

ACADEMIA

Breaking Through the Glass Ceiling

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Truly ensuring equal opportunities for men and women will require a profound change in how the humanities are perceived, together with a reversal of the tendency to belittle achievements in the field.

Over the past year, several units affiliated with the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAS) have received the logo “HR Excellence in Research,” awarded by the European Commission to institutions that adhere to the highest standards of scientific research and recruitment policy. Institutions that receive the award are required to apply the ‘gender balance’ principle, not only at all career levels but also in the composition of decision-making bodies and committees (including for adjudicating competitions).

Gender balance is a concept that has entered the public discourse in Poland chiefly in connection with the debate about gender quotas in political parties. The European Commission defines the concept as one element of a broader policy of ‘gender mainstreaming,’ which aim to promote a relative gender balance in fields where women are typically greatly outnumbered by men.

As it turns out, however, within the research community it is still not fully clear what should actually be done to guarantee gender balance in practice. That is because certain issues cannot be resolved at the level of the organization of specific scientific units. It’s not particularly problematic, for instance, to secure gender balance on competition committees, because one can always invite in a male or female professor from a different scientific unit. But the situation does become more complicated, for example, in the recruitment of candidates for doctoral programs, when it proves necessary to plan measures guaranteeing the admission of equal (or similar) numbers of men and women.

Similarly, planning relevant policies here, as well as to ensure more gender-balanced recruitment of staff within the PAS, seems very difficult, chiefly because this issue has yet to be sufficiently discussed. A study from 2003 regarding the proportion of men and women among holders of scientific titles in Poland reported that women account for 47% of holders of doctoral degrees, 32% of those with the post-doctoral degree of *doktor habilitowany*, and 27% of professors (*Gendered Career Trajectories in Academia in Cross-National Perspective*, 2007). Findings from 2012 show that these proportions became even more skewed against women – 43%, 32%, and 21% respectively (*Nauka*, 2/2013). This demonstrates the presence of what is referred to as the ‘glass ceiling,’ a barrier that prevents women from securing professional advancement.

Promoting gender balance is one of the roles of the European Commission, but the practical implementation of this policy depends on the people who make up specific institutions: academies of sciences and higher education institutions. It is worth initiating discussions on this issue and sharing experiences.

For example, one of the issues worth discussing involves asking if gender balance should work both ways – for instance, at institutes in the field of humanities, which are dominated by women. This is illustrated very well by the structure of employment in one of the PAS institutes in the humanities (which is by no means an exception, simply a glaring example): at that particular institute, women account for 58% of full professors (*profesor zwyczajny*), 90% of associate professors (*profesor nadzwyczajny*), 68% of assistant professors (*adiunkt*), and 70% of research assistants (*asystent*).

Consequently, the feminized humanities are faced with an enormous challenge. Gender mainstreaming aims to effect much-needed institutional and organizational changes. At most institutes in the humanities, however, the proportions are still skewed against women. This illustrates how the current problem of equal opportunities for men and women in science is influenced by the distinctive character of specific disciplines, which in turn hinge on a range of historical, social, and economic factors.

Humanities, chronically underfunded and neglected, turn out to attract (and keep) predominantly women. Addressing the issue of gender balance in a responsible way, adopting this principle while taking account of the characteristics of specific branches of science, will among other things require a profound change in how the humanities are perceived and a reversal of the tendency to belittle achievements in the humanities. This, in turn, can only be achieved through changes in the funding system.

However, this means not new competitions for funding of research projects in the humanities, especially ones in which we can demonstrate economically viable applications of our research, but above all systematic and structural changes in working conditions, chiefly pay levels. Only when we achieve this will we be able to start resolving the problem of gender equality in science. ■