

'EU fails potential of highly qualified women scientists'

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Persistent gender stereotypes, predominantly male decision-making bodies, the lack of transparency in recruitment procedures and the operation of 'old boys networks' to which women often do not have access result in the EU losing the potential of highly-qualified women scientists and the estimated 700,000 additional researchers needed to reach the Lisbon goal, argues an NGO representing women scientists.

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What is the current status of women in science in Europe? Have the Commission's action plans on women and science delivered?

Europe is still far away from gender balance in science and research. The under-representation of women in research is still significant. The imbalance between women and men also increases the higher you get to the top. According to the latest EU statistics, "She Figures 2006", women make up more than 50% of EU students and earn 43% of EU doctoral degrees but on average only get to 15% of senior academic - and thereby research - decision-making positions. In some countries and in some disciplines, these percentages are even lower. Women also only make up 18% of the scientists in the private sector and, in the majority of the EU member states, only represent less than 20% on scientific boards and panels.

However, whether this under-representation of women scientists is described as the "leaky pipeline" or described as the result of the "glass ceiling", it means that European research and European research policy is losing the potential of highly-qualified women scientists.

In December 2001, the European Commission adopted the Science and Society Action Plan which contained a series of actions to promote gender equality in science. Action 24 specifically aimed at setting up a European Platform of Women Scientists committed to gender equality in scientific research. The European Platform of Women Scientists (EPWS) was legally established as an international non-profit organisation in Brussels in November 2005, receiving its seed money as an FP6 Specific Support Action. The Platform constitutes a new strategic instrument complementing various initiatives taken at the European level to ensure better participation of women scientists in research and the research policy process as well as the inclusion of the gender dimension in research.

Are there big differences between the EU-27 with regard to women and science?

There are differences among the Member States as regards the percentages of female PhD graduates, university professors and researchers. In 2003, the percentage of female PhD graduates in some countries was below the European average of 43%, for example, in the Czech Republic (35%), in Belgium (36%), in Germany, Malta and Turkey (38%) and in France and the UK (42%). Other countries recorded much higher rates such as Latvia (67%), Lithuania (62%), Estonia and Romania (58%) and Portugal (56%). Other relevant statistics show that, while women represent an average of 29% of the researchers in Europe, countries like Latvia (53%), Lithuania (48%), Bulgaria (47%) and Portugal (44%) are above this average. The Netherlands (17%), Germany (19%), Belgium, the Czech Republic and France (28%) register less significant scores.

However, these figures have to be carefully examined as to what they reveal about the position of women scientists in the respective countries, for example, with respect to status, pay, involvement in research, and decision-making power. Where research positions generally are lower paid, involve more teaching than research, and recognition and decision-making power are comparatively low, the numbers of women tend to be higher. Where research positions generally are well paid, involve more research than teaching, and recognition and decision-making power are comparatively high, the numbers of women tend to be lower.

Differences among countries also exist in terms of gender awareness, the gender pay gap and networking among women scientists. However, also here one has to carefully study the reasons for this situation and the inter-relation of the factors involved.

Which mechanisms are responsible for this situation?

The factors that lead to the under-representation of women in science and research decision making are manifold. They include lack of gender awareness and persistent gender stereotypes, predominantly male decision-making bodies and insufficient network support with respect to women's career advancement. Also, the lack of transparency in recruitment procedures, gate-keeping and the operation of "old boys networks", to which women often do not have access, have an important influence on reaching the top level. The gender pay gap is a serious issue in all the EU countries and concerns all fields of the employment market, including education, research, universities and especially, however, industrial research. Often, there is an unintended gender bias in current ways of defining and evaluating scientific excellence which might work to the disadvantage of women. Furthermore, the general insecurity and openness of scientific careers as well as the absence of infrastructures to enable a sustainable work-life balance, although an issue concerning both women and men - together with traditional images of the division of labour in family structures - still has a greater impact on the career development of women. The scarcity of women in senior positions and on scientific committees in the majority of the EU member states may also prevent women's interests from being put forward in policy and decision-making processes on future science development.

