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Paper title: Seeking a Seat at the Policy Table: Engaging Women in Biotechnology Policy and Decision-Making

Abstract:

The opinion expressed in this paper are the sole responsibility of the author and do not reflect those of the OECD or of the governments of its Member countries.

Society's relationship with science is in a critical phase. Science today is progressing rapidly and appears full of opportunities. Through new biotechnology, biological understanding has probably expanded more in the past 50 years than in all previous human history.

Used discerningly, biotechnology appears to offer new techniques to improve the quality of life. Yet there is growing dissatisfaction with the directions that biotechnology research has taken in the last two decades, particularly in health and agriculture. Science appears out of phase with society, least popular and most feared at the height of its influence and success.

This crisis of confidence is of great importance both to society at large and for scientific and technological progress. Today, "the knowledge keepers" in both public and private sector are put into question; and there are calls for a better "match" between the scientific research agenda(s) and societal needs. There is a need for new assumptions, roles and skills to meet the awakened public sensibilities, values and expectations. Achieving this requires, however, increased transparency and accountability and serious rethinking of how innovation policy is set and how innovation systems work.

This debate, at a first glance, may appear to be devoid of gender implications. This is not surprising. While various surveys indicate that women account for more than 60% of life science graduates in a number of OECD countries, women make up less than 5% of senior academic staff in the majority of OECD countries. Furthermore, their representation in public office remains considerably lower than that of men.

Women's representation at the highest levels of national and international decision-making has not changed in the five years since the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing¹. Women continue to be in the minority in national parliaments, with an average of 16 per cent worldwide in 2005, despite the fact that women comprise the majority of the electorate in almost all countries. The proportion of women holding Cabinet-level office was even lower (14.3%).

At the international level, although certain progress has been made in improving the representation of women in the senior and policy-making levels in the United Nations, the goal of 50 per cent minimum has not yet been reached. With only 12% of women at senior levels in 2006, also the

¹ 1) United Nations, [Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration](#), United Nations Department of Public Information, New York, 1995, clause 190 (d).

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Developments is still far from the 30% minimum necessary to ensure a critical mass of women to make a difference in international policy debates.

The Platform for Action adopted at Beijing states that women's lives should be viewed within the social, economic and political framework of the society, and not outside of it. The Beijing Conference reaffirmed that "women's equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account.

Besides the Beijing document, a number of international instruments have affirmed the principle of equal participation of women and men in power and decision-making, including the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

The scarcity of women in senior scientific and policy positions inevitably means that their individual and collective opinions are less likely to be voiced in policy and decision making processes and equally in setting a biotechnology research agenda responsive to their needs.

This paper intends to provide an overview of today's key issues in the international biotechnology policy debate and a critical assessment of the initiatives and approaches applied across OECD countries to enable greater participation of women in decision and policy making.