

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE LEADERSHIP OF THE MAX PLANCK SOCIETY (MPG)

We are writing to express our concern at the highly publicized dismissals, demotions, and conflicts involving female Directors of Max Planck Institutes (MPI). These reports have appeared in prestigious and widely read outlets including *Science* (in 2021¹ and 2018²) and *Nature* (in 2018³), where issues of leadership and bullying have been highlighted. Similar reports have also publicized cases involving women in top academic positions at the University of Copenhagen (in *Nature* in 2019⁴), ETH Zurich (in *Science* in 2018⁵), and the University of London (in *Science* in 2018⁶), indicating that these issues involving senior women extend well beyond the MPG.

As detailed by Kramer and Harris in their book *It's Not You It's the Workplace: Women's Conflict at Work and the Bias that Built It* and by Gillard and Okonjo-Iwela in *Women and Leadership: Real Lives, Real Lessons*, professional women face many biases that disproportionately delay their advancement along the career track and compromise their effectiveness and even their tenure in positions of power and authority. Female leaders are judged more harshly, and allegations of leadership shortcomings are far more often made against female leaders than male ones.

Gender bias in individual institutions can be difficult to assess because of the small numbers of women in leading scientific positions. The Max Planck Society (MPG), however, has a large number of Directors. We therefore call on the MPG leadership to examine the statistics for MPI Directors who have left their positions before retirement or faced sanctions or demotions within the MPG. Are women and/or non-German nationals disproportionately represented in these groups? To what extent do departures reflect institutional pressure from the MPG? What publicity accompanied these departures or demotions?

Since only highly successful individuals are appointed as MPI Directors, subsequent failures in these positions represent not only grave individual hardships, but also a loss to the society that invested in these careers and reputational damage to the MPG. Failure of a highly successful individual who has attained a high rank is in a very real sense an institutional failure. We are also concerned that highly publicized failures of women at top level positions in science could have a chilling effect on young women considering careers in science and engineering. In a 2018 article in *Science*,⁷ the upcoming vacancies in MPI Directorships were presented as “*a chance to hire more women and more foreign researchers, and an opportunity to open up entirely new fields of research*”. It will surely be more difficult to recruit top talent if the MPG is perceived as being unsupportive of its female and foreign leaders. The MPG has a duty to ensure that the women and foreign researchers recruited as MPI Directors do not face discriminatory conditions and to proactively identify and address any issues that might contribute to future failures, including bullying, harassment and mobbing of female leaders themselves.

The signatories to this statement are female leaders in research from academia, government, and industry, who endorse this statement as individuals. Endorsement of this statement does not imply any toleration for discrimination or harassment of early career researchers. No institutional endorsements are implied. No women affiliated with the MPG were asked to endorse this statement.

¹ <https://www.science.org/content/article/max-planck-institute-demotes-noted-archaeologist>

² <https://www.science.org/content/article/she-s-world-s-top-empathy-researcher-colleagues-say-she-bullied-and-intimidated-them>

³ <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-05634-8>

⁴ <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-02461-3>

⁵ <https://www.science.org/content/article/eth-zurich-starts-process-dismiss-professor-accused-bullying-students>

⁶ <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.361.6404.734>

⁷ <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.359.6381.1204>

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