

Business Development

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▼ EC report reveals scarcity of female bioentrepreneurs

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The meager number of women occupying high-level positions in European biotechnology reflects antiquated recruitment processes, rather than active discrimination.

The European biotechnology industry employs disproportionately few women at high-level positions, according to a new report prepared for the European Commission (Brussels, Belgium) by an independent expert group on women in industrial research¹. The imbalance is somewhat surprising because biotechnology is a young industry supposedly free from past patterns of gender segregation. Nevertheless, the gender gap exists, and industry insiders blame recruitment processes.

"Today the presence of female entrepreneurs or even chief executive officers in biotechnology companies continues to be insignificant in Europe," write the authors of the report *Women in Industrial Research: A Wake-up Call for European Industry*. Indeed, women hold on average 15% of high-level positions in industry in the ten European countries for which sex-disaggregated statistics are available (see [table](#)), compared to 25–33% of research positions in the public sector.

Table 1: Percentage of female researchers in industrial research.

Country	Percentage
Ireland	28.2
Greece	23.9
Portugal	23.8
France	20.6
Denmark	19.6
Spain	19.4
Italy	18.5
Finland	17.8
Germany	9.6
Austria	9.0



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Cynthia Robbins-Roth says the gender bias in filling high-level positions is not intentional, but stems from recruiters' reliance on established networks.

All figures refer to 1999 except those for Austria (1998), France and Italy (2000), and Ireland (2001). Sex-disaggregated statistics are not available for Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. In the United States, 19% of researchers in industry are women. In Norway, the figure is 19.6%.

Secondary source: STRATA; derived from DG Research and Unit C5. Data: Eurostat, New Cronos; DG Research, WiS database.

The United States does not fare much better (women hold only 16.4% of middle to top management positions in the 17 companies quoted on the American Stock Exchange Biotechnology Index), but cultural differences make it easier for women to reach high-level positions in the United States. "The US is much more aggressive [than Europe] at not letting discrimination get in the way," says Deidre Gillespie, CEO of therapeutic vaccines company Oxxon Pharmaccines (Oxford, UK), who had her first high-level position working in the United States. At a more practical level, US firms have better developed child care facilities than do firms in countries such as Germany.

But things are changing in Europe. Christine Soden, CFO of genomics company Oxagen (Abingdon, UK), believes that change has occurred over the past five years as high-level women have been hired from the United States. But Lisa Drakeman, who was recruited from the United States to be the CEO of human antibody company Genmab (Copenhagen, Denmark), says, "The problem is not so much moving up, but rather getting in at all."

Being recruited in the biotech sector is tricky. "What is problematic is not so much the gender issue," says Dominique Costantini, CEO of drug

resistance company Bioalliance (Paris, France). "The problem is that no one has the quality required by investors." Cynthia Larbey, managing director of People in Health (London, UK), a biotech interim management consultancy, says that European investors require 'superstar' management for biotech firms to survive—let alone succeed—which is a fundamentally flawed attitude. "The business model for European biotech is all but impossible for anyone other than the superhuman, man or woman," says Larbey.

According to Cynthia Robbins-Roth, founder of BioVenture Publishing (San Mateo, CA) and author of annual surveys of women in the biotechnology industry, the problem also has to do with the way recruiters rely on established networks, as they cannot perform due diligence on all candidates. "It is not just women," says Robbins-Roth. "It affects anyone but middle-aged white guys. They [the recruiters] are not trying to be exclusive; it is not intentional." As a solution, "what the industry needs is to extend their search to a wide variety of candidates and include as much diversity as possible," says Robbins-Roth. She believes that people in charge of recruitment have to realize that gender diversity would improve their company's chances in the market because investors and customers, too, are diverse.

However, such drastic changes to the recruitment system may not happen anytime soon, and another solution is to use the existing system to create similar networks for women. "Women need to be more aware that they need networking," says Christine Lemke, COO of proteomics company MelTec (Magdeburg, Germany). A number of women's networks (see [further information](#)) have emerged that could help their members link up with other existing biotech networks and mentors who will support them and help them climb the ladder.

Such mentors are important because women's ambitions are often voluntarily curtailed (see "[Women explain the gender gap](#)"). "Women tend to stay at middle-management level [by their own choice]," observes Nalân Utku, CEO of GenPat77 Pharmacogenetics (Berlin, Germany). Larbey agrees: "I do believe that a large number of women are choosing not to go to the top."

Although there are fundamental systemic barriers to women rising to the top of biotechnology firms, success ultimately comes to individuals who have the drive and ability to be successful, regardless of gender. "Successful people know what they want and go and get it. If they find themselves in an environment that is holding them back, then they will change it," concludes Robbins-Roth.

Box 1: Women explain the gender gap

Women in Europe are advocating various reasons to explain the gender unbalance. Women polled by Catalyst in 2002 for a study called "Women in Leadership: A European Business Imperative" said that the top barriers against advancement of women in the industry are:

- Stereotypes and preconceptions about women's roles and abilities—66%
- Lack of senior or visibly successful female role models—64%
- Lack of significant general management or line experience—63%
- Commitment to family or personal responsibilities—62%
- Lack of mentoring—61%

Further information

[Association of German Biotech Companies \(VBU\) Female Managers Network in Biotechnology](#)

[HighTech Women network](#)

[Forum for Women Entrepreneurs](#)

[Women in Technology International](#)

References

- RübSamen-Waigmann, H., *et al.* Women in Industrial Research (WIR): A wake up call for European Industry (A report to the European Commission from the High Level Expert Group on Women in Industrial Research for strategic analysis of specific science and technology policy issues) (2003).

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