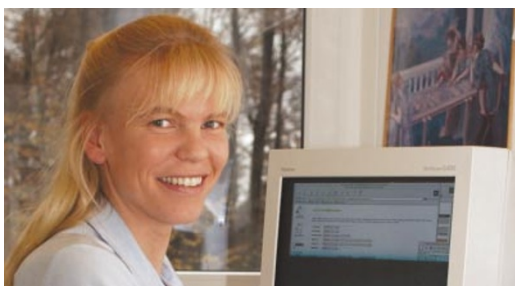


Equal opportunities



Gerlind Wallon:
EMBO plans to help more women scientists come back to work

Women make up about half of all first-degree students in most Western countries. But the proportion goes down as the degree level goes up. By the time women reach the faculty they are under-represented. The proportion of women in academic science varies from a high of 21.5% at lower grades to a mere 5% among full professors, according to a report prepared for the European Commission by the European Technology Assessment Network (ETAN). And female representation is even worse when physics is considered on its own, says a recent report by the International Union for Pure and Applied Physics (IUPAP).

The insecurity of an academic career, being disadvantaged when it comes to promotion and the lack of affordable childcare are among the reasons that many female researchers leave academic research. But it's not all bad news. A small number of funding schemes are aimed at helping them back into work.

The European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO) announced this February its Restart Fellowship programme for women scientists who have left research to raise a family and would like to return. But this new programme has some limitations. Its leader, Gerlind Wallon, admits that the total of just six fellowships on offer for this year is currently a "sore spot".

FULL OR PART TIME?

The Daphne Jackson Trust in Britain has been offering similar fellowships for the past 10 years, during which time it has helped nearly 100 women scientists and engineers. The Daphne Jackson Fellowship, which is named after the first female physics professor in the United Kingdom, provides two years of funding for women who wish to return to science. In contrast to EMBO's Restart programme, which requires its awardees to return to research full-time, the Daphne Jackson stipends are always funded at half-time levels.

To Althea Wilkinson, now a local project manager at the University of Manchester's Jodrell Bank Observatory, receiving the fellowship was an "absolute lifeline". While she was raising children, her contract as a part-time lecturer was not renewed, and the fellowship enabled her to retrain and obtain her current position.

Raising a family and having a university career in Britain is still a problem for women, according to Yasmin Robson, who was a Daphne Jackson fellow in astrophysics at the University of Oxford. "The part-time nature of the fellowship allows you to do both without the feelings of guilt," she says. Nutritionist Margaret Rayman, who got back into science after a 15-year break and is currently a senior lecturer at the University of Surrey, adds that usually an "enormous proportion of your salary" as a postdoc is spent on childcare.

SHORT TERM

The Marie Heim-Vögtlin (MHV) Fellowships of the Swiss National Science Foundation are for three years, and applicants can choose whether to work full- or part-time. MHV fellow Pia Stieger, a biologist at the University of Berne's Institute of Plant Sciences and a mother of two, was pleased to have this option and is now working 60% of full time.

The current fellowship schemes have a few flaws. Stieger points out that three years is rather a short time to re-enter academic science, get your results published and secure a more permanent position — all while working part-time. Daphne Jackson fellows agree. "Two years is too short to establish a research reputation," says Wilkinson.

Some countries have implemented initiatives that go far beyond funding that is earmarked for female scientists. The Academy of Finland's current equality plan states that "the minority gender is to occupy at least 40% of all research posts". But most countries still shy away from fixing quotas.

Mary Osborn, a group leader at the Max Planck Institute for Biophysical Chemistry who chaired the ETAN Working Group, sees special fellowship programmes as a way of strengthening the position of women in science. In addition, she hopes that more independent positions will be created for young researchers. Osborn's main goal at the moment is to ensure women's representation on advisory boards and appointments committees — which is also a key recommendation of the IUPAP panel. In her opinion, this will be crucial to promoting sexual equality. ■

Jan Schmollinger is a graduate student in Boston.

Web links

European Molecular Biology Organisation
 ♦ www.embo.org
 International Union of Pure and Applied Physics
 ♦ www.iupap.org
 Daphne Jackson Trust
 ♦ www.daphnejackson.org
 Swiss National Science Foundation
 ♦ www.snf.ch