

## Editorials

### Female students – male power

The general situation for women in the medical and natural sciences is showing very slow progress<sup>1</sup>. From 1998 to 2002, the percentage of women among academic staff in medical science improved from 38 to 42%, and in natural science from 24 to 28%, as a mean for the EU countries. This looks slightly promising. But in the medical sciences only 14.7% of academic positions at the highest level are held by women, and in the natural sciences only 10.6% of the top posts were held by women in 2002, also EU average.

#### Men publish, women educate?

In *Nature Reviews*<sup>2</sup>, around 20% of the authors in the last five years are women, although about half of current PhD students in medical and natural sciences, and lecturers for that matter, are women. A paper by Jaggi *et al.*<sup>3</sup> describes the 'gender gap' in authorship of academic medical literature over the last 35 years. First authorship of women has increased from 5.9% in 1970 to 29.3% in 2004, while female senior authorship has increased from 3.7 to 19.3%. Naturally, there are large differences depending on the topic of the journal, e.g. *Obstetrics and Gynecology* and *Journal of Pediatrics* had higher percentages than *New England Journal of Medicine* and *Annals of Surgery*. Corresponding data on publications in nutrition have not been possible to identify.

#### Men rule, women educate?

Doing a quick scan of our own societies, federations and unions in nutrition provides some more nutrition relevant information. Currently the UK Nutrition Society ([www.nutritionssociety.org](http://www.nutritionssociety.org)) comes out well, with a woman president and roughly half of the council including honorary officers being female. The Federation of European Nutrition Societies ([www.fensweb.org](http://www.fensweb.org)) has men in the three leading positions in the secretariat, while country officials show rough gender balance. In the International Union of Nutritional Sciences ([www.iuns.org](http://www.iuns.org)), the past, current and next presidents are all men, while the total representation among officers and members of the board is gender equal.

However, the gender representation of nutrition students is hardly gender equal in European countries. There is a vast over-representation of females at student level. With no research to guide us on gender equity among nutrition academics, we cannot judge whether the situation is comparable to the statistics we can identify for the medical and natural sciences on a European level.

We do not know very much about the global situation in nutrition academia either.

#### Digging in my own yard

My university, Karolinska Institutet, was in 2005 ranked as number 7 out of 15 'best places to work in academia' in the world<sup>4</sup>. We are proud of this and the leadership of the university is eager to maintain our position. Since 2004, our university has a young (my age) and progressive female vice-chancellor, Harriet Wallberg-Henriksson, with a background as MD and professor of physiology. Professor Wallberg-Henriksson – or Harriet, as she is on first-name basis with us all – has a keen interest in gender issues, and has been pushing for gender equity. A board for gender equity has been formed, and all executives on senior and middle levels are currently undergoing training in gender equity issues. A number of senior lecturer positions are being established in areas where well-qualified women are available. A network of female scientists is formed and informal as well as formal discussions and meetings are taking place to improve the academic situation for women.

As Swedish women, we tend to consider ourselves among the most emancipated in the world. However, our university has an intake of mainly female students (75%), a teaching staff with a gender distribution of roughly 50/50, but the percentage of female professors is low (15%). We can certainly argue that this severe under-representation of females at higher level may be an age issue (several male professors are close to retirement age), but progress was not made during the years 2001–2005. The government has requested that the percentage of newly employed professors has to be at least 30%, and the university is taking that request seriously. The number of women on assistant professor's level is increasing, slowly but surely.

#### Why not gender balance?

At the Karolinska Institutet, the reasons why gender balance is not achieved include, among other things, that the percentage of women actually applying for higher academic posts is low. This may be due to the areas in which professorships are advertised, where some change is now being introduced.

Another reason could be that among the recruits from other countries we see mainly men. Do successful women from other countries have problems in moving to a new location owing to family structure and traditions? Yet another factor may be that women within our university

have limited ambition to move to the higher academic level: that they actually see their mission in teaching and supporting students, and do not necessarily wish to be, on top of everything else, responsible for leadership and staff issues. Such issues need straightening out.

