

That worries stem cell advocates. “I’m traditionally an optimist, but I don’t take this as a very good sign,” says Tim Leshan of the American Society for Cell Biology, which has been lobbying in favor of the research.

Meanwhile, Senators Arlen Specter (R-PA) and Tom Harkin (D-IA) introduced a bill on 5 April that would authorize NIH to fund derivation of and research on human ES cells. Two antiabortion senators are co-sponsors, Senator Strom Thurmond (R-SC) and Senator Gordon Smith (R-OR).

—GRETCHEN VOGEL

JAPAN

Women Academics Propose Steps to Equity

TOKYO—The campaign has begun. On 30 March, 35 Japanese women scientists met here to draw up a list of obstacles they face in obtaining grants and plot a lobbying effort to create a better working environment. But initial reaction suggests that some of those barriers—while they pale in comparison to more serious forms of discrimination—are rooted in the country’s culture or its economic woes.

“Women scientists [in Japan] face a mountain of troubles,” says Mariko Kato, an astrophysicist at Keio University’s Hiyoshi campus in Yokohama and one of the conference organizers. “We have to start with those problems that have easily identifiable solutions.”

As is true elsewhere, women hold a disproportionately small share of senior faculty positions in Japan’s universities (*Science*, 2 February, p. 817). Although participants suspect that discrimination and harassment play a major role in keeping them from achieving equity, they also point to a slew of seemingly innocuous policies that, in practice, put them at a disadvantage in competing for grants.

One such policy is the automatic termi-

nation of grant funding if the recipient goes on leave for more than 6 months. It clashes with the rule allowing women at national universities, and some private universities, a full year of leave after childbirth. The policy forces women returning from maternity leave to reassemble their labs and restart their research careers, say symposium participants, who also complained about a rule that restricts most grants for new investigators to those age 37 or younger. With more women wanting to resume their research careers after starting a family, they say, a ceiling based on years in the field rather than age would be more equitable.

An even bigger problem may be a rise in the number of part-time and nonpermanent university faculty and staff positions at private nonprofit institutes, a trend fueled by the sagging economy. “No one ever expected that so many researchers would be stuck in temporary positions,” said Michiyo Nakane, a science historian now working as a part-time lecturer at Rikkyo University in Tokyo. Although the squeeze on tenured positions applies to both men and women, men are more likely to be appointed to permanent posts when they are offered.

Another source of irritation for women and confusion for reviewers is a rule requiring grant applicants to use the name entered in Japan’s family registry. By law, married couples must register under one name, and most choose the husband’s name. Although many women still use their family name on the job, some faculty members have been pressured by their superiors to use their registered name.

Gamely defending the government’s current policies was Kenji Sakuma, director of planning in the Scientific Research Aid Division of the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology, Sports, and Culture (Monbukagakusho), which is the primary source of grants for researchers. Sakuma brought good news on some issues, including

the fact that grant applicants will soon be able to choose which name they prefer to use. He also said that the ministry would like to find a way to make grants compatible with child-care duties. But those rays of light were more than overshadowed by his defense of the status quo on other topics.

Grants need to be terminated if researchers are on leave for extended periods,

he explained. “The intent of research grants is to support world-class, leading-edge research,” said Sakuma, adding that a hot idea can grow cold if put on hold for a year. And extending grants to nonpermanent employees, who are typically on 1-year contracts and often lack laboratory space, “would be very difficult.”

The symposium participants took heart from what they see as a growing awareness of the issue. Hiroko Hara, a cultural anthropologist at the University of the Air in Chiba, noted that the Association of National Universities and the Science Council of Japan, the country’s largest grouping of researchers, have recently issued statements in support of more women professors and researchers. “There is a lot of power behind these requests,” she said.

Some noted that the meeting itself was a sign of progress. “A decade ago we were just trying to get women into research. Now we’re getting to the point of addressing specific problems [that hold women back],” said Mitsuko Asakura, a professor of labor law at Tokyo Metropolitan University. Participants hope that, over time, such incremental changes in the grants process may ultimately achieve their goal of parity.

—DENNIS NORMILE

WORKFORCE DIVERSITY

NSF Makes the BEST Of a Good Idea

Every PI should have it so easy. On 8 January, John Yochelson submitted a proposal to the National Science Foundation (NSF) to create a \$10 million, industry-led organization to promote diversity in the U.S. scientific workforce. Barely 6 weeks later, Yochelson learned that eight federal agencies had agreed to give him \$2.3 million, an award that was officially announced earlier this month at the national innovation summit of the Council on Competitiveness, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit. Its speedy success is testament to two government officials who decided not to let yet another federal report on the problem gather dust.

Yochelson heads the council, which will serve as midwife for a new entity called Building Engineering and Scientific Talent. BEST hopes to become a national clearinghouse on diversity in science and engineering, studying what works and publicizing its findings. The council has also pledged to raise an additional \$7 million or more from corporations and foundations to get BEST off the ground.

The council’s proposal dovetailed with a recommendation of the Commission on the Advancement of Women and Minorities in Science, Engineering, and Technology,



Under fire. The government’s Kenji Sakuma, right, discusses gender issues with faculty members (from left) Hiroko Hara, Michiyo Nakane, and Mariko Kato.

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