The ♦ Women and Science ♦ challenge in Europe

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Women are under-represented in European science. They do not contribute as much as they could to scientific progress.

The most striking factor in this under-representation is vertical segregation. Although the proportion of women gaining scientific degrees has increased significantly in recent decades, the proportion of women reaching the very top of the scientific hierarchy remains stubbornly low. In most countries, less than 10% of the top positions in science faculties are occupied by women. But it is interesting to note that this under-representation tends to be less marked in Southern Europe.

The factors that ♦ explain ♦ the slower progress of women in scientific careers seem to be linked both to difficulties faced by women generally and to the peculiarities of the research system. Among these factors are the following:

- the dual career management problem: surveys show that women scientists more often tend to be ready to follow their partners than the other way round;
- the issue of child-bearing and child-rearing, which necessitate compromises between private and professional lives: there is a need here for more ♦ family-friendly ♦ employment and research practices;
- the difficulty that women face in being *recognized* for their achievements: Marie Curie would not have received the Nobel Prize if Pierre, her husband, had not told the jury that he would not accept it alone. Had he been less scrupulous, the contribution of Marie Curie to science would probably be totally invisible to us.

There are also open questions about the nature of science and its potentially male-orientated character and values. Behind this lies the equally open question about whether women would make science different. But we shall not know until we have more experience in putting the matter to the test.

The under-representation of women in science is a growing and common concern in all the member states of the European Union (EU) as well as more generally in the European scientific community. To discuss this issue and to pave the way for future action, the European Commission took the initiative to convene a conference in April 1998 (the proceedings have been published and are available on request or through the web:

http://www.cordis.lu/improving/src/hp_women.htm). At this conference it seemed that, beyond the need to be fair to women, the promotion of women in science is of crucial importance for European society as a whole. By ♦ letting women in ♦, the scientific system can only improve and respond better to societal needs.

Participants called for action at European level both to reinforce national strategies to promote women in science by exchanging experiences between EU Member States, and to encourage the participation of women in EU-financed research.

Action by the European Commission

Building on the conference results and recommendations, the Commission developed an action plan to integrate the gender dimension in research policy.

This action plan was developed in a communication¹ approved by the Commission on 17 February 1999. The Council backed up the Commission ♦s approach and invited Member States, in a resolution (RECH 71-8565/99 of 1 June 1999) that was adopted on 20 May, to promote

women in science.

The action of the Commission will follow two tracks; it will:

- promote dialogue between member states on policies and measures undertaken in national research systems to promote women in science, and
- develop a ♦gender watch system♦ within the Union♦s research policy, to promote research by, for and about women in the Fifth Framework Programme.

To implement this action plan, a team covering ♦Women and Science♦ as well as a working group covering all the research areas have been created within the Commission (http://www.cordis.lu/improving/src/hp_women.htm).

The next steps are as follows.

1. **The launch of gender impact studies about the Fifth Framework Programme.** In September 1999 the Commission will publish a call for studies to analyse the gender impact of research financed by the Fifth Framework Programme.
2. **The diffusion of statistics on women♦s participation in the Fifth Framework Programme.** Statistics on women♦s participation in the advisory groups, evaluation panels and calls for proposals will be made available on our website.
3. **The delivery of a report from an expert working group in October.** Twelve women scientists, chaired by Mary Osborn, Professor at the Max Planck Institute for Biophysical Chemistry, have been asked by the Commission to produce a policy report to identify the challenges of reaching a gender balance in research policy.
4. **The establishment of the National Civil Servants♦ Group on Women and Science.** Member States will be asked to designate one civil servant to take part in the policy dialogue proposed by the Commission to the Member States.
5. **A policy seminar in April 2000.** With the co-operation of the national civil servants, and on the basis of the expert working group♦s report, the Commission will organize a seminar to discuss the best means for proceeding with the promotion of women in science.
6. **A Gender and Research conference in April 2001.** On the basis of the results of the gender impact studies, there will be a conference to make recommendations on how to integrate the gender dimension in future research policies at the Union level.
7. **A report to the European Parliament and the Council (Summer 2001).**

All of these steps are part of a mobilization process. They fit into the general action plan that aims at creating a policy dialogue between member states as well as integrating the gender dimension in the Fifth Framework Programme. But it should not be forgotten that nothing can substitute for the involvement of women scientists. All this can only make sense and deliver results if they take part in the Fifth Framework Programme in the broadest sense and if they make their voice heard in the policy process at all levels.

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References

1. Com(99)76 final ♦ available on request or through the web.

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