Breaking the glass ceiling from home

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In the past 2 months, every American Chemical Society member has been affected in some way by the COVID-19 pandemic. For some ACS members, the impact has been directly on their personal health or the health of a family member. Others may have lost their employment or are struggling to redefine what daily work looks like when working remotely.

Our members have missed face-to-face celebrations of birthdays, retirements, weddings, graduations, Mother’s Day, and even the celebrations of loved ones who have died. We have all been affected by this pandemic in some way, and the long-term effects have yet to become evident.

For those members who are fortunate to have retained their employment and have been tasked with working remotely, the challenges are numerous. They have had to reestablish how their work will function without an office and support staff. They have had to determine which work can be accomplished remotely and via what mechanisms.

Publications describe the risks of burnout from working from home and the possible repercussions for employee mental health. Those quarantined alone without a physical or emotional support system face even greater challenges. The mental and physical toll can also be substantial for those who are working and are caretakers for children or adult dependents, especially when supports such as daytime care facilities are no longer available.

While there are many positive examples of relationships in which the household load is evenly divided, research shows that most women in married and partnered relationships still carry a disproportionately higher quantity of “invisible labor” at home. This is the time and effort invested in keeping a household running effectively, such as maintaining family schedules, completing household tasks, and communicating with educators and healthcare providers. It is not yet known how long people will continue to work remotely without schools and childcare open.

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unprecedented time in history.

How will teleworking during the pandemic affect the careers of women chemists? Evidence is emerging that journal article submissions from female authors in the **past few months have declined**. If article submissions by women have decreased, then it is likely that submissions of grant proposals and patent applications may also be down. Any important long-term task that is easily interrupted by the care requirements of others is likely affected.

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Career mobility or progress for those on the tenure track is in part measured by the number of peer-reviewed publications. How will these women chemists be fairly evaluated in future career stages when it comes to tenure and promotion? This career impact applies to women chemists in all employment sectors.

Women chemists will need to advocate for themselves and for one another during this unprecedented time in history, and I encourage them to communicate their work needs to those around them. Don’t be afraid to ask for extensions or resources. It is vital that fair evaluation and performance assessment be developed for all employees who are working remotely. Allies are also encouraged to speak up within their institutions, ask about what is being done, and point out the systemic barriers to success.

This year marks the 93rd anniversary of the Women Chemists Committee. While much progress has been made for women chemists since 1927, our work to advocate and empower women chemists continues. It is important to celebrate some big successes in the area of public recognition of the outstanding work of women chemists.

Of the 76 recipients of **ACS National Awards given in 2020**, 26 were women. This is the most female recipients we’ve ever had in a single year. Most exciting of all was that 5 national awards went to a woman for the first time. These include the following:

• ACS Award in Inorganic Chemistry to Catherine J. Murphy
• Alfred Burger Award in Medicinal Chemistry to Gunda I. Georg
• Irving Langmuir Award in Chemical Physics to Veronica Vaida
• Peter Debye Award in Physical Chemistry to Laura Gagliardi
• ACS Award for Affordable Green Chemistry to a team that includes Jane E. Godlewski

Some ACS National Awards have not yet recognized the accomplishments of a woman chemist. We encourage ACS allies and ACS division leadership to look at the awards in their fields and consider nominating outstanding women chemists for those awards.

The Women Chemists Committee has many programs, events, and task forces, in addition to workplace and awards advocacy, and we encourage you to learn more about the committee at our website, acswcc.org. You can also find us on social media and reach us at wcc@acs.org. Let’s advocate for one another to help ensure that the work of women does not go unrecognized.

Views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of C&EN or ACS.

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