

Vélemény, vita

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN THE HUNGARIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

NŐK A MAGYAR TUDOMÁNYOS AKADÉMIÁN

Péter Somogyi

Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Experimental Medicine, Budapest Department of Pharmacology,
Oxford University, UK
peter.somogyi@pharm.ox.ac.uk

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Honoured President, Members of the Presidium, Dear Fellow Academicians! I listened with admiration to the presentation of academician Lamm, Chair of the Presidential Committee on Women in Scientific Careers, summarising the Committee's work. The Committee studied the problems and the ways the Academy could help in advancing equal opportunities for women. I read their report; they did a splendid job in analysing those factors hampering equal opportunities, which could be changed. Looking back on the past few decades, I ask: What are those novel facts that we have not known about? I could not find any, which leads me to the next question: Why are we still dealing with these problems? As we heard, the reason is that we have not done enough to ensure conditions for the self-realisation of women in science. Yet, the interests of the country's scientific progress would require this. It is not the goodwill or the analysis of the problems that are missing, but the *deeds*. As I have published recently, it is time that we face this challenge (Somogyi, 2016, 2017).

Here I would focus only on one problem that I have called your attention to one year ago – the low proportion of female academicians, relative to the contribution of women to the Hungarian scientific advance. Recognising this did not require ingenuity: it is a fact that in 2016 we elected 26 outstanding male academicians and no woman, thus stabilising the proportion of female academicians as 6.6% in our Academy. Being aware of the internationally recognised outstanding female candidates nominated in 2015, I proposed that the reason for this bias is in our election system; my opinion published in July 2016 resulted in 11 comments from other academicians (Buzsaki, 2016; Csépe, 2017; Csermely 2017; Falus, 2016; Hadas, 2016; Hargittai, 2016; Kamarás, 2016; Lamm, 2016; Nagy, 2016; Pléh, 2016; Soltész, 2016), whom I thank again.

You all received the May issue of *Magyar Tudomány*, in which I summarised my reply to the comments and I am happy to send the whole material to anyone in 'pdf' format. You find a graph in my reply, which predicts that if we are able to keep the current trend of the past 25 years of increasing the proportion of female academicians by 0.17% per year, which is not guaranteed, then by 2150 women will reach 30% in the Academy. But why would we want such a high proportion – asked the members of the Biology Section of the Academy? So the Biology Section proposed to change the Basic Rules governing our procedures and that this modification is incorporated in each round of the elections: the Assembly of Academicians should vote about the suitability of each female candidate who had received more than 50% support in their respective discipline Sections, for as long as the proportion of females amongst the academicians will reach 16–18%, the proportion of females amongst those holding a Doctor of Science title (DSc). I repeat, the Biology Section did not propose that they are automatically elected, but that at least we vote about them.

This modest proposal was not supported by the President, the Presidium and the Committee for the Modification of the Basic Rules and, therefore, it was not sent out for debate in the Sections. By rejecting this symbolic step we missed a historical opportunity! It would have been symbolic, as even by this mechanism at most 1–2 candidates would have been considered; in the 2016 election there was only one female candidate who received more than 50% of the vote, nevertheless she was not elected. But, at least in addition to the well-sounding phrases, we could have shown an example by *doing something* in each round. The Biology Section did not propose *positive discrimination*, as certain members tried to misinterpret the proposal with such a *pejorative phrase* – on the contrary, we proposed a partial compensation for disadvantages and the lack of equal opportunity throughout the career of women, as we heard from academician Vanda Lamm. But the Presidium did not support this proposal! Instead, we voted on and accepted a declaration of positive intention for the modification of the Basic Rules as proposed by President Lovász.¹

¹ As we are a 'Scientific' Academy, we need to ensure that the consequences of our decisions can be quantified and this applies also to our intentions of ensuring equal opportunity for women. We are fortunate that our President is a mathematician, so he will be able to measure the result of his proposal that we accepted. Unfortunately, I have not developed my statistical skills since I left university. However, taking into account the trend over the last 10 elections from 1990 (see Somogyi, 2017) after the collapse of communism, on the basis of what I learned at Loránd Eötvös University, I would expect that the regression line laid over the number of women elected plotted against the election years ($y=0.27x+0.8$) will hit the value of 3.77 in 2019; thus 4 women might be elected if there is no change in the election mechanism and everything remains as it has been for so long. If we elect 5 or more women and we maintain that trend in the future, then we could hope that our President's proposal will have brought change. If we were to elect fewer than 4 women as new members, then we will continue our backward journey, which started in 2016.

I ask those of you who think that my prediction (Somogyi, 2017) for the continuing decline in the proportion of female academicians in the current election system is erroneous, point out to me in writing where I make a mistake. Since I first wrote about the discrimination of women in the Academy, I have received more than 100 letters from Foreign and Honorary members of our Academy, as well as from female scientists holding the Doctor of Science title. The opinions expressed in these letters strengthened my resolve that we must act, because if we maintain the current election system, we run the risk of shaming ourselves again in the next election in two year's time. At least those amongst us may feel ashamed who think that in comparison to other academies our proportion of 6.6% female academicians is to be ashamed of.² We are all responsible whether and when progress will be made.

I ask for your support to achieve change – thank you.

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² On the day of my presentation the British Academy of Medical Sciences, of which I am a Fellow, announced that 17 female Fellows were elected in 2017, 37% of the new Fellows. In contrast, in the Hungarian Academy of Sciences the Medical Section has 4 women (12%) and the Biology Section has 2 women (6%) (URL1).

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- URL1: <https://acmedsci.ac.uk/more/news/highest-percentage-of-women-elected-to-academy-as-top-scientists-recognised-with-fellowship>