

A Binding Formula for Women



Society, the economy and science have a burning problem: Women must finally be enabled to play an appropriate role in leading positions. As long as women continue to have less favorable opportunities than men, we are squandering valuable potential. But what is the right way to go about this? How can we reach a situation in which women are adequately represented at the management level – also at the Max Planck Society?

There is still a gap between men and women in science as they climb the career ladder: While there are more female graduates than male, at the doctoral level, the ratio is around 45 to 55 in favor of men. Among post docs and in W2 posts, women account for barely 30 percent. The share of female professors is around 25 percent. And

effects on us are particularly serious, as female scientists can't afford to step aside from their profession for an extended period – science is advancing at too fast a pace. At the Max Planck Society, we try to be particularly supportive of employees with families. We have substantially increased the availability of childcare: 47 of our institutes now have cooperation agreements in place with external nursery operators, and 6 more will follow. Since 2006, we have invited the Hertie Foundation to carry out its *audit berufundfamilie* – career and family audit – as another means of promoting a family-friendly human resource policy. The resulting certification provides female applicants with a transparent picture of our goals and the steps we are taking. But we are dependent on political will: The Max Planck Society can merely try to secure nursery places for its employees. As a rule, we are reliant on the existence of widespread, well-developed childcare facilities.

The uncertainty of career planning, on the other hand, is a phenomenon that is intrinsic to the world of science. A scientific career can't run along the same lines as a career in civil service. Young scientists need to gather experience abroad and familiarize themselves with a variety of institutions. Therefore, a certain proportion of scientific posts must be of a fixed-term nature – not just here in Germany, but in other important research nations, as well. And this affects not only women, but men, too. On the other hand, we should beware that women are not awarded fixed-term contracts more frequently than men. And we must open up new career paths, for example by increasing the emphasis on tenure-track appointments. The prospect of a fixed probationary period leading to a permanent management post reduces the inherent uncertainty.

Life is particularly difficult for female scientists with children

at the W3 level, fewer than 10 percent of post holders are women – a sobering thought. But where do the causes lie?

Allow me to highlight three factors that make it difficult for women to pursue a scientific career: the lack of compatibility between family and profession, the insecurity of scientific career planning – due mainly to short-term contracts – and the fact that the majority of male scientists frequently have too little regard for their female counterparts.

Life is particularly difficult for female scientists with children. Childcare facilities remain a rarity. We in the world of science are not alone in facing this problem, but the

The third cause is particularly tricky. Studies show that male scientists generally give preference to men. This is due mainly to subconscious role model perceptions. At the same time, a current survey by the Center for Higher Education confirms that

The assessments of superiors and colleagues stifle motivation

many women are less motivated than men to aspire to top positions. That presumably has to do with the assessments of superiors and colleagues.

What can we do to break free from these clichés? Surely the first step toward improvement is to recognize our situation for what it is. We must actively promote, support and encourage women. Coaching and mentoring programs have proven to be effective. We offer special management training courses for female post docs. At the same time, it is also important that outstanding female scientists become more visible. Databases such as the Robert Bosch Foundation's AcademiaNet offer a good starting point. Experience also shows that women are more likely to be offered an opportunity if they are assessed by female scientists – which is why we try to ensure that every evaluation and appointment committee includes at least one female member.

In all these matters, it is worth taking a look abroad. Consider the US, where equal opportunity for female scientists in management positions has been a central issue for nearly 20 years. In the past decade, according to the National Science Founda-

tion, the proportion of female scientists in the highest positions has risen by 1 percent each year. For example, from 1997 to 2008, the ratio of female senior faculty members rose from 17 to 27 percent. Nevertheless, it is striking that, even in disciplines in which women are traditionally well represented, such as the social and life sciences, the proportion of women still doesn't exceed one in three.

In general, it appears difficult to raise the percentage of women in top positions above this mark – even outside the world of science and in an environment that is particularly supportive of women. Figures recently released for the Federal Ministries in Berlin have clearly made the point: even at the Federal Ministry for Families, no more than 29.4 percent of secretaries of state, heads of department and sub-department managers are female.

A glimpse at the big picture shows that the Max Planck Society's targets are realistic. Compared with other German research organizations, we are doing well. But we can't be satisfied with a situation in which women account for less than 9 percent of our Directors. For this reason, at its meeting in March, the Senate adopted a self-imposed commitment to increase the number of female scientists in management positions. Within the next five years, we intend to increase the share of women in TVöD pay groups E13 to E15Ü, as well as in W2 and W3 posts collectively by one percentage point per year; by 2017 we expect one third of these TVöD posts and one quarter of W2/W3 posts to be held by women. We already gained positive experience with such a commitment between 2005 and 2010.

At first glance, the target may seem rather unspectacular, but it must be taken into account that fluctuation over a five-year period is limited. Directors' posts, in

particular, are occupied on a long-term basis, meaning that we can only gradually increase the proportion of women. Moreover, in absolute figures, five or even eight percentage points constitute remarkable growth. The increase in female W2 and W3 post holders between 2005 and 2010 had the concrete effect of more than doubling the number of female scientists at this level. Overall, we succeeded in raising the number of women in these posts by 53 percent. The result was to noticeably heighten the

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representation of female scientists in positions of responsibility at our institutes. The new commitment we have undertaken now aims to raise the number of female Directors by a further 60 percent, and to increase the number of female research group leaders (W2) and female scientists in management positions in TVöD employment by around 20 percent.

We simply can't afford to squander the gifts of outstanding female scientists. Especially at the Max Planck Society, we need exceptional talent – and we need creative women who are able to think outside the box.



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