



Qualified women still opting out of career in science, says study

The growing number of female doctoral graduates in the European Union is not reflected in the number of women taking up senior science research positions. The GENDERA project looked into the matter.

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A research study into why fewer female graduates pursue or stay on in science research posts than their male counterparts suggests that the discrepancy is a result of 'subtle discrimination and role conflict'.

GENDERA, a research project supported by the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7), set up task forces in nine countries in 2010 to analyse over two years the gender make-up of universities, research institutes, national academies, and private research organisations.

Its research was launched in light of figures that suggest women still tend not to opt for a science research career even though they are qualified to do so. According to [She Figures](#), in 2010, for example, 46 % of all PhD graduates in the European Union were female, and yet only one third of senior research posts were occupied by women.

Practical solutions

Based on its research findings, GENDERA published a booklet of recommendations for research and academic organisations on how to improve their equal opportunity strategies in order to attract more female candidates. Called *Practical recommendations for research organisations to lead the change towards gender equality in science and technology*, the publication was distributed widely by partner countries.

'We wanted to make recommendations that could be readily understood by lay people and not just social scientists,' said GENDERA project coordinator Dr Dóra Groó of the Hungarian Science and Technology

Foundation. 'It's a very slow process but I'm quite sure that several, if not all of these countries have used our publication to encourage people to think about the problem.'

In the recommendations, GENDERA proposes steps to help make science research institutions more attractive to potential recruits, such as introducing family-friendly work schedules, in-house gender-awareness training and providing more childcare support. The project also presented a brief to policymakers, where it makes the case for gender quotas.

'Nobody likes gender quotas,' said Dr Groó. 'We can't say that women should make up 50 % of the staff in a university, but it's essential that the committees that make decisions about science and science financing should be at least 30 % female.'

Enforcing quotas remains a controversial solution, though, to the 'gender equality in the workplace' problem. In 2012, Justice Commissioner Viviane Reding's proposal for it to be mandatory for companies to ensure 40 % of their board directors are female by 2020 or face fines was met with criticism from some national governments that commonly complained that such a quota was patronising to women and undermined the establishment of real gender equality in the workplace.

The criticism she faced came from both senior business men and women alike. 'The biggest challenge in many cases and in many countries is that even women say that there's no problem,' said Dr Groó. 'So it's difficult to get people to acknowledge that there's something to discuss.'

Database of gender equality initiatives

The project expressly chose to assess the situation in Germany, Spain, Greece, Italy, Israel, Hungary, Austria, Slovakia and Slovenia. 'We didn't want to focus on the countries that already do well in promoting gender equality in science, like in Scandinavia,' said Dr Groó. With the exception of Germany, says Groó, these countries have demonstrated a relative lack of gender-awareness in the past.

In today's workplace, a 'gender-aware' company shows no bias towards either sex and an understanding of their respective working needs. In most cases, this usually translates into a company's ensuring that childcare facilities are available, equal opportunities for advancement and training are in place and maternity leave is standard policy.

At the end of the GENDERA study, the partners produced a database of more than 60 gender-aware initiatives from their respective countries that had successfully promoted the advancement of women to research posts at different career stages and across different sectors.

To be included in the database, the initiatives had to show that they address one or more career-stage barriers faced by women. Principally, these are outdated perceptions of career suitability and the difficulty of reconciling a research career with family life.

Example programmes include ICT summer schools for female undergraduates and networking opportunities that allow experienced female scientists to meet with their junior counterparts.

Change afoot?

During its two-year course, GENDERA focused on the national level to see how and if EU recommendations on women in science are applied and hosted a number of workshops in partner countries.

'We see gradual changes in institutions, but it's very slow. In Hungary, we see that multinational companies are dealing well with the gender issue,' she said. 'But it's the smaller companies that are much slower to change.'

A female researcher at work. © Shutterstock/ Kolet

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Alexandra Bitusikova, senior researcher at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia, headed the Slovakian national task force. 'The problem with the under-representation of women in science is that it's a waste of talent and a waste of money,' said Dr Bitusikova.

'It leads to management and decisions that favour men... Under-representation of women is a loss for the whole of society that's hard to measure and be proven scientifically, but it does exist.'

According to Bitusikova, the project has already had a positive impact in Slovakia. 'I think that in countries with underdeveloped gender equality policies, national workshops and conferences strongly contributed to awareness-raising,' she said. 'They offered a much needed debate on a topic that is often considered a "non-topic", unimportant or non-existent,' she said.

As for the long-term success of the GENDERA project, Dr Groó urges patience: 'The database is still available online and offers some encouraging examples,' she said. 'Our goal was not to solve the problem because that takes a long time. Our goal was to bring the problem to the surface,' she said. 'It's very frustrating when you can't see an immediate impact,' she added. 'But it is the kind of initiative that will have an effect in the long run.'

More info

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