German centre risks women-only job ads

[MUNICH] One of Germany's largest national research centres, the Research Centre Jülich, has advertised tenure-track positions reserved exclusively for women in a bid to increase the number of women occupying top research positions.

The move has been widely applauded in principle. But it has also raised some eyebrows in other research institutions. Personnel officers say they had been led to believe that advertising women-only positions for scientific posts is illegal because it discriminates against men.

But Sybille Krummacher, a scientist at the Jülich centre, which conducts research into energy and the environment, says: "It was time to stop the continued analysis of why women are under-represented in top scientific positions, and start taking bold action."

She claims to have identified a loophole in the legal situation which forbids sex discrimination in jobs where the sex of an applicant is irrelevant. A federal law forbidding discrimination in job advertising was upheld by the European Court in 1995 in a ruling on a case in which the city of Bremen wanted to advertise jobs specifically for women. But the court also said that employers could take steps to promote the "realization of equality of opportunity".

Women-only tenure-track positions fall into this category, argues Krummacher, as they keep highly trained women in research at exactly the time when many are forced to choose between starting a family and keeping a career. The high drop-out rate at this critical time means that women do not have equal opportunities for senior positions, she adds.

A recent report by Germany's Science Council, the Wissenschaftsrat, points out that, although half as many women as men complete PhDs, only 4.5 per cent of top academic jobs are occupied by women (see *Nature* **393,** 402; 1998).

This difference is blamed on Germany's hierarchical academic system. This keeps young researchers as juniors dependent on their professor or laboratory chief, which makes it difficult for any scientist to establish a secure research career before the age of 40. Combined with a lack of child-care facilities, this discourages women who do not want to sacrifice their chance to have children.

Jülich's tenure track programme for female scientists, which offers three positions per year for the next three years, addresses this problem by advertising explicitly for women who do not necessarily wish to "abandon the idea of having a family".

The Max Planck Society (MPS), which runs 82 research institutes, has a programme to try to increase the number of women in top positions. Only five of its current 230 directors are women. The MPS has avoided possible legal conflicts over discriminating against men by using its own funds to support nine five-year 'C3 positions', equivalent to the lower rank of professor, and by calling for nominations from its eighty-odd research institutes, rather than advertising.

A spokesman for the MPS calls the decision of the Jülich Research Centre "very courageous", but fears that its legal basis may be shaky. Germany is a very male-dominated society, he says, and it cannot be ruled out that some male researcher will bring a discrimination case against Jülich.

Förster: 'a step in the right direction'.

Detlev Ganten, president of the Helmholtz Society, the umbrella organization for Germany's 16 national research centres (including Jülich), says that there is no general support within the society for positions earmarked for women. Aside from the legal problems, he says, many women who are successful in science feel that there is a stigma attached to such posts.

The Helmholtz Society has recently introduced a number of other measures, he says, such as recommending stronger representation of women in recruitment selection committees, and trying to improve child-care facilities. It is promoting consciousness-raising at all levels, from special mentoring programmes with school students to the creation of a working group to advise the society's own management.

But Andrea Förster , a researcher at the Geology Research Centre (GFZ) in Potsdam — also a national research centre — describes the Jülich tenure-track positions as "a step forward in the right direction". She points out that, while women make up a third of the GFZ's scientific staff on short-term contracts, only six of the 280 permanent scientists are women.

Förster, one of the young east German scientists kept on at the institute when it was re-founded after reunification in 1990, does not think that improved child-care facilities alone will help improve the lot of women in science. She points out that there was a high proportion of women in science during the communist era, when child-care facilities were taken for granted, but there were still not many in high positions.

Förster blames the structure of science in Germany, and in particular the time it takes for a scientists to get on to a career track. The Jülich programme is a direct challenge to this structure, she says, which goes straight to the heart of the problem. **Alison Abbott**

'Timeline' celebrates a century of physics

APS

[WASHINGTON] An illustrated 'timeline' tracking the past 100 years in the history of physics was unveiled in Washington this week by the American Physical Society (APS). The series of posters was created to celebrate the society's centenary, and features more than 90 Nobel laureates.

The 11 posters form a 23-foot mural (above), known as 'A Century of Physics'. Copies will be sent to every high school and college in the United States. A hypertext version of the timeline is also available at www.timeline.aps.org **on the web.**

It was unveiled at a reception that also celebrated the award of an APS fellowship to Representative Rush Holt, former assistant director of the Princeton Plasma Physics Laboratory (see *Nature* 394, 411; 1998). Its sponsors include the US Department of Energy, the Richard Lounsbery Foundation, IBM, Lucent Technologies, National Science Foundation and United Parcel Service.