EDITORIAL

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Breaking barriers: women in oral and maxillofacial surgery challenges and the path forward

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Oral and maxillofacial surgery (OMFS) has long been recognized as one of the most demanding specialties in both dentistry and medicine, requiring a unique integration of surgical expertise, scientific knowledge, and high training intensity and long duration of time for becoming specialists. Despite the growing number of women entering dental schools worldwide, the proportion of female surgeons in OMFS remains disproportionately low, particularly in countries such as Korea, where the specialty is positioned at the intersection of dentistry and surgery. This dual identity, while academically enriching, has also contributed to structural and cultural barriers that limit the entry and retention of women in the field.

Unfortunately, an official sex-disaggregated statistics for the board certified oral and maxillofacial surgeons and academic faculty members in Korea are not publicly available. Therefore, the proportion of women in OMFS is calculated using the Korean Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons (KAOMS)' board of directors list compared to the total ratio of female dentists in Korean Dental Association.(Table 1) Female dentists are marked as 28% among all dentists currently, while there has been no woman director in KAOMS until 2010, and maintained as one digit number.(Table 1) Interestingly, female executive directors have not existed until 2019, only one woman executive director was selected and acting since 2020. This underrepresentation of women in OMFS is not merely a reflection of personal choice but rather a multifactorial issue shaped by resident and fellowship training intensity, institutional expectations, and societal norms[1-3]. Surgical training pathways often demand long and unpredictable working hours, including night duties and weekend commitments. In academic settings, these demands are further compounded by expectations for research productivity, teaching responsibilities, and professional service at the affiliated clinical institute. For many women, particularly those navigating family responsibilities, achieving a sustainable work–life balance within such an environment can be exceptionally challenging.

In Korea, these challenges are further accentuated by the relatively small number of female role models in OMFS.(Table 1, Fig. 1) The scarcity of women in senior academic and leadership positions in OMFS perpetuates a cycle in which younger trainees may perceive the field as less accessible or less compatible with long-term personal and professional goals. As shown in Table 1, the frequency of the female board of directors is in increasing trend and the presence and visibility of female faculty members are gradually reshaping this perception. However, the executive directors and presidency level has never been enriched by female members in the recent 20 years. As more women assume roles as educators, researchers, and leaders within academic institutions and professional societies, they contribute not only to scientific advancement but also to the cultural transformation of the specialty.

Importantly, women in OMFS bring distinct perspectives that enrich patient care, education, research, and social activities in the scientific societies. A growing body of literature suggests that diversity in surgical teams enhances communication, empathy, and clinical outcomes[4-6]. In many specific

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Table 1. Summary of the numbers and ratios of male/female board of directors in the Korean Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons in the recent 20 years (2006-2025)

Year	Total number of board of directors (No. of the executive directors)	No. of male directors (No. of the male executive directors)	No. of female directors (No. of the female executive directors)	Proportion of female directors (ratio of female executive directors) (%)
2006	30 (6)	30 (6)	0 (0)	0.0 (0.0)
2007	30 (6)	30 (6)	0 (0)	0.0 (0.0)
2008	32 (6)	32 (6)	0 (0)	0.0 (0.0)
2009	30 (6)	30 (6)	0 (0)	0.0 (0.0)
2010	29 (6)	29 (6)	0 (0)	0.0 (0.0)
2011	32 (6)	31 (6)	1 (0)	3.1 (0.0)
2012	32 (6)	31 (6)	1 (0)	3.1 (0.0)
2013	47 (6)	46 (6)	1 (0)	2.1 (0.0)
2014	60 (6)	58 (6)	2 (0)	3.3 (0.0)
2015	61 (6)	57 (6)	4 (0)	6.6 (0.0)
2016	61 (7)	57 (7)	4 (0)	6.6 (0.0)
2017	59 (7)	53 (7)	6 (0)	10.1 (0.0)
2018	59 (7)	53 (7)	6 (0)	10.1 (0.0)
2019	59 (7)	53 (7)	6 (0)	10.1 (0.0)
2020	61 (7)	53 (6)	8 (1)	13.1 (14.3)
2021	61 (7)	53 (6)	8 (1)	13.1 (14.3)
2022	61 (7)	53 (6)	8 (1)	13.1 (14.3)
2023	63 (11)	54 (10)	9 (1)	14.2 (9.1)
2024	77 (13)	68 (12)	9 (1)	11.7 (7.7)
2025	77 (13)	68 (12)	9 (1)	11.7 (7.7)

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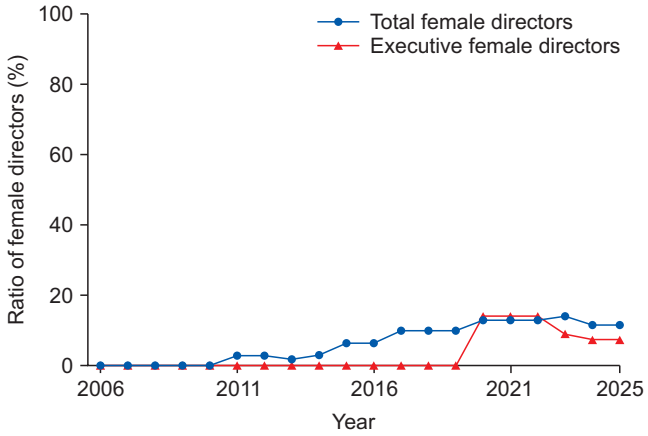


Fig. 1. Summary of the proportion of female board and executive directors in the Korean Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons over the past 20 years (2006-2025). Proportions were calculated as the number of female directors divided by the total number of directors.
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fields of OMFS such as craniofacial deformities, pediatric maxillofacial disorders, and reconstructive surgery, where long-term patient relationships and multidisciplinary collaboration are essential, these attributes are particularly valuable. Moreover, women surgeons often play a pivotal role in mentoring the next generation, fostering inclusive environments, and advocating for systemic changes that benefit all practitioners.

Looking forward, it is imperative to move beyond acknowledging disparities toward implementing actionable strategies. Institutions and professional organizations should promote policies that support flexible parental leave and equitable opportunities for career advancement. Mentorship programs by the female leader surgeons specifically tailored for female trainees and early-career surgeons can provide critical guidance and support. Furthermore, academic journals and societies have a responsibility to highlight the contributions of women in OMFS, thereby normalizing their presence and inspiring future leaders. By fostering an environment that values diversity, inclusivity, and sustainability, OMFS can better adapt to the changing landscape of healthcare and academia.

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Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

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