A

n Indo-French seminar on ‘Women in Science’ was organized from 3rd to 5th February 2015 at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bangalore. The seminar showcased the excellent research work done by women scientists in the framework of projects funded by the Indo-French Center for Promotion of Advanced Research (CEFIPRA). It also sought to encourage an Indo-French dialogue to arrive at best practices for increasing women’s participation in science and making it more efficient and effective by learning from each other’s experiences.

The seminar attended by 250 participants was arranged with the collaboration of four institutions namely Indo-French Center for Promotion of Advanced Research (CEFIPRA-www.cefipra.org), Service for Science and Technology at the French Embassy in India (SST-www.frenchsciencelndia.org), Indian Academy of Sciences (IASC-www.ias.ac.in) and Indian Institute of Science (IISc-www.iisc.ernet.in).

The pictures of two women of high accomplishments – India’s first woman to qualify as a doctor from USA, Anandi Gopal Joshi, and France’s Marie Curie, the first woman to win a Nobel Prize – were used as a symbol of the Indo-French science collaboration. Madam Marie Curie’s name is synonymous with the highest excellence in science. What is perhaps not well known even in India is the equally inspiring story of Anandibai who became a medical doctor in 1886. Married to a man about 20 years elder to her at the age of 9, Anandibai was, however, home-schooled by her husband and sent to USA to become a medical doctor. However, she sadly succumbed to Tuberculosis in 1887.

Dr. Debpriya Dutta, Director, CEFIPRA gave a brief talk on how CEFIPRA is serving as a model for bilateral cooperation in Science and Technology. Established in 1987, the Centre receives financial support from the Department of Science & Technology, Government of India and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of France. He also presented opportunities and tools to promote, support and encourage Indo-French Scientific cooperation.

Dr. Jenifer Clark, Attaché for science and technology at the French Embassy in India, also gave a brief presentation on opportunities for scientists through such programmes. When asked about the strengths which Indian and French women can exchange from each other, she replied, “At the scientific level, scientists from India and France, whether women or men, benefit highly from working together on Indo-French research projects. Indeed, we see that the impact factor of Indo-French co-publications is higher than that of publications from just France or just India.”

On the issue of shifting careers from laboratory research to science-related jobs, she said, “For young researchers who want to shift from bench-work towards other science-related jobs, it is necessary to develop some specific skills and attributes like networking, public speaking, team work, flexibility, adaptability, efficient time-management and good ability for multitasking.”

Dr. Jenifer Clark said that to gain these skills training sessions, opportunities to present research work (especially to non-specialists), doing internships in science policy and management organizations (funding agencies, ministry departments, research charities, etc.), using social media to discuss science, writing general science articles and learning about business development is very important. “I think it’s important to start preparing for a career outside of research before making the switch – indeed non-academic jobs are competitive too, so it’s good to make sure that it is the right position for each person,” she said.

The panel discussion on the second day of the seminar showed that the challenges faced by women pursuing a scientific career in France and in India are actually very similar.

Anitha Jagadesh of the Manipal Centre for Virus Research presented a poster on her work on Influenza-A viruses.
Many Indian women give up their scientific career due to some or the other reason. It is a loss of resources invested, especially if education they have taken is public funded. When asked about this Prof. Rohini said, “I find this wasteful on two grounds. First, for the reason you mention that the resources and efforts which have been invested in the training do not bring return. Some people at times might quote that as a reason for not encouraging women to be involved in higher studies and research training. But to me, even more importantly, it reduces the diversity in the input that is given to science in general. I do not mean to indicate that there is difference between science as done by men and women but science being very individualistic every human being contributes in his or her own unique way.”

Prof. Rohini said that the best period where intervention can make a difference is early career period where one has to settle in a career and which is also the time when one must start a family. “According to me the best intervention is not necessarily to afford schemes to come back to the mainstream but rather introduce Institutional, Social and Policy structures which would allow a smooth negotiation of this early period,” said Prof. Rohini.

A large number of young women scientists from all over India were present in the seminar and presented their scientific work at the poster presentation session. Anitha Jagadesh, a 2nd year PhD scholar at Manipal Centre for Virus Research, Manipal University presented her research on the Neuraminidase (NA) gene of Influenza A viruses. About the conference she said, “Conferences like these not only provide an opportunity for budding women researchers like me to present our research work, but also helps to learn from experienced and eminent scientists.”

The exhibition-cum-sale counter had books like the autobiography of C.V. Raman, A Girls Guide to a Life in Science – an inspirational book for young girls who are aspiring for science as a career, and Lilavati’s Daughters: Women Scientists of India – containing biographical sketches of about 100 women scientists of India.

When asked for a message for young girls who want to pursue a career in science, Prof. Rohini Godbole, who has co-edited both the above books, replied, “The world is yours. Go, do what you want to do! Nothing else matters except your passion for Science!”

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