

Gender equality as a precondition for excellence: the core mission of EPWS in European research policy

In 1988, **Dr Brigitte Mühlenbruch** became the University of Bonn's first Equal Opportunities Commissioner, a post she held for over ten years, before founding the Center of Excellence Women and Science CEWS in Germany. Now Honorary President of the European Platform of Women Scientists EPWS, an international organisation she initiated in 2005, and with almost 30 years of experience fighting for gender equality in science and research behind her, she is a force for change on both the national and European level, and a voice to be reckoned with.

Since its establishment in 2005, the European Platform of Women Scientists EPWS has brought together more than 100 member networks in 40 countries to work together for the promotion of equal opportunities within all fields of scientific research. By forging a link between women scientists and European research policy-makers, EPWS aims to give women researchers a voice in the European research policy debate.

Honorary President Dr Brigitte Mühlenbruch spoke to *Research Features* about how she believes that gender equality is not just a right, but a necessity for excellence and innovation in science and research.

Can you tell us more about the European Platform of Women Scientists EPWS, its core mission and heritage?

EPWS is an umbrella organisation bringing together national and European networks of women scientists, organisations and individual members committed to the socially significant field of equal opportunities in science and research in all disciplines in the European Union (EU) Member States and the countries associated with the EU research programmes. Through its member associations and its individual members, EPWS brings the voices of 12,000 women scientists to be heard at European level. EPWS is an international non-profit association fulfilling an explicit political goal of the European Commission. However, despite a high acceptance and the acknowledged quality of the Platform's work, no solution has been found to sustain

the running costs of EPWS. Since 2009, therefore, the Platform has had to continue its activities and services on a voluntary member basis.

EPWS's core mission and main goals are to represent the concerns, needs, ideas, aspirations and interests of European women scientists; coordinate support activities for women scientists to facilitate their active role in the European Research Area; increase the participation of women scientists in European research policy and in the shaping of the EU research agenda; enhance the participation of women in science and its decision-making bodies; and promote the understanding and the integration of the gender dimension in science and research content and research methods.

Can you tell us more about your career, in particular, your role as Managing Director at the Center of Excellence Women and Science CEWS?

For many years, I worked as a scientist in the field of Pharmaceutical Chemistry at the University of Bonn before becoming the university's first Equal Opportunities Commissioner. Upon my initiative, we founded CEWS in 2000. CEWS works like a think tank to initiate the development of new ideas and processes of change in the field of gender equality and in knowledge transfer between science and politics. In 2005, CEWS drafted the winning proposal for the establishment of EPWS. From 2005 to 2009, I served as EPWS Vice President, from 2009 to 2017 as EPWS President, and since September 2017, I have been the Platform's Honorary President. ▶

EPWS brings the voices of 12,000 women scientists to be heard at European level





Honorary President of EPWS, Dr Brigitte Mühlenbruch.

What is EPWS's involvement in EU policy debate and why is this so important?

Promoting equal opportunities in science, research and innovation, especially gender equality and the integration of the gender dimension are declared goals of the European Commission. A sustainable dialogue between the political and scientific level is essential. The first step to getting involved in the policy debate is to monitor the decision-making process in all areas relevant to women researchers in the EU. This is then often followed by the drafting of written statements on the Platform's position on these policies. The Platform also conveys its views on possible legislation or events taking place in these areas to policy-makers through meetings, official questions and more informal discussions.

What are your personal achievements and highlights at EPWS?

My first highlight was the opportunity to conceptualise the Platform itself, to shape its architecture and its working structures. In 1998, I first presented my idea of a European node for women in science at the 'Women and Science' conference and in 2002, as a member of the Steering Committee for the Study on Networks of Women Scientists I confirmed the need for a network for women scientists at the European level.

A permanent highlight is, of course, working in an international team in such a broad field; it is inspiring because we have all started from very different points but there are many things to learn from each other. Sometimes I felt like a conductor of a large orchestra with many soloists. The members of the EPWS are our most important asset, and all activities and services rely on their voluntary work.

Can you tell us about genderSTE and its relation to EPWS?

genderSTE was a European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) initiative running from 2012 to 2016 which intended to 'advance the state of the art in knowledge and policy implementation on gender, science, technology and environment through creating a network of policy-makers and experts on gender, science and technology.' EPWS took part in this project with some of its members, who were appointed national representatives of their own countries: I was a member of the Management Committee/Specific Organisations. The network's 'Memorandum of Understanding' contains further details.

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What needs to be done to ensure that women continue to enter science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education and careers?

The way I see it today, challenges have dramatically changed especially in the last few years; there are many strategies and support measures available in all countries at the political and institutional level to encourage young women to pursue studies and careers in STEM now. An impressive example in Germany is the 'Go Mint' initiative, launched in 2008 with the aim of increasing young women's interest in scientific and technical degree courses and attracting female university graduates into careers in business. More than 220 partners are already supporting this aim with a wide range of

activities and initiatives to advise young women on their studies and career.

What has your personal experience been as a woman in a leading role?

My personal experience has not been an easy one, but I was a member of the system, and I had to face its rules and customs. I had to learn that the realisation of changes, especially structural changes in the academic world, is a set of long-lasting and slow-moving processes. Without EU legislation, many countries in Europe, including Germany where I live, would not be as progressive as they are now in the field of equal opportunities for women. That does not mean that we are already on the top, and women in leading positions are no longer faced with obstacles,



EPWS Lunch Debate at the European Parliament.

but we are on the right path and must continue to be engaged in this issue.

How does EPWS ensure that it is not negative towards men? Is there a great amount of male support?

In 30 years of working in the field of equal opportunities, I have not noticed a single action that has been negative towards men. All actions regarding structural change of research institutions, a better work-life-balance, family-friendly workplace organisation, etc., support both women and men. Our request for an encompassing, meaningful integration of the gender dimension in research content fosters the quality of science and research because simplification and blindness to the whole in scientific studies is far away from being excellent.

There is support by men too and it is interesting to notice, that oftentimes the supporters are fathers of daughters, learning that their daughters are confronted with and have to overcome many more obstacles in their scientific career than their sons.

EPWS already has some big-name supporters behind it, including the L'Oréal Foundation – how does EPWS attract and campaign for more support from leading organisations?

The establishment of EPWS has been strongly supported by the European Commission and our other supporters pursue the same goals as us; they know that Europe has not reached its target for 40% female representation in science policy-making. As the L'Oréal Foundation put it 'The world needs science and science needs women'. The goals and the work of EPWS are attractive for our supporters, and the Platform is of course very grateful for their generous support.

Can you tell us about EPWS's set of 'unique selling points' and the plans for the future?

EPWS is a trans-European network with a database of 100 women scientist associations with varied disciplinary expertise. EPWS is empowered to introduce coordinated political interventions on equal opportunities in science and research in the European policy debate via diverse channels such as position papers, replies to public consultations, etc. In doing so, the Platform acts as a structural link

between the research community and policy-makers at EU level. In the field of research, EPWS is a broker for cooperation among its member networks and other stakeholders, facilitating projects and interchanges.

- If you would like to learn more about the EPWS and their mission, please visit their website at <http://epws.org/>.



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