

THERE ARE NO WOMEN IN SCIENCE – JUST PEOPLE

**Prof. Maria Anna
Ciemerych-
Litwinienko**

is Vice Dean for Research at the Faculty of Biology, University of Warsaw, where she also heads the Department of Cytology. She studies the differentiation of stem cells and skeletal muscle regeneration. Winner of numerous awards, including the *Polityka* magazine scholarship in 2003 and the L'Oréal for Women and Science scholarship in 2005.

ciemerych@biol.uw.edu.pl

**Edyta Brzóska-
Wójtowicz,
PhD, DSc**

is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Cytology, Faculty of Biology, University of Warsaw. She studies skeletal muscle regeneration and the possibility of using stem cells in their reconstruction. Winner of the L'Oréal for Women and Science scholarship in 2015, and a finalist in the 2014 Science Awards of *Polityka* magazine.

edbrzoska@biol.uw.edu.pl

Prof. Maria Anna Ciemerych-Litwinienko and Asst. Prof. Edyta Brzóska-Wójtowicz from the Faculty of Biology at the University of Warsaw discuss the position of women in science.

ACADEMIA: We are here today to talk about women in science.

MARIA ANNA CIEMERYCH-LITWINIENKO: There is no “women in science”, there are simply scientists! At least this is how I feel. Maybe that is because my parents raised me as a human being, not as a woman or a man. I have also never experienced gender discrimination at work. But I know that many women do experience it, they are marginalized and frequently their points of view are ignored.

EDYTA BRZÓSKA-WÓJTOWICZ: Although, neither of us has experienced gender discrimination personally, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence pointing to unequal treatment of women in the scientific world. For instance, it is quite common for female scientists to be judged by their appearance. People do not say, “wow, you gave a great lecture,” they say, “wow, you look great in that dress.” I do not hear such comments addressed to men. There is hard data on how many women hold various jobs in the science sector. Even if half of all MSc students are women, a majority of PhD students are male. There are also significantly fewer women at the postdoctoral and professorship levels.



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Maybe they don't have what it takes to work in science?

E.B.-W.: I would rather say that the problem lies in the difference in how boys and girls are raised. If we tell a little girl to "run like a girl!" or "run like a boy", she will run the same in both cases, but by the age of seven she will run faster if asked to run like a boy. More importantly, girls are subconsciously discouraged from learning about technology by their parents or teachers. A report by the L'Oreal Foundation shows that over 80% of Poles believe that being a scientist is a male profession.

M.A.C.-L.: The problem of women in science is directly related to the problem of being a woman in our society. If we look at the proportion of women holding key positions in corporations, that balance may be found in Scandinavian countries. In Poland, unfortunately, there is not much emphasis put on the welfare of girls and

women, which is why we are a patriarchal society. We, women, are partially responsible for this. Mothers often teach their sons that a woman is designated to perform certain "functions", such as housekeeping, and when it comes to other areas she simply does not have the skills.

Why do many women only make it to the doctorate level in science?

M.A.C.-L.: Due to their biological functions. They become mothers and often do not return to study or to work as a scientist.

E.B.-W.: It's a pity. After all, in Poland education is co-funded by the state, and this way the resources allocated for the education of girls and women are wasted. Some might say that the reason why they leave science is because they are less capable than men, but this is not true. The main reasons are social.



There is one more argument: research work requires a lot of travel, and since women have more responsibilities at home they are not always able to commit 100% to work.

M.A.C.-L.: At our department there are mostly women. We certainly did not consider gender when hiring new people, women were simply more qualified than the men who applied. However, I can imagine that some employers will try to avoid having to deal with losing female employees to maternity leave and for this reason prefer to employ men. I have to admit, however, that when three of my colleagues got pregnant at almost the same time and had to be temporarily on leave, there was a moment when I panicked. Urban legend says that I locked myself in my office for the whole day and did not come out. But shortly after my other colleagues and I got to work and did what we had to do. I deal with such problems by taking action.

ria for grants are the same for both men and women. The Foundation for Polish Science created a special BRIDGE program designed to help those returning to work after a break, but it has already ended. Some projects designed for young scientists (up to the age of 35) allow the age limit to be extended by one year if the applicant has had a baby. But there is no such option for older scientists. Things are similar in the case of regulations specifying the timeframe to complete post-doctoral studies. The law allows eight years from the completion of the DSc (*habilitation*), but if someone was busy raising two children during that time, then they have effectively had two years less. And what about female physicians, who have exactly the same number of years as the men to complete their specialization?

Returning to work also involves emotional costs.

E.B.-W.: It was difficult for me because on one hand I wanted to return to work, but on the other I wanted to stay home with my children. What made it easier was the fact that I was not completely cut off from work during my maternity leave as I continued writing papers and reviewing theses. I was active so I did not fall out of the loop. Besides, the flexible working hours we enjoy as scientists are invaluable. My friends in the corporate world do not have such privileges. In any case, it would not have been possible without the support of my family and colleagues. They never gave me a hard time when I had to take time off to take care of my children.

Both genders have their own special qualities, but just as many women as men can either be weak or strong.

So what does a manager do in this situation?

M.A.C.-L.: Nothing. The manager says that it is wonderful news, we are very pleased for them, and that we will manage. You can always hire someone as a temporary replacement. Where there is a will, there is a way. On the other hand, parents make very organized employees as they have to manage their time to balance work and home responsibilities. I do not have children, I am not so well organized, so I know what I am talking about.

