

Numbers are not enough: filters, sponsors and supporters

ELIZABETH POSKITT

It is too easy to think the increasing numbers of women entering scientific departments at undergraduate level will automatically create change as women mature in their professions. A recent survey of women in medicine in Norway¹ found that men had a significantly greater probability of achieving positions of medical leadership than women in all age groups and in all categories of job studied. The difference in probability was greatest in academic medicine and least in disciplines where there was already a relatively high proportion of women.

A lack of appropriate sponsors and supporters may affect women's career progress. Rather surprisingly, in view of the enormous pressures that fall upon women committed to both academic career and family, Davis & Astin², reviewing women in universities in USA, found married women (all disciplines) had greater research productivity than single women. Married women's careers resembled those of men in terms of educational preparation, field of study and publication rates more than those of single women. Whilst the reasons for these findings are not clear, married women may be helped by opportunities to access their husbands' networks and contacts.

Bond³ has written extensively on the personal and institutional 'filters' which hinder women's progress to the top in academic fields. She stresses the need for women to develop networks and to find mentors to help their careers. She points out the importance of champions who may or may not be women but who will fight for the position of women in faculty and committee. But women must recognise - and the modern generation of women scientists may be more aware of this than previous generations - the need for a focused approach to their careers. Women tend to have broad, conscientious attitudes to the demands of their posts, readily accepting teaching and administration commitments which deprive them of precious time for writing papers and research proposals.

Institutional 'filters' subtly affect equality of opportunity even when there may be appropriate legislation. Bond³ describes how appointments and promotions committees in academic institutions often look for candidates who seem to offer no threat. They may subconsciously seek candidates with personal styles and characteristics similar to those of the committee members. Given the overwhelming majority of men at the top in scientific institutions, it is thus likely that the 'masculine' ambience of institutions is perpetuated. For those women who do achieve leadership positions this creates further problems since they have the double role of family and work commitments and that of fulfilling the expected 'masculine' demands of their position whilst bringing their own aspirations and qualities to the post. Further, they are likely to act as mentors to other women and 'token woman' on committees. If, in achieving all this, they appear 'superwomen', they may discourage women following them who do not perceive themselves as future superwomen!

One of the aims of this debate should be to stimulate the research and action which will make the topic irrelevant for discussion in ten or twenty years' time. The outcome of projects such as those planned by the Canadian WISE teams and the evaluations of schemes and projects already in progress will be valuable. But meanwhile we should help women entering the

scientific field to recognise the need to focus on their career and develop supportive academic networks. Such networks may have to be wide and

inter-institutional if there are shortages of women in their departments. Institutions need to activate gender policies effectively and review the implications of gender disaggregated data on institutional structure and functioning.

Returning to the study of doctors in Norway. It seems the size of the female minority must be large enough to change prevailing attitudes and organisational structures if the proportion of women at the top is to improve significantly. The authors saw no convincing evidence that the situation for young women doctors would be any different in the years to come. Let us hope this debate is only the beginning of discussion and action that effects change for women in science.

Elizabeth Poskitt
International Federation of University Women
8 rue de l'Ancien Port
Geneva CH 1201
Switzerland
ifuw@ifuw.org

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