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How not to scare off women: different needs of female early-stage researchers in STEM and SSH fields and the implications for support measures / Katerina Cidlinska

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Abstract

Women researchers are underrepresented in almost all research fields. There are disciplinary differences in the phase in which they tend to quit their academic career: in the natural and technical sciences (STEM), it is in the postdoctoral phase, whereas in the social sciences and humanities (SSH) it is during the doctoral phase. This is indicative of disciplinary differences in the barriers women face in their careers. Related studies on these barriers are more numerous in the STEM field, which in turn limits the scope of potential policies and measures that address the needs of women in the SSH field. This article aspires to contribute to an understanding of the obstacles women from different fields face in their careers and to offer a reflection on various support measures. Using qualitative data (interviews, focus groups, workshop notes, evaluation forms) from a Czech mentoring programme for female junior researchers across all fields, the subsequent analysis reveals disciplinary differences in the perceived career path obstacles in research as well as the attitudes held towards it. Furthermore, the analysis points to the reasons for these obstacles and attitudes by using the concept of professional

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identity, a useful tool for identifying the barriers to the development of professional career ambitions. Additionally, the analysis utilises Becher and Trowler's categorisation of SSH and STEM fields into rural and urban categories, enabling one to reflect on the social, cognitive and power features of these fields and the influence these features have on the conditions for the start of an academic career. In order to motivate women to complete their PhD and to apply for a job in academia, this article argues that measures should be taken in the SSH field to promote the involvement of women in the academic community right from the start of their PhD, and therefore, along with mentoring, sponsorship is also needed. In the natural and technical sciences, it is crucial to present women in the late doctoral and early postdoctoral phase with positive female role models – not as token superstars, but as young researchers who are just a few career steps ahead and who have managed to balance their career with a family in the frame of an egalitarian partnership. Furthermore, it is necessary to increase the gender sensitivity of these female researchers in order to prevent feelings of scientific inefficacy arising from the discrepancy between their own intended biography and priorities, and the normative notion of the “proper” scientist, which is strongly masculine instead of gender-neutral. Recommendations are also included for transforming this normative notion of the “proper scientist” – a precondition for wider structural changes within the entire academic environment – into a more gender-neutral one. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)