It's not easy.

E.B.-W.: It is very difficult. Our work is really specific, it never really ends. You cannot just simply put down the test tube or a pen at 4:00 pm and not think about it until the next day. When my children were young I would come to the lab, do my experiments, pick them up from preschool, and once they were asleep I would sit down to write.

In some fields it is difficult to resume your career after a maternity break.

E.B.-W.: Yes, it is easy to fall into this cycle. After they give birth, women stop being involved in research for a year, which creates a gap in their careers. It makes it harder to get grants, for example, because there is no work continuity, no publications, and the crite-

It all depends on the individual work environment, doesn't it? Because these days you really can't count on support from the state.

M.A.C.-L.: There is not much support at all. Although, compared to other countries, maternity leave in Poland is quite long, which is a good thing. But PhD students, for examples, are not covered by the social insurance (ZUS), so when a woman becomes pregnant she does not receive such financial support. What are her options in such case? Either to use the scholarship during her maternity leave, but then she will have to spend the last year of her studies working for free, or to suspend her scholarship and be supported by her partner or other family members. And this is a time when she really needs the money.

E.B.-W.: This system is horrible. The 500+ program, which provides subsidies for a family's second and subsequent children, is not at all beneficial for women who want to work and have children. It does not help mothers with their first child, and that is when help is really needed. Also, there are not enough day-care centers and preschools available.

Are female scientists perceived differently if they have children?

E.B.-W.: Yes, there is a tendency to stress the need for a work-life balance when it comes to women. When-

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ever someone mentions my accomplishments, whether I am receiving an award or a grant, they immediately add “you have managed to accomplish so much and you have two children.” I never hear such comments when it comes to my male colleagues. So we are a bit stigmatized, but I still hope that it all comes from genuine concern and good intentions.

Sometimes women are kept away from certain projects at universities because others feel they need this time to care for their children. It is true that young children require a lot of time and attention, but women should be able to decide for themselves whether or not they can handle a certain project. Otherwise, they miss out on a lot of important work.

Research work involves travel. Shorter trips for conferences or field work, but also longer ones for various internships and fellowships. How can you balance that with family responsibilities?

E.B.-W.: I used to travel before I had children, but once they were born I did not go on any longer trips. And I regret it. When a man travels for an internship, his wife and children usually follow him, but it does not work that way when the roles are reversed. That is because when a man has a job he is less inclined to quit it and follow his wife. Although there are exceptions. I know many women who brought their husbands and children with them when they traveled for their internship.

However, in this case it is a general problem. The fact that there is much focus on being able to travel in our line of work is hardly questionable. But we are forgetting one important issue. Young scientists in Poland do not enjoy the sort of funding that American, German and French students do. Polish PhD students are paid approximately 1,400 PLN, living on the border of poverty. They have no savings that would allow them to travel freely. Scholarships usually only cover the cost of living abroad for a PhD student or postdoctoral fellow themselves, but not his or her family. In addition, the scholarship is just enough to survive, but often does not provide the type of financial comfort that includes money for day-care or private healthcare. Thus, it is difficult to ask young scientists to travel all over Europe or the world, not to mention to take along their families.

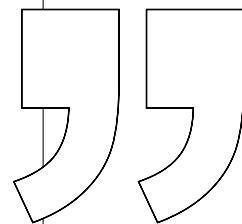
In some countries top-down regulations ensure that an equal proportion of men and women are employed in various positions. Does this work in science?

M.A.C.-L.: Scientists should be employed based on their skills. Gender can be important when various types of panels or expert boards are created; for example, where members are selected from a group of people with similar experiences and achievements.

As a vice dean, you often meet with the deans of other faculties, and you have a lot of experience working abroad. Are the problems encountered by female scientists the same everywhere?

M.A.C.-L.: It seems to me, though obviously my point of view is subjective, that in our faculty women scientists are not treated any differently. We have not had a male dean in fourteen years. Within the faculty committees the men to women ratio is usually 1:1, although, we select the members based on their qualifications. No place is free of discrimination, however. In the United States this was changed systematically, and representatives of various minorities were hired on a preferential basis, by lowering the requirements, for example, and later tracking their progress. In all the foreign laboratories I worked in women played a huge role. In the United States I worked in a lab where my boss' right-hand-person was a woman. In

Scientists should be employed based on their skills. Gender may matter when choosing between qualified candidates.



the UK I worked on two teams headed by women, and in France I also worked alongside many great female scientists.

Is strength a prerequisite for a woman to pursue a career in science?

M.A.C.-L.: Yes, but it is a matter of personality, not gender. A female boss can be strong and a male boss can be weak, and vice versa. Femininity or masculinity is not the issue here. I prefer to see it as someone having qualities that make a good scientist and a good boss. Both genders have their own special qualities, but I think that just as many women as men can either be weak or strong. Everyone has traits that make them good at something, some work better quietly at home, others are good at fighting on the front lines. You need to see inside the person, not focus on their gender. Perhaps I am not being objective as I have always had support from men, including my mentor, Prof. Andrzej Tarkowski. There were also many women in my support circle. Without these people I would not have been able to become a scientist. Even if I am not always successful at it, I try to treat everyone equally, regardless of gender, and I hope I am doing a decent job.

INTERVIEW BY AGNIESZKA KLOCH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAKUB OSTAŁOWSKI