



European Platform of Women Scientists | Rue d'Arlon 38 | B-1000 Bruxelles

Vice-President Margot Wallström
Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal
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Elections to the European Parliament 4-7 June 2009 - What is in for Europe's Women Scientists?

Dear Vice-President Wallström,
Dear Commissioner Špidla,

Thank you very much for your letter, dated 10 March 2009, kindly requesting me as a member of the Network of Women in Decision-Making in Politics and the Economy to join the European Commission's efforts and reach out to the community of my association, the European Platform of Women Scientists EPWS, to contribute to increasing the turnout to the up-coming European Parliament elections between 4 and 7 June 2009.

As an association operating at European level, the European Platform of Women Scientists EPWS is fully committed at the up-coming elections. However, the European Union's political will to promote women in science and research has become increasingly difficult to communicate regarding any serious present or future concrete actions.

The European Commission and the European Parliament have acknowledged the waste of human resources, money and potential wrought by not fully utilising the abilities of women scientists and have attempted to address this problem through a number of different initiatives in recent years.

One of the European Union's most prominent steps in working to retain women in science careers and improve their representation has been an FP6 Specific Support Action to fund the creation of the European Platform of Women Scientists EPWS. The project ran from 1 February 2005 until 31 October 2008 and was endowed with 1.98 million €. It implemented the design, mission and activities of the Platform as a non-profit network of networks of women scientists and organisations promoting equal opportunities in science from all disciplines all over Europe, as suggested in detail by a previous feasibility study.

The creation of EPWS was well received by the community of women scientists which embraced its launch and further development with great enthusiasm and commitment. In less than three years the Platform has evolved into the network of almost 100 member organisations in 39 countries working for over 12,000 women scientists in Europe and beyond. EPWS has also established itself as a cross-cutting NGO with expertise relevant to a number of different

EU policy areas and has working contacts with a diverse range of Directorates General next to DG Research as well as with the European Parliament, the European Science Foundation and the European Research Council.¹

Because of its successful performance, increasing impact, high visibility at European level, and the acknowledged necessity of its work, the Platform was listed as named recipient in the FP7 Capacities Science in Society Work Programme 2008. Under this current funding scheme, EPWS receives funding for “project activities”, not for the running costs of the Platform. The Platform itself that is the running costs of the organization and the work for the association, such as the costs for office rent and office administration including the necessary personnel, are not covered by these funds. EPWS also has to match the Commission funding with 20% co-funding and has to pre-finance the last instalment. For this the Platform has to raise funds which – ideally – are not project bound.

EPWS member networks, notoriously under-funded themselves, are unable to cover the most substantial sum of the running costs of the Platform by their membership fees. The contributions to administrative costs which remain within EU grant schemes and other possible grants only finance a fraction of the Platform’s running costs. Funding from the private sector, as well, depends on the carrying out of specific projects for foundations or corporate sponsors thus adding to the workload of the organisation while again leaving the costs of running an international association uncovered. As a small start-up NGO, EPWS also has no big institution, a university or a research organisation, behind it to cover part of the running costs or help with co-financing and pre-financing engagements.

This situation does not only raise concern for the long-term sustainability of the Platform but even places its short-term existence in doubt before EPWS has sufficient time to have a long-lasting, enduring impact in terms of improving the representation of women in science and research in Europe. The fact that the European Commission has created a permanent organisation to fulfil an identified public need but has enacted certain financial structures, which render the organisation unsustainable both in the short-term as well as the long-term runs the risk of both wasting the huge amount of resources deployed in creating this organisation and of nullifying the European Commission’s efforts to address the problems facing women in science and the associated ill effects these problems have for European science and societies. The Platform has repeatedly pointed out the necessity to find a common solution to this dilemma.

Against the background of the current situation and perspectives of EPWS, we ask ourselves, what are we to tell the women scientists of Europe regarding the sincerity of the European Union’s political will to improve the situation of women in science and research to make them go to the ballot box in June 2009? Where and how does the Union’s political will to promote women in science and research, especially into decision-making positions, manifest itself in a sustainable, future oriented manner, in evidence for Europe’s women scientists?

Are we to inform Europe’s women scientists that the European Union will continue to promote equal opportunities in science and research yet at the same time *cannot* afford an organisation explicitly founded by the Union to represent their concerns, needs, ideas, aspirations and interests in the European policy debate and to co-ordinate support activities for women scientists to facilitate their

¹ For more information please see enclosed Paper on the Mission and Activities of EPWS, 2008.

active role in the European Research Area as researchers as well as participants in the research policy debate in Europe?

What are European women scientists to expect from the future European Parliament and the future European Commission in the face of the fact that the long-term sustainability of the European Platform of Women Scientists cannot be secured and that an institution once created to administer change is now in danger of ceasing to exist? How is the European Union to establish confidence that it will be able to convincingly tackle the problem of a decreasing interest of young people in science and research if the Union cannot financially afford to encourage, retain and promote highly qualified women scientists already in research careers?

How can we convey that the European Union is serious about acknowledging the importance of networks for the empowerment of women in science and research but does not follow its word by actions and fund the running costs and thereby the long-term policy and strategy development of these organisations? Or, by the same token, why it does not make (paid) use of such organisations created as the result of European policies and of acknowledged necessity and use the Platform's expertise and services but continue to self-perform activities that could most suitably be outsourced to EPWS?

How are we to explain to Europe's women scientists and to those who work for their promotion that, on the other hand, the European Union apparently *can* afford that the 52,5 million € allocated to the creation of the European Institute for Gender Equality remain untouched for over more than two years while another already established organisation working for equal opportunities in science, needing only a fraction of the interest gained in the meantime, and research is fearing for its further existence? Assuming an average interest of 3% on the European Institute for Gender Equality's allocated budget of 52.5 million € for the period 2007-2013, so far unspent, would render 1.575 million € p.a. since the Institute's formal adoption in December 2006 and by now equal 3.15 million € for 2007 and 2008. A sum that would cover the Platform's running costs for 6.3 years.

Where, in short, is the European Union's self-confidence regarding the pursuance and implementation of its own equal opportunities policy in science and research in a consistent and sustainable manner after acknowledging the need for it in numerous policy documents and recommendations?

On our common way to transform Europe into the world's most competitive knowledge-based society the participation of women scientists has never been more important than at this moment in time. The European Union cannot afford to lose its strongest allies on this way. By turning the back on Europe's women scientists, however, this is exactly what is going to happen.

Sincerely



Dr. Brigitte Mühlenbruch
Vice President

Enclosure: EPWS Paper on Mission and Activities 2008