

Barbies for girls, microscopes for boys?

When I started my job as scientific manager for the 3D Repertoire project, I realised that the gender imbalance, especially in top level positions, is a particular problem in science. What can be done? To get more information, I attended the conference 'Women in Science: The Way Forward', held at EMBL Heidelberg on 9-11 May 2007.

The conference was organised as part of the EU project SET-Routes, a collaboration between EMBL, CERN and EMBO funded under FP6 to encourage more girls to pursue a career in Science, Engineering and Technology (SET). More than 200 participants, mainly women, attended this two-and-a-half day event, with contributions from biologists, chemists, psychologists, representatives of renowned scientific institutions and grant agencies. Some speakers also came from the other side of the Atlantic. The conference was followed by training for the new SET-Routes ambassadors (see below, *SET-Routes: How can I get involved?*).

Keynote speaker Rosalind Chait Barnett is Research Director in Women's Studies at Brandeis University, Massachusetts. Negative gender messages – Barbies and cooking sets for girls, cars and microscopes for boys – affect children early, influencing their future choices of career. Awareness of gender stereotypes



needs to increase among parents and teachers, who have such a determinant role in the first steps of children's education.

The first session presented some examples of initiatives aiming to increase the percentage of women in science. The Christiane Nüsslein-Volhard Foundation targets young woman scientists with children, allowing them to afford support (babysitting, household help, a washing machine, etc.) and keep up with laboratory work. Other initiatives include the Marie Heim-Vögtlin subsidies (Switzerland), the MuT programme (Mentoring and Training for women) and the Center of Excellence: Women and Science (both Germany).

Committees play a fundamental role in selecting the best candidates for positions, and in order to avoid discrimination it's crucial to select gender-balanced, 'human-diverse' committees. It's also essential to make the committee members aware of general biases. Brian Nosek from the University of Virginia pointed

out the persistence of 'mind bugs', implicit stereotypes that often guide our behaviour without conscious control.

Ragnhild Sohlberg, Vice-President of Norsk Hydro, presented the policies implemented in Scandinavia since the late 1960s: paid maternity and paternity leave, parent allowance, child care facilities, flexible working hours. Despite all this, women professors are still a minority, so reconciliation between family and career can't be the only cause of the observed gender gap. Recently, Norway approved a new law that requires a minimum of 40% women represented on the board of directors of public companies. But are quotas an answer to the problem?

The focus of the last session was on how to motivate women to remain in research by changing institutional cultures. A research centre such as EMBL, where great emphasis is put on training, networking, collaborations and measures to combine family and research, offers a stimulating environment for all scientists to develop a career. Nadia Rosenthal, Head of EMBL Monterotondo, stressed how crucial it is to eliminate discrimination and preserve the passion of women for science, for example, by a good mentoring programme.

At the end of the conference, my own take-home message was that the 'way forward' will involve multiple parallel activities at the individual level, by changing our still strong implicit gender stereotypes; at a school and institutional level, by providing training and excellent mentoring; at the national level, by guaranteeing protective and efficient infrastructures; and at the European and international level, by creating fair committees and equal opportunities.

And the Gender Action Plan for 3D Repertoire? We will provide information and mentoring (most of the women group leaders accepted enthusiastically to act as mentors for young researchers). In addition, three prizes (€2,500 each) will be offered to help researchers to reconcile family life and science.

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SET-Routes: How can I get involved?

In the SET-Routes School Ambassador Programme, young female graduates visit schools across Europe to describe their 'life in science' to high-school students. University Ambassadors are top women scientists who share their experience of working in science with undergraduates and postdoctoral students.

If you'd like to become an ambassador or would like to know more about SET-Routes, contact msantos@embl.de.



Babes in the wood

A group of mostly urban-dwelling EMBL Heidelberg Kinderhaus kids have been communing with nature in a three-month "Waldprojekt". The 4-6 year-olds of the Lila Kindergartengruppe ventured into the forest behind EMBL every week between the end of January and the beginning of May to look at the changes in plants, animals and nature that spring brought. Back in the classroom, they catalogued and discussed their discoveries.

