



**Rebecca Smith**

(Parliamentary and Policy Officer)

# The European Scene

The EPWS (European Platform of Women Scientists) Annual Conference took place in Vilnius, Lithuania. Prominent keynote speakers addressed core issues, including the relative progress and continuing contradictions concerning women and science, whereas the sessions covered a broad range of topics from networking to mentoring, research methods and noteworthy policy measures.

As expected, activity regarding gender equality within the scientific community mirrors the evolution of the approach that can be witnessed at a national level. A distinct shift can be seen from women's rights to human resources and integration, through policy definition and assessment relating to the current arguments based on work/life balance and the economic benefits of the increased participation of women.

A considerable proportion of this activity and research has taken place at the European level, including in 2006, the formation of a group of independent experts collectively known as the WIRDEM (Women in Research Decision-Making) Expert Group. The group comprises senior scientists from various disciplines who represent institutions rather than countries.

The activity of the group builds from a strong base of excellent reports produced by the European Commission which include:

- *Science Policies in the European Union: Promoting Excellence through Mainstreaming Gender Equality* (Osborn 2000);
- *National Policies on Women and Science in Europe* (European Commission 2002);
- *Waste of Talents: Turning Private Struggles into a Public Issue. Women and Science in Enwise Countries* (European Commission 2003);
- *She Figures 2006: Women and Science Statistics and Indicators* (European Commission 2006)

The most recent WIRDEM report was the subject of the session 'Positive Policies: Noteworthy Policy Measures to Achieve Gender Equality in Science at National and European Level' and is entitled *Mapping the*

*Maze: Getting More Women to the Top in Research*. The report tackles the issue of under-representation of women on scientific boards, currently seen in almost all European countries.

According to the report "The scarcity of women in senior positions in such bodies inevitably means that their opinions are less likely to be voiced in policy and decision-making processes, which may lead to biased decision-making and priority setting in scientific research." It also points out that "Since the 1990s, the majority of university graduates in Europe have been women, but men are three times more likely than women to reach the most senior levels. If women are not visible and are not seen to be succeeding in their careers, they cannot serve as role models and retain young women in scientific professions."

To those working in this area, these findings come as no surprise. The task now facing activists is to ensure that reports such as this are disseminated and acted upon by those responsible for committee composition. Actively seeking women should not be seen as placatory or undermining achievement, but rather as a fundamental part of creating committees that make the best decisions for the scientific community.

A look at some of BBSRC research committees that deal with responsive-mode funding shows the following composition:

- BBSRC Genes and Developmental Biology Committee: 40% (six women, nine men);
- BBSRC Animal Sciences Committee: 26% (five women, 14 men);
- BBSRC Biochemistry and Cell Biology Committee: 31% (five women, 11 men);
- BBSRC Biomolecular Sciences Committee: 25% (four women, 12 men);

These results are better than many of those seen in other European countries, but there is still some way to go before we match the target that the European Union has set itself of at least 40% women in its research evaluation commissions. The EU Charter for Researchers supports the goal of aiming "for a representative gender balance". A target of 40% has already been adopted by Norway, Sweden and Finland. As a result, the proportion of female members in Research Councils at the Academy of Finland and Norway is 47%, followed by Sweden with 35%.

This is in stark contrast with some other European countries. In October 2007, the four most influential decision-making bodies concerning the funding of Estonian research and science were composed almost entirely of men<sup>4</sup>. In Portugal, the proportion of women in the evaluation panels of research projects at 11% continues to be well below the proportion of women at the highest ranks of university structures.

The reasons behind the differing levels of female representation between European countries are inevitably complex. However, countries such as the UK should look to Norway, Finland and Sweden for examples of good practice. The EU standard should become an example for the rest of Europe to follow; however, until the EU reaches its own target, the conviction of its commitment remains questionable. ■