Which measures should be taken to bring about change?

Key measures to address the current under-representation of women in research and its decision-making bodies include: the promotion of gender mainstreaming; more transparency in recruitment processes; enhanced security of scientific careers; ensuring gender balance in

research decision-making bodies, evaluation panels and selection committees, following the Commission's target of a minimum of 40% female representation in panels and consultative committees in the research process, specific support actions for women researchers, such as mentoring and targeted promotion policies, the strengthening of networking among women scientists at national, regional, and EU level, and raising awareness in the scientific community as well as among policy makers on the issue of equal opportunities in science and research.

The participation of women in science and research and in the research policy debate is not only a fundamental human right of women scientists, but also a matter of justice. In view of the acknowledged discussion on the value of diversity, it has also to be seen as essential to achieving excellence and innovation in research and ensuring a sustainable scientific quality of research. Furthermore, failing to make full use of the available qualified human potential of women scientists is detrimental to economies and societies on the macro level as well as to individual research institutions on the micro level.

Using the full potential and scientific excellence of women scientists is of central importance to the realisation of the European Research Area (ERA) and the Lisbon goal of Europe becoming the world's most competitive knowledge-based economy. To ensure and achieve scientific excellence and technological innovation a thus strengthened research effort, the European Union must significantly increase the number of female researchers among the estimated 700,000 additional researchers needed to reach the Lisbon goal.

What does EPWS, as the voice of female researchers in Europe concretely do to improve the framework conditions for women scientists, to ensure gender awareness and to enhance the successful participation of women scientists in European research programmes?

The European Platform of Women Scientists (EPWS) is a growing international umbrella association of networks of women scientists and those promoting women scientists in all disciplines all over Europe, representing the interests and aspirations of women scientists in EU research policy. The Platform at present numbers 117 members, together representing more than 10,000 women researchers in 30 countries.

Acting on its mission, EPWS facilitates an informed and structured dialogue between the community of women scientists and organisations promoting women scientists and policy makers in Europe, which involves three major steps:

1. Harnessing the concerns, needs, ideas, aspirations and interests of European women scientists in all disciplines and all stages of their career paths.
2. Coordinating support activities for women scientists to facilitate their active role in the European Research Area as researchers as well as participants in the research policy debate in Europe.
3. Feeding the voice of women back into the research policy debate, setting the research agenda and shaping institutions.

EPWS strengthens contacts and collaboration among women scientists, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe and in the private sector, and promotes the understanding and inclusion of the gender dimension in science and research. The Platform provides contacts to high-profile women scientists of all disciplines as keynote speakers, panel members and evaluators and helps to identify funding and support opportunities for women in science, continuing to enlarge its

database of around 160 networks of women scientists and networks promoting women scientists throughout Europe and beyond.

Within one year, EPWS gained visibility and credibility in the EU landscape: via the EPWS monthly newsletter and news alerts. Reaching thousands of readers all over the world, EPWS regularly informs women scientists on research policy developments at EU level, good practice in the promotion of women scientists and international events of interest. Since the beginning of 2006, the Platform actively participated in around 200 international events and has been portrayed in around 200 articles all over the world.

EPWS actively participated in the political debate on a number of relevant issues. Among these are the discussion on the European Commission's Seventh Framework Programme for Research and Development (FP7), the EU's Lisbon Agenda, the European Research Area (ERA) and the overall discussion on the notions of "Excellence" and "Innovation". Position papers and replies to public consultations have also been published on these issues. EPWS interventions contribute to raising awareness among policy-makers of the principle of equal opportunities in research, the importance of gender mainstreaming and gender balance as well as the need to achieve an inclusive, gender sensitive notion of "excellence".

EPWS offers the scientific community excellent networking opportunities within and beyond the own discipline, geographical area, and the European Research Area (ERA), focused information in the fields of research and gender via free newsletter, news alerts and an interactive web site as well as visibility at European level and beyond. Member networks have the opportunity to develop their initiatives through exchange of good (and bad) practice examples, the transfer of know-how and the organisation of joint projects.