

[Q&A]

Adelheid Ehmke

# Addressing the gender imbalance

The European Platform of Women Scientists' (EPWS) President **Dr Adelheid Ehmke** has an extensive background in academia and administration. With such strong credentials she is well placed to comment on the position of women in science

**The European Platform** of Women Scientists seeks to support the work of a range of national and regional networks of women scientists by 'networking the networks'. The Platform aims to make women scientists see themselves as stakeholders and better understand the role they can play in the research policy debate and how to fully benefit from these opportunities. In order to be inclusive, the Platform follows a wide definition of the term 'science'. EPWS is open to any researchers in any discipline taught at university level, but also welcomes women scientists working in engineering and technology. In this interview we explore the aims of EPWS and what they stand for in an environment where they have to fight that little bit harder for the recognition they deserve.

**eStrategies:** What is the role of EPWS in EU research policy?

**Adelheid Ehmke:** The role of the Platform is to represent the interests and aspirations of women scientists in EU research policy and to promote the understanding and inclusion of the gender dimension in science. This is with the primary aim of enhancing the participation of women in both research and research decision making. EPWS supports the work of networks of women scientists from all disciplines and strengthens links and collaboration between women scientists, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe and in the private sector. EPWS offers a discussion forum for women scientists and policy makers at regional, national and EU level, and acts as a structural link between women researchers and research policy makers in Europe.

**eStrategies:** Are women in the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector an endangered species?

**Ehmke:** Women are still underrepresented in science and technology in Europe. According to the statistics and indicators of the European Commission on women and science (She Figures 2006), women made up only 29 per cent of those employed as scientists and engineers in 2004, and in 2003 only 18 per cent worked in the business sector. In the ICT sector, the proportion of female PhD's in computing reached only 18.6 per cent. Even more worryingly, the numbers of women, though it has never been particularly high, is actually dropping rapidly in both the US and Europe. Efforts are being made to reverse this trend. The European Commission is trying to encourage more women to take up a career in ICT via initiatives like the launch of a shadowing exercise, working together with leading companies in Europe to give young women a taste of what a job in ICT would be like. The Commission also plans to develop a European guide to best practices on ICT gender issues in 2007.

**eStrategies:** How does EPWS promote women in ICT?

**Ehmke:** EPWS's particular focus on ICT is a reflection of the fact that ICT is of paramount importance to research and higher education. Therefore it encompasses both academia and the business sector. In view of the consensus that has developed on the value of diversity, the participation of women in science, research and in the research policy debate has to be viewed as a priority if we are to achieve excellence and innovation in research.

EPWS, therefore, actively contributes to improved networking activities for women in ICT and has worked to raise awareness about the situation of women in ICT at various conferences. At the IST 2006 Conference in Helsinki, EPWS organised a networking session in cooperation with WINNET EUROPE, the European Network of Women Resource Centers, in partnership



with CWIT, the American Center for Women and Information Technology. The main goal was to share experiences and facilitate the creation of a European Center of Women in ICT, as well as to explore the possibility of establishing a Network of Excellence under the Seventh EU Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development.

EPWS also provides contacts for high-profile women scientists of all disciplines to gain positions as keynote speakers, panel members and evaluators, alongside our role of identifying funding and support opportunities for women in science.

**eStrategies:** Why is cooperation with EPWS of interest to companies in the ICT sector?

**Ehmke:** EPWS offers membership to companies that wish to demonstrate their support for the promotion of women scientists in the industrial sector and more particularly in the ICT sector. Joining EPWS as a supporting member, or sponsoring one of the Platform's activities or projects, allows companies to establish and increase their visibility in the European research community as well as among European research policy actors. At present the EPWS database contains detailed information on more than 160 networks in Europe. Through EPWS's direct contacts with scientific networks and researchers from all disciplines across Europe, companies will be able to attract a new well-trained workforce committed to enhancing innovation and development.

In the future, EPWS will reinforce links between universities and enterprises, facilitate information exchange between them, and develop pilot projects like the creation of women scientists' and women engineers' networks at the enterprise level, or a job alert for EPWS supporting members and sponsors. EPWS aims to start a data base of good practices. It will also offer role models and encourage mentoring activities in order to attract more women toward scientific careers in ICT, suggesting innovative areas of activities for companies in the ICT sector.

**eStrategies:** What are the main factors responsible for the situation of women in research in Europe? Are there specific obstacles for women?

**Ehmke:** The factors that lead to the under-representation of women in science and research decision making are manifold. They include lack of gender awareness and persistent gender stereotypes, predominantly male decision-making bodies and insufficient network support with respect to women's career advancement. Also, the lack of transparency in recruitment procedures, gate-keeping and the operation of 'old boys networks', to which women often do not have access, have an important influence on reaching the top level. The gender pay gap is a serious issue in all the EU countries and concerns all

fields of the employment market, including education, research, universities and especially, however, industrial research. Often, there is an unintended gender bias in current ways of defining and evaluating scientific excellence which might work to the disadvantage of women. Furthermore, the general insecurity and openness of scientific careers as well as the absence of infrastructures to enable a sustainable work-life balance, although an issue concerning both women and men - together with traditional images of the division of labour in family structures - still has a greater impact on the career development of women.

**eStrategies:** Are gender promotion issues a territory only for women? If a man would like to join your organisation would it be considered?

**Ehmke:** EPWS is an umbrella association, open to networks and organisations that promote women in research and the inclusion of the gender dimension in all areas of research. Men can be and are members of such networks and organisations. However, men's involvement could be stronger and, therefore, we encourage male researchers to actively promote equal opportunities in science.

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**eStrategies:** What would be your vision of the future regarding your initiative?

**Ehmke:** The participation of women in science and research and in the research policy debate is not only a fundamental human right of women scientists, but also a matter of justice. In view of the acknowledged discussion on the value of diversity, it has also to be

seen as essential to achieving excellence and innovation in research and ensuring a sustainable scientific quality of research.

EPWS has to be more than a temporary initiative. It has to grow into a sustainable association with strong political impact. To achieve its goals, EPWS needs the support of strong partners from the public and private sectors and seeks the cooperation with public institutions, companies and foundations. ★

*Located in Brussels, the European Platform of Women Scientists supports the work of a whole range of existing national, European and international networks of women scientists from all disciplines (natural, medical and social sciences, engineering and technology, the humanities and arts).*

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