**EFFECTIVE OPPORTUNITIES FOR GENDER EQUALITY, CAREER ADVANCEMENT, AND KNOWLEDGE BUILDING: SERVING AS A CHIEF SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATOR**

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**Abstract**

Nuclear Security is a vast field and it is not limited by the gender of the personnel involved. Equal opportunities are offered by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) for both technically qualified male & female officers for career advancement and to knowledge building. The paper presents the pathways of career development of a woman from an operator to an expert in the field with serving as the Chief Scientific Investigator (CSI) of a Coordinated Research Project (CRP) J02005.

1. INTRODUCTION

Opportunities within technical fields may seem limited for women, particularly in specialized areas such as nuclear security. There may be real or perceived barriers to career advancement, specifically in opportunities for women to exercise project or team management leadership, build important networks, and expand and demonstrate technical skills.

The IAEA encourages and assists research on, development of, and practical use of atomic energy and its applications for peaceful purposes throughout the world. It brings together research institutions from Member States to collaborate on research projects of common interest through Coordinated Research Projects (CRPs). For each project, participating institutes designate one staff member as the Chief Scientific Investigator (CSI) to manage the research project. The IAEA acts as the sponsoring and coordinating body; and an IAEA technical staff member is assigned to lead each CRP as the project officer.

Sri Lanka has participated in many IAEA CRPs and I serve as the CSI for the CRP on Improved Assessment of Initial Alarms from Radiation Detection Equipment. This experience has greatly enhanced my technical acumen, project management skills, and leadership abilities. I have been able to lead a team, develop a network, and build my confidence.

1. CHALLENGES

Generally, most of the officers in nuclear security field are male officers and they are well equipped with heavy radiation detection instruments at the border monitoring operations. Electronic and computer base technical knowledge is essential to understand the operations in the field. Also, some radiation detection instruments such as Backpack radiation detectors, Radio-isotopes Identification Devices (RID) consists of heavy weights. As a female operator, handing the heavy weighted instruments for a period of time could be a major challenge. Sometimes, to conduct the training courses or during special operations, I need to travel further away from my institute to the field. Especially, with unknown officers, facility operators and new environments to work with. It has been observed that, some male students under estimate the knowledge of a female trainer in the field. But having work experience as both user and an expert/trainer, it is easier to overcome this attitude with sound knowledge in the practical scenarios met in the field. The diverse knowledge and exposure to the field is largely beneficial to overcome these challenges.

1. OPPORTUNITIES AND FACING THE CHALLENGES

The CSI role has also given me the opportunity to assist other Member States in the development and implementation of radiation detection strategies. For an example, I had to lead an expert mission to Cambodia to educate the operators/FLOs on collection of data. I have also been led the development of a site-specific tool to improve consistency, accuracy, and efficiency of alarm assessments through the Tool for Radiation Alarm and Commodity Evaluation (TRACE). I have participated in multiple IAEA technical meetings to further improve my understanding of testing processes for radiation detection equipment [1] and detection methodologies. Also, I was able to provide technical support to technical meeting on advance techniques using Backpack radiation detectors which was organized by IAEA in year 2019. As a CSI, I have benefited from mentorship and technical collaboration with the IAEA Project Officer. As a result, I have received a great opportunity to advance my career while increasing effectiveness and sustainability of nuclear security detection activities in Sri Lanka. As a minute example for the woman’s factor in the field of nuclear security I urge other female members of the Member States to participate the CRP programs and improve their capabilities and scope into an international level.

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