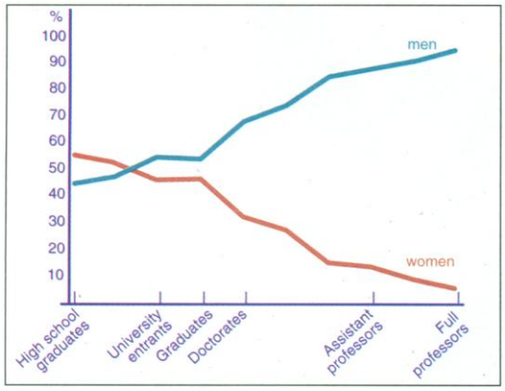
WOMEN IN SCIENCE

EU Confronts the Gender Gap

At the University of Lisbon, being a woman does not seem to be a huge impediment to a successful career in science: Almost 60% of all assistant and associate professors and 30% of full professors there are female. But in most other European research establishments, that's far from the case. Throughout the European Union (EU), the situation for women scientists is dire—on average, men outnumber women by around 20 to 1. This bleak picture emerges from the pages of a new European Commission report that, for the first time, pulls together statistical data from all over Europe. Besides fueling the gender debate in the EU with hard data, the report also sketches out several recommendations to offset the imbalance, such as more meticulous bookkeeping for gender-disaggregated statistics, better access to public records, and an affirmative action approach similar to that in the United States.



The scissor diagram. The proportion of women drops off dramatically further up the career ladder in Germany.

The report,* presented to EU research commissioner Philippe Busquin this week, is one of the outcomes of a conference on women in science held in April 1998. In the wake of the meeting, then-research commissioner Edith Cresson asked Mary Osborn, a cell biologist at the Max Planck Institute for Biophysical Chemistry in Göttingen, Germany, to assemble a group of experts and look in detail at the situation female scientists face in the EU's 15 member states.

The first obstacle the group—consisting of 12 top women scientists and science policy-makers—faced was a profound lack of sound statistical data. Osborn says that, especially in industrial research, "it's almost impossible to get good numbers." Once the group had collected all the available data, however, a more or less consistent picture emerged. Although the science community in some southern European countries, such as Portugal, seemed to be a little less lopsided, the proportion of women in senior research positions was extremely small—in Austria, for example, only 4% of full professors are female, compared to almost 14% in the United States. The situation is even worse in independent research institutions and private granting organizations. "In some charities women didn't play any role at all," says Osborn.

This is in striking contrast to the gender distribution among science undergraduates, where every other student is female. "Women are not staying in science. They're not being promoted to the same level as their male colleagues," says Osborn. "This is a huge waste of resources. Society, which is paying for the training [of female scientists], is not getting a good return." Busquin agrees: "Women's potential is seriously underused. Many highly trained women are lost to science during their career."

Osborn's first take-home message is that "we need to push for better statistics, broken down by gender but also by academic rank. And a monitoring system, because if you don't have the numbers you can't really assess any progress." Also, given the severity of the problem, the group calls for a concerted action plan across the EU instead of piecemeal projects in individual member states. European legislators should mandate target ratios for gender balance in public bodies such as universities, grant assessment panels, and policy-making committees. Osborn points out that some countries, including Finland and Italy, already have such gender equality acts in place.

For the Sixth Framework Program, the next round of the EU's rolling multibillion-dollar research effort starting in 2002, the group suggests, among other things, that the commission should aim for a gender balance no greater than 60:40 on key scientific committees and evaluation panels by 2005, monitor grant applications and success rates by gender, and create a new European prize for excellent female researchers.

The report will also be presented at a meeting of national civil servants from across the EU in Helsinki at the end of the month, where "it may serve as a catalyst to kick off national debates in the member states," says Nicole Dewandre, the head of the Women and Science section of the EU research directorate. "This gives us a solid, quantitative argument for opening up the European science system to women," she says.

–MICHAEL HAGMANN

* "Promoting Excellence Through Mainstreaming Gender Equality." See www.cordis.lu/improving/src/hp_women.htm

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ScienceScope

Ensnared A Ukrainian scientist accused of selling "a national treasure"—plankton biodiversity data—to the West was charged last week with illegal currency transactions. A conviction could torpedo millions of dollars in research support to Ukrainian scientists from the European Union (EU).

The Ukrainian security bureau (SBU) is accusing Sergey Piontkovski (right) of the Institute of Biology of the Southern Seas in Sevastopol of diverting British and EU grant money—used to digitize the plankton data—to foreign accounts, rather than putting it in agreed-upon Ukrainian vaults (*Science*, 29 October, p. 879). Unnamed experts valued the data at more than $200 million in the 16 November *Slava Sevastopolya* newspaper, suggesting that the transfer was a rip-off. But Piontkovski says he has tried "to explain ... that countries invest millions in getting data, but the data themselves are free for scientific exchange." He denies that money ended up in personal accounts.

Piontkovski faces up to 5 years in prison and expects the SBU to bring lesser charges against at least one colleague. A trial could begin as soon as January. But a spokesperson for the EU's INTAS program —one of the researcher's funders—said "there will be consequences" for its funding in Ukraine "if the questions are not fully resolved by mid-January."

Retooling Sweden's research funding system appears headed for a radical overhaul. Responding to controversy over a streamlining plan released last year (*Science*, 20 November 1998, p. 1401), a government panel last week proposed replacing existing basic research councils with a single entity and trimming the number of government agencies with responsibility for applied studies from eight to three. It also called for new fora to discuss funding coordination and communicate with policy-makers.

The plan has won guarded praise from researchers, though some fear it could create artificial divisions between basic and applied studies. But panel head Hans Wigzell, president of the Karolinska Institute, hopes parliament will consider the plan early next year and that Sweden will begin 2001 "with a totally new organization."

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