### Why important?

The InterAcademy Council report *Women for Science*<sup>5</sup> concludes: 'If we are to spread science and its values around the globe, both in industrialised and developing nations, the full potential of all populations must be harnessed for scientific endeavours, and the science must belong to all citizens, whether male or female, rich or poor'.

We have a long way to go before that happens with regard to gender and general equity. Specifically for nutrition, a recent paper<sup>6</sup> points out the role of education of girls and women as vital in improving the general health as well as the nutritional status of children. According to the World Food Programme, women are gatekeepers to the introduction of healthier eating. The World Food Programme's Gender Policy 2003–2007, *Enhanced Commitments to Women to Ensure Food Security*<sup>7</sup>, emphasises this. The enhanced commitment to women considers the dual sides of women's special nutritional needs and supports women's effective participation in decision-making on all levels.

### What can our journal do?

A lot of the time we lack knowledge on the gender of our authors, and it would be hard to provide any gender statistics on authors. We are now investigating simple possibilities in our online submission system to ask authors for gender information. By doing so, we can easily access statistics on the gender balance of our own journal's

authors. We can also try to make sure that we have a sound gender balance among reviewers, since there may exist gender issues in how to judge scientific writing.

Someone said that women come from Venus and men from Mars. Let us make sure that we are on the same planet today, with equal opportunities, in the board room and on the higher levels of academia.

Agneta Yngve  
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## Friends, vouchers, work force and plant foods

### Food security and deprivation

Several papers in this issue are related to deprivation and food security<sup>1–6</sup>. They originate not only from Africa (Tanzania and South Africa) but also from the USA, Canada, the UK and Ireland. The same issues apply whether in Africa, North America or Europe. Deprivation counts. Attitude counts. Provision of healthy foods counts. A socially supportive environment counts.

The Tanzanian paper<sup>1</sup> points at the importance of friends and family who can chip in during seasonal insecurity. In closely knit societies, individuals from the same ethnic group seem to support each other better than

over the boundaries of ethnicity. Of course, material wealth matters – or to put it crudely, a network of rich friends can support in a more efficient manner.

The UK paper is from Wales<sup>2</sup>. This shows that advice to drink more juice counts for much less than getting a voucher for doing so, among pregnant women in a deprived neighbourhood.

### The public health nutrition work force in Canada

Rideout *et al.*<sup>3</sup> recommend the use of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms<sup>7</sup> in the efforts to protect the right to food. The importance of public health nutrition actors in

pushing for food rights in Canada is emphasised: a lobby could contribute forcefully to increase the political will for food policy measures. I send my support to the Canadians for building their public health nutrition network, capacity and strength!

### Go green for old age

The European Prospective Investigation into Cancer and Nutrition project keeps delivering valuable information regarding diet and health in Europe, this time on the elderly<sup>8</sup>. The results from this massive cohort of almost 75 000 participants show that a diet rich in plant foods is associated with lower all-cause mortality. We look forward to receiving more results.

### Gender alpha or omega?

To follow up on the gender editorial<sup>9</sup> in this issue, I made an effort to count the authors in this issue and work out their gender based on first names. This is what I found. Out of 12 papers, three did not include full names of authors, which made gender analysis impossible. Of the rest, it turns out that seven out of nine papers had a female first author (78%). Altogether we had a large number of authors this time and 47 out of 78 (60%) were female. When looking more closely at the last author, who at least in Europe is the most experienced one and which position counts in academic promotion, five out of nine were female (56%).

This little exercise illustrates first the problem of not getting this information first hand but having to work from names and sometimes not being able to do so, since first names are not provided. Second, it shows us that in this issue we have more female than male authors, which is what should be expected in the area of nutrition, with so many female students. Regular

monitoring of the gender of authors can provide us with the full picture.

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