



Working together to achieve equal representation of men and women in the life sciences

**EMBO Position Paper on
Women in the Life Sciences**

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Science is essential to the economic welfare of Europe and its citizens, and the achievement of future benefits depends on excellence in basic and applied research. It follows that everything possible should be done to promote research in Europe. This includes ensuring that women and men have equal opportunities to pursue careers in science, contributing to both the establishment and achievement of research priorities. Several considerations make this approach necessary:

- Maintaining excellence in science requires contributions from the best women as well as the best men.
- The life sciences are expanding rapidly and the demand for well-trained scientists is increasing at a time when the number of students studying science is decreasing.
- Training scientists is expensive, and it is economically wasteful not to use all the skills of trained scientists in the workplace.

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Women in Science

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Women in science

Women are currently under-represented in senior positions in the life sciences. Although there are at least as many women as men among undergraduate students, the proportion of women diminishes as one scales the career ladder. There have been a number of studies on the place of women in science (e.g. the ETAN report, <http://www.cordis.lu/improving/women/documents.htm>). These have sought to account for the under-representation of women and to propose solutions for this problem. They have concluded that bringing about change will require positive action at all levels, including the adoption of new national legislation, adjustment of institutional policies and practices, identification

and elimination of discriminatory behaviour, and greater support for young women (and men) during the early periods of their career. It will require action on the part of men as well as women to achieve the necessary changes.

The reasons why women leave science are complex, but fall into two key categories: choices (real or apparent) between research and raising a family; and overt or more subtle discrimination.

Difficulties in making career decisions

- Childbearing coincides with the period when most young scientists are establishing an independent position, and time away from the laboratory makes it more difficult to remain competitive.
- Movement within and across countries to high quality research groups is seen as a prerequisite for success in research. Women are more likely to follow their male partners to a location dictated by their career needs than the other way around.
- Young women lack role models of senior women scientists.
- Some societies are not supportive of women in the workplace, or do not provide sufficient career routes for those who have taken a break for child care. This makes it difficult for those with young families to remain in science.
- Due to this lack of support, women are hesitant to apply for research grants or senior positions.
- The absence of well-defined career paths for scientists in many countries discourages young women and men from remaining in science.

Discrimination

- The fact that most senior positions are held by men, and speakers at meetings and conferences are predominantly male, may promote the view that only men can be successful.
- Women are sometimes offered lower salaries, less laboratory space and smaller research budgets, making it less likely that they will succeed.
- Many organisations and committees, including peer-review bodies and national academies, are self-selecting, which could reinforce the current dominant position of men.

Recommendations for achieving equal opportunity for women in science

The following recommendations may be taken as guidelines towards the implementation of policies in national and international organisations, funding bodies and research ministries to achieve equality of opportunity and presence for women and men in research.

Equal opportunity can be promoted by:

- ensuring equal treatment for men and women in research, with respect to salaries, research budgets and laboratory accommodation;
- collecting and maintaining data on the position of women in science at the institutional, organisational, national and international levels;
- monitoring of data regarding employment, salaries, grants, budgets, laboratory space etc., according to sex and investigating differences in the treatment of women and men;
- establishing realistic goals to increase the number of qualified women in senior positions within institutions, on review and appointment committees, and in advisory bodies;
- raising awareness that the representation of women in science is an issue and encouraging all those involved in making appointments, awarding fellowships or funding grants to avoid bias;
- reminding organizers of conferences and courses of the necessity of adequate female representation;
- offering support for younger scientists (women and men) to enable them to pursue careers in research while bringing up a family, or to facilitate their return to research after a break for child rearing;
- promoting family-friendly policies, including flexible employment arrangements and adequate child care;
- supporting and encouraging mentoring programmes through the formation of networks among women scientists and by placing emphasis on contributions women have made to science;
- encouraging women to apply for large competitive research grants and to assume senior positions in science.

EMBO is committed to

- monitoring data on all EMBO related activities to ensure that there is an increasing awareness of the need to avoid gender-bias;
- ensuring equality of treatment for those applying for EMBO fellowships and other awards;
- striving to remove all potential sources of discrimination among its review processes, and alerting members of its review committees to possible gender bias;
- encouraging those organising EMBO courses and workshops to include a reasonable proportion of women among session chairs, speakers, and others attending;
- establishing a specific re-entry fellowship programme for women and men who resume their research career in academia after a break for child care;
- achieving these goals without the introduction of quota systems or other mechanisms that could undermine the quality standards of the organization.

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