Italian women meet glass ceiling in the lab

Alison Abbott

Men are three times more likely than women to be promoted to top positions in Italian publicly funded research laboratories, according to a study to be released early in the new year.

The study also finds that 90% of institute directors are male. Men even hold many of the top positions in disciplines where women form the majority of junior researchers, such as biology and the social sciences.

The study was conducted by a working group of senior women scientists, with the backing of Italy’s National Research Council (CNR). It was chaired by Rossella Palomba, director of the CNR Institute for Population Research in Rome. Data were analysed from 15,000 publications and from the archives of hundreds of public research institutes, employing 7,000 scientists.

Palomba says that Italy is probably not the worst performer in Europe, but that the study’s findings are still shocking.

“The difference in career opportunities for women in research in Italy cannot be explained by the difference in the number of publications,” she says. On average, men publish under one paper per year more than women, she explains. But a bigger publication gap comes between the ages of 35 and 39, at a time when women are often involved in child care and men are busy getting promoted.

Many of the more successful women researchers forgo the opportunity to have children, the study finds. Nearly 40% of female research directors are childless, as are 22% of senior researchers.

Palomba suggests that the situation might be improved if more women sat on selection panels, and if institutes were asked to publish the number of women on such panels. “Merely publishing gender statistics will probably make a difference,” she says. “And having women on the panels will help break up the old-boy networks that cause women to be overlooked.”

But Enzo Iarocci, president of the National Institute of Nuclear Physics (INFN), says that there are so few women in
Italy’s National Research Council (CNR) is this week breaking from its much-criticized practice of filling key posts from within its ranks, and is advertising internationally for scientists to head some of its institutes. The positions are the first to arise under a reorganization that will combine some 300 CNR institutes and university-based centres into 95 larger units. This is the first step in a reform programme to make the CNR more efficient (see Nature 394, 712; 1998).

The appointments are for four-year renewable terms. Each new director will be responsible for coordinating research programmes at the merged centres and institutes.

Most scientists agree that the new arrangement will promote collaborative research, but say that, with no extra money available for research, it is not ideal. Some observers are also sceptical about whether outsiders will find the new directorships attractive. For example, they will have few opportunities to build their own research teams. This is “a weakness in the process”, says John Guardiola, head of the CNR International Institute of Genetics and Biophysics in Naples.

Arturo Falaschi, the director of the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology in Trieste, is more optimistic. Together with an expected competition to attract 1,000 researchers, he says advertising the directorships could help to address problems such as gender imbalance.

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