Women in Biology

It’s nothing really new: women are underrepresented in the natural sciences. This is equally valid in Austria as in most of European and international academia. A group of female scientists around Monika Bright wanted to get the full details: they took the occasion of university’s anniversary year 2015 to more closely examine the proportion of women in biology and founded the initiative “Women in Biology”. The data proved to be dramatic: although the percentage of female students was 65%, and the number completing their PhDs was still at the 50% mark, only 10% remained at the top positions of scientific careers (permanent positions, professors).

Comparison of career trajectories in biology at the University of Vienna

Where and when do these women leave biology? Monika Bright mentions an interesting aspect involving the type of funding and the length of employment contracts: “Temporary, third-party-funded pre- and postdoc positions are offered to and accepted by women, whereas the longer-term postdoc and tenure track permanent positions are largely occupied by men. For many women this also corresponds to the phase in which they start a family, making the career in science – with its high workload, unusual working hours and stays abroad – especially challenging. The ‘equal division of labor’ regarding parenting duties is still an exception in Austria. This puts extra pressure on women, for example in organizing childcare. Nonetheless, our study shows that the publication output of men and women is equal”.

“Our analysis also shows that the faculty’s management level is exclusively or almost entirely occupied by men”, says Monika Bright. This doesn’t have to be the case, as is highlighted by the long list of internationally successful female scientists who have been invited to give talks in the framework of the “Female Role Model in Biology Seminars” sponsored by “Women in Biology”. Women who are still in the early phases of their careers should be given the opportunity to recognize key factors for their own
career planning – based on the interaction with successful female researchers. The target groups for
the seminars are female PhD students and postdocs. To date, six such seminars have been held with
female professors from various international institutions and the director of a Max Planck Institute.
“Our aim is to create awareness for the fact that we women in biology, although underrepresented,
are by no means “alone”, adds Monika Bright. The initiative is further designed to create networking
opportunities for women scientists after the postdoc level. Monthly meetings and regular workshops
are being held. The initiative “Women in Biology” is currently working on developing a website to
provide the full range of information relevant to biologists planning their own scientific careers. Based
on the great demand, a more ambitious information event is also being planned. “Men are also
cordially invited”, says Monika Bright, adding that “the initiative ‘Women in Biology’ is open to female
scientists from all disciplines who are interested and wish to actively participate!”

MISSION STATEMENT:
Female scientists are currently underrepresented at the Faculty of Life Sciences – especially in
biology. The goal of the “Women in Biology” initiative is to analyze the factors underlying this
situation and to support the career development of female scientists at all career levels, from
student to professor. Our vision is a balanced gender representation in the employment landscape
and in the top-tier positions at the faculty.

Contact: monika.bright@univie.ac.at
Download Poster “Women in Biology”