

Gender roles and not gender bias hold back women scientists

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Traditional roles of women in the home and a negative bias in workplace support result in less career success for women versus men at the same stage of their research careers, determined researchers at the European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO) in a study appearing in the November 2007 issue of EMBO reports.

Despite the fact that more than half the European student population is female, women hold less than 15% of full professorships in Europe, according to the She Figures 2006 from the European Commission. While the percentage of female university graduates and PhD holders has increased, the gender gap is not closing at the same rate as careers advance.

The study authors, Ledin, Bornmann, Gannon and Wallon, were prompted to investigate whether gender bias was at the root of the lower success rate of female applicants to the EMBO Long-Term Fellowship and Young Investigator Programmes. Gender blinding of application reviewers found that gender bias was not the cause. A thorough investigation of the publication data of all applicants revealed that the performance gap widens even further between men and women researchers at later stages of their careers. This widening gap results in a 50% lower fraction of females applying as young group leaders to the EMBO Young Investigator Programme as compared to the number of female postdoctoral scientists who apply for the EMBO Long-Term Fellowships.

The EMBO Long-Term Fellowship Programme attracts scientists who completed their PhD training within the previous three years before application and are seeking financial support for post-doctoral research. Scientists at a later stage of their careers who are within four years of establishing their first independent laboratories can apply for support through the EMBO Young Investigator Programme.

Surveys of applicants found that traditional gender roles combined with a pervasive negative work culture appeared to be at the root of the lower success rate of women researchers versus men researchers.

The traditional gender roles are manifested by the facts that women take substantially more parental leave and more often adjust their careers in preference to that of their male partners. As a result women publish less and are slower to advance in their careers because on average they spend less time at work and have a greater burden to carry outside of the lab than their male counterparts at the same stage of their careers.

In the workplace, women scientists had fewer opportunities for mentoring, less supervisor support once they began to have families and there was a general lack of gender policy and monitoring in institutions.

The study authors ask whether employers, policy makers, scientists and society can afford to lose such a large number of trained specialists from the workforce. They conclude that both a shift in thinking about the roles of men and women and positive action in the workplace are required to ensure that family decisions do not prevent men and women from career and societal aspirations.

Through its Women In Science Programme, EMBO assesses and acts on imbalances in the scientific career path. EMBO monitors the selection process in EMBO programmes, alerts EMBO committees towards gender imbalance, devises actions to counteract gender imbalance and

creates awareness in the scientific community.

Source: European Molecular Biology Organization

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