

## Bias against women in higher scientific positions?

I read the recent Women in Cell Science interview featuring Joyce Taylor-Papadimitriou (*J. Cell Sci.* **3**, 371-372) and as a female scientist just starting my first post-doc it brought some questions to mind. She mentions that ‘although women make up 50% of the work force at the bench...there are few women in the decision making positions’. Is this because of a bias against women in these positions or is it simply that not as many women apply? Are the percentages of women and men who have completed a post-doc and apply for these positions the same or do a disproportionate number of women scientists choose alternative scientific (or non-scientific) careers? If there is a bias against women in higher scientific positions that is one issue, but if not as many women choose this career path as men then the percentage of women and men in these higher positions doesn’t need to be the same. If fewer women apply for decision-making positions, then maybe one needs to address this issue. Is it because of a lack of confidence in obtaining these positions, because the

majority of women don’t want to be in these positions, or for various other reasons? I am wondering whether the increased percentage of women in science at the PhD and post-doc level needs to be (or should be) reflected by a proportional increase in the percentage of women in decision-making positions in order for one to say that progress is being made in this area.

Heather Thompson

*Dear Dr Thompson*

*I think to answer to the questions you raise is difficult without some statistics. I personally would think a combination of factors influences the final ratio of women to men in the different positions. If we start at the top, where many positions are not advertised or, if they are, only to meet the formal requirement, people are head hunted. It is more than likely that there is more head hunting of men than women for these positions – directors of institutes, government advisory positions...that sort of thing. These lead to other decision-making positions on executive boards of companies, etc. As for professorships, again I think people are approached, or positions may be created or tailored for*

*an individual, and again probably fewer women are approached than men. Also there may be some prejudices in choosing heads of departments in universities.*

*Lower down the chain, where the appointment to a head-of-laboratory-type position depends solely on selecting applicants applying to an advertisement, the parameter of the number of women applying almost certainly influences the ratio. From what I see in institutes in the UK and in non-professional positions at UK universities, which are less political, there are a considerable number of women in these positions. The decision making here is at the scientific level, not so much on policies.*

*The above is a personal view, which may be less representative of the real situation than I would like, but it should generate more discussion.*

*Kind regards*

*Joyce Taylor-Papadimitriou*

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