

*What do you do, if you are told you cannot be a surgeon?* The voice comes from a young woman sitting in the back of the lecture hall, now packed with 300 students. I am leading a panel on gender discrimination at a medical college in southern India, and these students are no strangers to barriers to their training. “You will encounter questions, discouragement, and discrimination from those you love, those you work with, and those you treat,” I tell her. “But you must be an advocate for yourself.” I want to tell these students how I learned that advocacy requires more than a belief in one’s values or aims. When I encountered obstacles as a female resident in a specialty with 89% male attendings, I worked with other residents at my institution to evaluate gender discrimination in surgical education and conduct a cross-institutional study on patient-derived gender discrimination. Whether advocating for one’s right to pursue a career in surgery or another cause, this work taught me that advocacy is a practice that requires intention. Advocacy entails collecting data, processing information, and finding a platform to speak the truth you have defined.

Five billion people globally lack adequate access to surgical care. Working through the Harvard Program for Global Surgery and Social Change (PGSSC), I strive both through small-scale capacity-building initiatives and more broad-based national surgical, obstetric, and anesthesia plans to improve surgical care for vulnerable populations across the globe. The ACS Leadership Conference and Advocacy Summit will help provide me the tools necessary to be an advocate for gender equity at my own institution and for policy development on an international scale through my work with PGSSC at the regional World Health Summit in Uganda this April. Through my actions and voice, I aim to advocate for my medical students and nurses to be treated with respect and kindness, for my female colleagues to receive the recognition their work deserves, and for patients in resource-limited settings to obtain access to essential surgical procedures. “Advocacy is a privilege,” I tell the 300 students sitting in the lecture hall, “You have been given a voice and a platform. Now use it.”