowship, I was mentored by an extraordinary scientist that truly transformed my career, Prof. Tracey J. Shors. Anyone who has met Tracey knows that she is a remarkable woman, who has pioneered the importance of sex differences in neuroscience. Tracey is not only a true scientist but an inspiring mentor who motivates and transfers her enthusiasm for good science to everyone around her! This is how I want myself to lead my scientific endeavors. I was fortunate that Tracey connected me to a network of extraordinary women neuroscientists who became my dear friends and collaborators. To set the record straight, I did not live in a women-only convent. I have always been surrounded by male peers and friends who have supported me in my personal and professional life. These peers have broken down past behaviors and consider women as equal partners in the scientific endeavor.

Earlier in my career, I did not face significant professional issues due to my gender. My experiences changed when I joined the Medical School of Athens, where I was recently promoted to the level of associate professor. My administrative duties involved my participation in committees at the Medical School, the National Medicines Organizations and at the Ministry of Health. I realized early on that as a young, “petite” woman, I had to be twice more convincing, well prepared and persuasive than my male peers, in order to express my professional opinion. However, I have learned to overcome these backward-thinking attitudes by being confident, well prepared, knowing my science well, and showing everyone firmly that I have an equal seat on the table. It is a skill that needs to be acquired, sometimes—like in my case—also inherited ... Perseverance and Resilience.

In the last years, my peers elected me as the President of the Hellenic Society for Neurosciences and President-elect of the Mediterranean Neuroscience Society, because they value my scientific path and my vision to most effectively support a vibrant scientific network for all of us in the Mediterranean area. However, I face the same challenges with my male peers primarily in securing adequate funding and occasionally I also face some conflicts. My message is for women and men scientists alike. We manage to overcome

problems and thrive when we have strong networks of support around us: families, partners, friends, colleagues. Empowered we walk the walk.

I plan for an impactful future. To become a better mentor for the younger generation, expand my research and translate my discoveries to true gains for the well-being of men and women. I put special emphasis on outreach efforts to disseminate science beyond the boundaries of academia and educate the public. For these efforts, I was recently honored to be invited to join the DANA alliance for brain initiatives as a full member. Currently, as principal investigator at the Medical School of Athens and as a member of the European College of Neuropsychopharmacology Preclinical Data Network, with the support of a talented and well-trained team, we thrive to push forward the field of Psychopharmacology, with a strong focus on promoting women's health. Employing multidisciplinary approaches and collaborations that encompasses Psychopharmacology, Neuroendocrinology, and Psychiatry, we seek to grasp a bigger picture and formulate new research hypotheses regarding sex differences in neurobiology and their effects on drug development. My scientific mission is completed by teaching and mentoring the next generation in the largest and oldest Medical School of Greece. Additionally, as a member of the "Greek Women in Academia Association" and as a L'Oreal—Unesco awardee, I advocate for women in sciences and academia.

Through my work, mentorship, and the visibility that my positions and awards have given me during the past few years, I hope that I will be able to build more effectively a supporting environment for scientific endeavor and innovation for the younger generation. I firsthand see the damage that takes place by the continuous scientific "brain-drain" not only in Greece, but in the whole Mediterranean area. Conducting great science, and creating equal opportunities for women and men scientists to thrive is my mission.

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#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflicting interests exist.

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