

Is there a gender bias in how academic leaders are criticized?

By *Lea Heckmann, Sarah Young, Hang Liu and Lindsey Bultema*

Yes, but not the way the media portrays it.

Recently, 145 female scientists signed an open letter to challenge the way the Max Planck Society (MPS) manages power abuse cases involving female directors¹.

This recent discussion was triggered by the removal of Nicole Boivin from her position as a director at the Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History. This makes her the fourth publicized female MPS director facing power abuse accusations in the last years. Naturally, one begins to ask themselves if female leaders are judged more harshly than their male counterparts.

But what if this is only half of the story?

As the representatives of the doctoral researchers of the MPS, we take it upon ourselves to shed light on this topic. After the public accusations^{2,3} in 2018, we have witnessed and supported the successful development of internal and external unbiased reporting lines and channels to treat cases of power abuse. We therefore see the need to speak up in the current discussion questioning these procedures.

Within the MPS, four^{2,3,4,5} out of 54 female directors (7.4%) had to cope with the consequences of official and publicized bullying reports and subsequent decisions. While for male directors this number was only one⁶ out of 250 or 0.4%.

Whereas: in our 2019 survey from the Max-Planck PhDnet⁷ 13% of doctoral researchers stated to have experienced bullying by a superior.

So what if the psychological barrier towards voicing righteous complaints against female leaders is lower, but male directors are still getting away with bullying and misusing their power?

To investigate this further, we included questions regarding the gender and characteristics of the supervisors in our 2020 survey. Roughly 2400 out of 5000 doctoral researchers participated in the 2020 survey⁸ and were additionally questioned about reported and non-reported experienced conflicts.

¹ <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-03492-5>

² <https://www.spiegel.de/lebenundlernen/uni/max-planck-gesellschaft-vorwuerfe-gegen-professoren-a-1186360.html>

³ <https://www.spiegel.de/lebenundlernen/uni/max-planck-gesellschaft-doktoranden-werfen-direktorin-mobbing-vor-a-1221885.html>

⁴ <https://www.buzzfeed.de/recherchen/neue-vorwuerfe-von-mobbing-und-willkuer-in-der-max-planck-gesellschaft-90138071.html>

⁵ <https://www.science.org/content/article/max-planck-institute-demotes-noted-archaeologist>, doi: 10.1126/science.acx9493

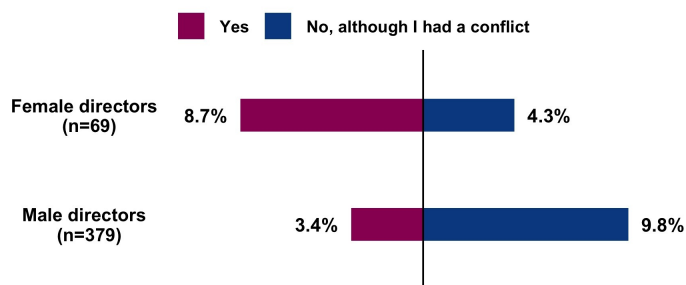
⁶ <https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/bildung/max-planck-gesellschaft-ein-oekologie-professor-soll-ueber-jahre-nachwuchsforscher-drangsaliert-haben-a-f7029a39-0002-0001-0000-000177879099>

⁷ Olsthoorn, L. H. M., Heckmann, L. A., Filippi, et al., (2020). PhDnet Report 2019. doi:10.17617/2.3243876

⁸ Majev, P.-G. & Vieira, R. M., Carollo, A., et al. (2021). PhDnet Report 2020. doi:10.17617/2.3344273

For the following, we only considered doctoral researchers, who have a director as their direct supervisor (n=448). What we find is that roughly 13% of doctoral researchers have experienced conflicts with their direct supervisor (only directors) for both female and male supervisors

Have you ever reported a conflict, in terms of a situation where you felt mistreated, with your direct supervisor to an official third party?

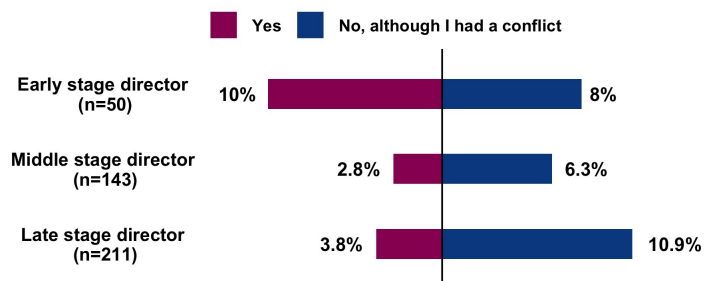


respectively. Startling is that 8.7%, so roughly two thirds of these 13%, report the conflict if it was with a female director, while only 3.4% report it for male directors. The main reasons for not reporting a conflict with a supervisor are: 1) that the doctoral researchers think it would not be resolved or 2) because they are afraid of the repercussions.

Additionally, we asked the doctoral researchers to subjectively categorize the career stage of their supervisor as early, middle and late stage. For early stage directors 56% of conflicts are reported, while only 31% for middle and 26% for late stage directors.

When looking at the gender distributions, unsurprisingly we find a decrease of female directors with advancing career stages (32% of females in the early stage, 16.1% in the middle stage and 8.1% in the late stage).

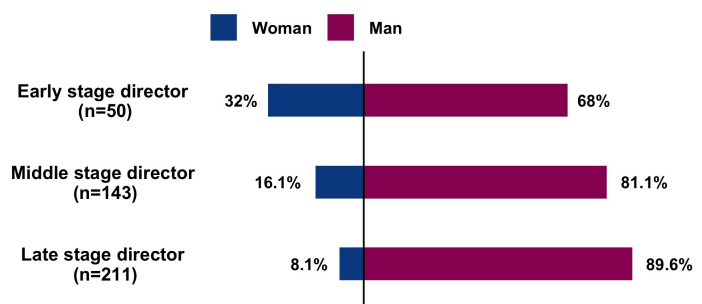
Have you ever reported a conflict, in terms of a situation where you felt mistreated, with your direct supervisor to an official third party?



This leads us to three conclusions:

1. Conflicts with female directors are either more likely to be reported on or more likely to be perceived as severe enough to be reported on
2. Established directors are less likely to be reported on
3. Most established directors are male

What is the gender of your direct supervisor



It is known that the same behavior can be perceived very differently if shown by a man or a woman, especially in leading positions^{9,10}. Therefore, we suspect that the root causes of the observed differences in reporting are due to the unconscious bias and prejudices against women in leadership positions.

The second part of the problem is that academia has the habit of creating small kingdoms around the established and late stage leaders. This makes it difficult to speak up when experiencing conflicts. Early career researchers feel that they will not be supported in resolving the conflict and fear consequences towards their own career.

We definitely see a gender bias in the number of conflicts doctoral researchers experience and report. But instead of lowering the bar again, we advocate for stronger measures and better protection of early career researchers who face bullying and power abuse independently of the gender of their superior. Therefore, official reporting channels and procedures including consequences, if proven necessary, are essential to drive cultural change within academia and protect early career researchers against power abuse. In doing so we make sure that all leaders regardless of their gender and level of experience justly face the consequences of their behavior.

⁹ Reimer, M., Welpe, I.(2021). Vorurteile und Verfahren beim Umgang mit anonymen Anschuldigungen: Was Forschungsorganisationen richtig und falsch machen können. Beiträge zur Hochschulforschung, 43(1-2), 86-105.

¹⁰ Brescoll, V.L. (2016). Leading with their hearts? How gender stereotypes of emotion lead to biased evaluations of female leaders. The Leadership Quarterly, 27 (3), 415-428