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Women in Science in Germany

Edelgard Bulmahn

The need for the principle of gender equality to be established in all national and European programs is increasingly recognized in European Union (EU) member countries. On average, only 9% of top research positions in the EU are held by women, despite the fact that women now constitute 50% of first-degree students in many EU countries.* And the percentages of women professors are increasing only slowly, at a rate of around 0.5 to 1.0% per year. Forward-looking education and research policy must create the prerequisites for a fair representation of women in all areas and at all levels; simply to wait for gender balance is not an option.

One of the German government's primary goals is to increase the participation of women in science and research in Germany, particularly in positions of leadership at higher education and research institutions. In 1998, only 6% of full professorial positions at German universities and about 4% of positions of leadership at German nonuniversity research institutions were held by women. In the same year, about 14% of full professors in the United States and France were female.* The situation in Germany is completely unsatisfactory and underlines the need for action. The forthcoming generational shift, especially at German higher education institutions where many of the researchers hired in the 1970s will be retiring soon, presents an opportunity to significantly increase the proportion of women in positions of leadership. A new program, entitled Equal Opportunities for Women in Research and Higher Education, which starts in 2001, is designed to help us reach our goal of 20% female professorships at German universities by 2005. Other programs aimed at advancing the careers of young postdoctoral researchers require 40% of new hires to be female.

In the autumn of 1998, the supervisory bodies of the 16 largest national research centers in the Federal Republic of Germany, which together form the Hermann von Helmholtz Association (HGF), adopted basic policy decisions on gender equality in an initiative of the Federal Ministry for Education and Research. In these research institutions, women hold only about 2% of leadership positions, a situation that is clearly unacceptable. Under the new policy, equal opportunity commissioners are to be appointed at the executive level, and staff development plans with specific targets for gender equality for the next 5 years are to be submitted for all areas of scientific staff. In addition, in the federal budget for 1999, we have created 100 permanent employment opportunities in research institutions that are designed specifically to help women reach top leadership positions, and we have established a framework for specific programs for women in leadership positions. For example, a program entitled A Springboard for Advancement (Anstoß zum Aufstieg), which was started at HGF centers but which we aim to extend to other research institutes such as the Max Planck Institutes, provides leadership training, coaching, and mentoring for female scientists as well as assistance with systematic career planning and networking. Also, it is now possible, for the first time, for research institutes to offer child care facilities that are funded out of their regular budgets.

In addition to these programs, strategic projects such as the Centre of Excellence Women and Science, an information resource providing international networking facilities and expert databases, are designed to bring about structural change and raise awareness. We are also actively supporting the International Women's University's EXPO 2000, where 900 female researchers will work together for 100 days, and are introducing an auditing program monitoring the human resource policies of universities and research institutes. Encouraging gender equality is essential for innovation and international competitiveness in education, science, and industry. Fair representation of women will help us broaden the basis of scientific questions, methods, and approaches; foster change; improve research quality; and bring about a fairer distribution of resources.

The author is the Federal Minister for Science and Education in Germany.

*Science Policies in the European Union: Promoting Excellence Through Mainstreaming Gender Equality, A Report from the ETAN Network on Women in Science (the European Commission, November 1999).

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