

The economist and former president of Harvard University Lawrence Summers is (in)famous for the controversy he generated by suggesting that “innate differences” make women less capable than men of succeeding in maths and science. The aftermath of his statement, the rejoinders, responses and eventual recant, make for interesting reading. It is worthwhile to rephrase the question of whether women are “ready” for a career in science and research, to whether society is ready for women to pursue such careers, especially in an Indian context. “Enabling” and “empowering”, in India, are often confused with patronising and sympathising with — and this remains true for the narrative of women in science as well.

In the West, affirmative action has been entrenched for close to three decades now. Gender equity and diversity at the workplace are embedded in systems and hiring processes in a mostly unobtrusive and constructive way. The discourse is not on whether there is a “compromise on quality” in such practices, but on how best to administer such processes and ensure that actions translate into better enabling work environments at all levels, not just in the laboratory or departments or classrooms but in administration as well.