

Has science got an a-gender?

By Silvana Birchenough (CEFAS)

My idea of writing this article began after long discussions with colleagues at different science levels. Interestingly, a large number of female scientists are very active during initial stages of their careers, but, as time progresses, there is always an obvious question dictated by career opportunities and the formation of a family. Further discussion on the subject reflected that young female colleagues are tending to give priority to their professional careers and delay starting a family.

Furthermore, after reading the editorial remarks by Carlo Heip and Simonetta Fraschetti in *MarBEF Newsletter* No 3 (Autumn 2005) about gender issues and the female workforce being under-represented in the field of science, this seems to highlight clear issues of concern. Perhaps one of the most interesting developments is the European requirement to incorporate 40% female participation in projects in order to increase the chances of a successful proposal. As a female scientist, I am sure that I would principally like to be invited to develop science rather than solely augment the numbers to be able to tick the boxes on proposals!

I work for the **Centre of Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS)** in the UK. CEFAS has a wide range of multicultural scientists across three main laboratories (Lowestoft, Weymouth and Burnham-on-Crouch) with 557 employees, making the work environment and experience challenging and rewarding. Our centre is composed of five science areas: Aquatic Health & Hygiene; Environment & Food Safety; Environment Resource Management; Fisheries Biology; and Fisheries Management. This brings a wide range of skills and a good mixture of scientists into our laboratories. Our organisation has clear family-friendly policies, allowing us to work flexible hours, with paid maternity and paternity leave and part-time positions. There are opportunities for promotion and career development; around 10% of staff benefit from moving up the ladder each year.

I wanted to reflect some real-life views in this article. I distributed a questionnaire to female colleagues in CEFAS to assess career opportunities, motivation, age, life-balance and future advice for young colleagues. I received answers from regulators, marine ecologists, chemists, fisheries biologists, geochemists and physiologists. In the majority of responses the main drivers to develop science were passion and satisfaction. Everyone found the work-balance questions challenging; all my colleagues indicated having to work longer hours to achieve promotion and recognition. They almost always acknowledged the support of a partner, which provided them flexibility to get on with work without impediments. Some future advice from CEFAS scientists to young colleagues for achieving a successful career always touched on honesty, clear focus and self-believe. I am very grateful to my enthusiastic CEFAS colleagues for allowing me to express their views here.

After discussion with colleagues it is clear that female scientists are still under-represented at different science levels in a majority of universities and research centres worldwide. I am optimistic that all the ongoing debates, networks and advisory groups will enable female scientists to develop their careers with sufficient support and career progressions. There are some small glimpses of change even in third-world countries (which are cultures still very much dominated by a 'macho' society), e.g. in Chile, females are taking the lead in politics. A clear example resulted from the recent presidential elections this year when a doctor, Michelle Bachelet, was elected president. Interesting enough, she is to become the third female president in Latin America, which is a great democratic achievement and overall cultural improvement.



Sorting beam trawl samples on board *RV CEFAS Endeavour*.
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Furthermore, there are currently schemes (i.e. Daphne Jackson Trust or Royal Society) in UK universities to facilitate the return of female scientists to academia to continue their careers after taking a maternity or family break. Information on these schemes can be found on the following links: <http://www.royalsoc.ac.uk>, for the Dorothy Hodgkin Fellowships, and the Daphne Jackson Foundation, at <http://www.daphnejackson.org>.

The recent BA festival of science in Norwich, UK, also hosted a session entitled: *Women in Science: Fulfilment or Frustration?* Extremely valuable information came out of this debate – visit the following link for further information: <http://www.the-ba.net>.

I personally believe that organisations with a good mixture of female and male staff and sound diversity policies are the most successful and that, even more importantly, at the end of the day science does not have an a-gender!

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