

Factors impacting women's advancement to positions on editorial boards of rheumatology journals

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Key Message: Reduced opportunities appear to be a key factor impacting women's advancement to editorial board positions

Dear Editor,

Increasing numbers of women are entering the field of rheumatology. However, gender equity in rheumatology academic leadership has not been achieved(1–3). Of concern, women are substantially underrepresented on editorial boards of rheumatology journals(4). To achieve gender equity, the key barriers impacting women's advancement to rheumatology editorial board positions must be identified. To explore this issue, we surveyed top rheumatology reviewers from Publons, an online review archival platform.

Participant characteristics, including age, gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, country of residence, academic position, and editorial board member status, were collected. Respondents were invited to select the top 10 most critical factors impacting women's advancement to positions on editorial boards of rheumatology journals from a list of 34 possible responses. Possible responses were categorized into the following themes (n=number of possible responses): 1) lack of opportunity (n=5), 2) lack of recognition/support (n=2), 3) existent gender imbalance (n=2), 4) poor mentoring (n=6), 5)

work-life balance (n=8), 6) poor career advancement skills (n=5), 7) gender climate (n=3), and 8) financial considerations (n=1). To avoid bias from survey design and the number of possible responses, a weighted score was calculated by dividing the total number of positive responses obtained for each theme by the number of possible responses available for selection—detailed methods outlined as supplementary material.

Forty-three respondents from 21 countries completed the survey (Supplementary Figure 1). The majority of respondents were Caucasian (56.4%), cisgender men (61.5%), and of heterosexual orientation (97.4%) (Table 1). Thirty-two respondents held academic positions, with 26 holding senior positions such as full or associate professorship. Males comprised 75.0% of senior academic respondents. Twenty respondents (46.5%) were current members of a rheumatology journal editorial board, the majority of whom were male (66.7%), held non-fixed term appointments (60.0%), and obtained their position by direct invitation (80.0%). Fifty-eight percent had previously been invited to join an editorial board; these were often male (78.3% (18/23) versus 21.7% (5/23), $p = 0.01$). Fewer respondents (28.2%, 11/39) had directly applied for an editorial board position, with only one such respondent being female.

Thematic analysis revealed that reduced opportunities were considered a key factor impacting women's advancement to editorial board positions (Supplementary Figure 2). The most common specific responses included: lack of opportunity to progress from peer reviewers (55.8%), not being asked to join editorial boards (55.8%), lack of transparency in appointments (53.5%), and lack of advertised vacancies (51.2%). Poor recognition (44.1%) and support (41.9%) for editorial work, pre-existing gender imbalance within editorial

boards (34.8%) and professional associations (32.6%), and a lack of mentoring or sponsorship (34.8%) also ranked highly. While work-life balance was a commonly selected concern (34.9%), few respondents identified a lack of childcare or support from family/friends as a factor. More male respondents identified work-life balance issues as a barrier for women than female respondents (62.5% male versus 37.5% female respondents). Few respondents identified poor career advancement skills as a significant issue for women, except for 'not asking to join editorial boards', which was selected by 25.6% of respondents.

We have identified reduced opportunities for editorial appointments as a key barrier to achieving gender balance on rheumatology journal editorial boards. Although females comprise 32.5% of top rheumatology reviewers, they occupy only 23.6% of editorial positions on rheumatology journals (Publons), indicating a loss of talent. As privileged 'gatekeepers' of academic knowledge, editorial board members define standards for vital research, control what information is released into the public domain, and influence clinical practice and society. Addressing disparity on editorial boards is thus critical to resolve the implicit bias it introduces into the research agenda and to promote a fair and equitable academic culture. Of concern, 80% of editorial board members in this survey obtained their position through direct invitation. This approach to recruitment is problematic as it fosters editorial board homogeneity and perpetuates systemic inequalities, owing to homophily bias. We hope this letter serves as a call to action for journal editors to ensure increased transparency and inclusivity regarding the appointment process for editorial board members. This is a vital step towards achieving diversity and gender equity in academic rheumatology.

Table 1

Age (median, IQR) years	41 (36 - 53)
Gender <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cisgender Female Cisgender Male 	15/39 (38.5%) 24/39 (61.5%)
Sexual orientation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Heterosexual/straight LGTBQ+ 	38/39 (97.4%) 1/39 (2.6%)
Ethnicity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> African Asian Chinese/Other Caucasian Hispanic Indian/Bangladeshi/Pakistani/Sri Lankan Mixed Other Prefer not to say 	3/39 (7.7%) 2/39 (5.1%) 22/39 (56.4%) 5/39 (12.8%) 1/39 (2.6%) 1/39 (2.6%) 4/39 (10.3%) 1/39 (2.6%)
Profession <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Doctor Non-clinical scientist/research 	32/39(82%) 7/39 (17.9%)
Academic role status <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No academic role Postdoctoral fellow Assistant Professor or Associate Professor Professor Other 	6/39 (15.4%) 4/39 (10.3%) 15/39 (38.5%) 11/39 (28.2%) 3/39 (7.7%)

Number of reviews for rheumatology journals throughout career (median, IQR)	65 (50 – 100)
Editorial board status	
• Current member of editorial board of rheumatology journal	20/43 (46.5%)
• Would like to be on an editorial board	19/43 (44.2%)
Previously invited to join editorial board	23/39 (58.4%)
Previously seen editorial board positions advertised	10/39 (25.6%)
Previously applied for an editorial board position	11/39 (28.2%)
Previously declined to be on an editorial board	12/39 (30.7%)
Details of securing appointment (existing editorial board members):	
• Applied for an advertised position	2/20 (10.0%)
• Contacted the journal	5/20 (25.0%)
• Invited by journal	16/20 (80.0%)
Terms of appointment (existing editorial board members):	
• Fixed-term	1/20 (5.0%)
• Not fixed-term	12/20 (60.0%)
• Unsure	3/20 (15.0%)
• Both fixed- and non-fixed term (<i>members of > 1 editorial board</i>)	4/20 (20.0%)

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