

FORTE Initiative – Austria's Strong Point for Women in Science and Techn

bridges vol. 16, December 2007 / Feature Article

Currently, women represent 56 percent of graduates in higher education in Europe. Unfortunately, this number does not translate into professional life: In research, the higher you climb on the job ladder, the fewer women you will encounter - somewhat unexpected from a logical point of view, but a matter of fact for industrial as well as academic careers.

According to [She Figures 2006](#), published by the European Commission, women constitute only 29 percent of researchers across the EU as a whole. Even worse is the situation in higher education: only 15 percent of those at the highest academic grade (Grade A position, equivalent to full professors in most countries) are women. The gender imbalance at the senior grade is even greater in engineering and technology, where the proportion of women is just 5.8 percent.

It seems that in a (academic) men's world, clearly built upon established male networks (which of course further develop the existing structures in favor to their own needs), female researchers still bump into the well-known glass ceiling when trying to compete for higher-ranking positions both in universities and non-academic research institutions.

However, this is not just another statement about unequal treatment of women. As a result of this situation, also called the "leaky pipeline" phenomenon, much scientific potential simply drains away because of its poor transport system. Those "leaks" cause the loss of highly skilled workers who would be strongly needed as valuable contributors, both in number and in skill, for the scientific progress and economic prosperity of a country. The same holds true for ethnic minority groups and other minorities whose potential and "value" to society has been neglected for too long.



To tackle this problem in Austria, five years ago the initiative fFORTE - *Frauen in Forschung und Technologie* (Women in Science and Technology) was launched at the insistence of the [Austrian Council for Research and Technology Development](#), the main strategic advisory body to the Austrian Government in S&T issues.

As a cooperative effort between the four Austrian Federal Ministries for

- Science and Research (BMWF),
- Transport, Innovation and Technology (BMVIT),
- Economics and Labor (BMWA), and
- Education, Culture and Art (BMUKK),

fFORTE aims for the advancement and encouragement of women in science and technology, it promotes girls and women on all educational levels, and it contributes to the career enhancement of female scientists with its four core programs: [fFORTE-academic](#) (BMWF), [w-fFORTE](#) (BMWA), [FEMtech-fFORTE](#) (BMVIT), and [fFORTE Schule](#) (BMUKK).

This Austrian initiative is quite unique in the breadth of its target groups, its research policy, and its effort to combine and coordinate the projects and programs of the four participating Federal Ministries. fFORTE has defined its main objectives:

- to facilitate the access of women to training in science and technology
- to improve the opportunities of women to embark on and successfully pursue careers in science and technology
- to facilitate women's access to research funding and infrastructure,
- to raise greater awareness of gender issues among key actors in education, economy, and public administration, and
- to provide accompanying research and cross-disciplinary research on women and science.



[click here for the organizational chart of the fFORTE initiative](#)

fFORTE has also identified five main areas on which to focus its activities:

- Structures
- Qualification and Career
- Training
- Awareness
- Research.

fFORTE_Coaching

One of the many successful services offered within the fFORTE initiative is the fFORTE_Coaching project. It is part of the fFORTE_academic program and will stimulate the participation of women in national and international research networks by raising the number of women researchers submitting projects within the EU Framework Programs.

Target groups are women researchers in the fields of technology and the natural sciences seeking to submit projects or to collaborate in projects in the 7th EU Framework Program, as well as female social scientists interested in interdisciplinary approaches.

bridges spoke with Dr. Susanne Schwinghammer, program manager of fFORTE_Coaching, and with Dr. Henriette Loeffler-Statka, one of the 20 scientists selected to participate in the fFORTE_Coaching 2007/08.

bridges: Ms. Schwinghammer, you're in charge of the further development and the administering the fFORTE_Coaching program. Can you tell us a bit about the program, its goals, and its tools?



Dr. Susanne Schwinghammer

Schwinghammer: Since its establishment in 2003, the goals and tools of the fFORTE_Coachings have been adjusted continuously. In 2003 the concentration was on workshops for successful research proposals. Today, wider goals have been added: the analysis of the project ideas of the participants in regard to national and international research programs; the encouraging of networking between women researchers to provide an open space for the exchange of experiences about the barriers and chances of the scientific world; the reflection of the institutional and social surroundings of the individual research projects; the strengthening of the self-representation and the self-awareness of the participating women; scientific career planning, work life balance, and - probably the most important goal - encouraging the women's mutual support.

The program combines workshops, presentations, teamwork, self reflection, and - this is new in 2007 - three individual coaching units per person.

bridges: How many female scientists have participated so far? Did you get any feedback from the alumnae on the coaching?

Schwinghammer: Including the current participants, approximately 100 women have taken part in the fFORTE_Coachings. The program has been evaluated twice, which helped in its further development and the adjustment to the specific needs of women researchers in Austria. The feedback of the alumnae was enormous. The open atmosphere within the Coaching groups enabled synergies between the researchers on personal and individual levels. To provide the sustainability of these synergies and group dynamics, the Ministry of Science and Research instructed me to establish a fFORTE_Coaching Alumnae Network. Besides an online platform, Web log [blog] and forum, the network will provide information on current calls, relevant events, and vacant jobs, and will offer two Coaching weekends per year on current topics. The Network will be launched in January 2008, and among other goals will foster the mutual mentoring of its members and cross-disciplinary networking with experts, colleagues, and institutions.

bridges: How would you describe the current situation for female scientists in Austria and within the European Research Area?

Schwinghammer: European studies show that well-trained women represent the most neglected potential resource for qualified labor. There's still an enormous imbalance in the number of women researchers in higher academic positions, both in the private and the public sectors. In Austria the proportion of female professors remains at 15 percent. Furthermore, Austria demonstrates the smallest percentage of female scientists and engineers among the job holders as such. Beside ethical questions, this fact bears an enormous disadvantage for Austria as a research site. The so-called "leaky pipeline," the draining away of highly qualified women along the academic job ladder, includes the loss of high potential and innovative know-how for education and research. It also negatively affects the savings through indirect returns for the Austrian gross national product. It is evident that the reason for this situation is not a lack of highly qualified

women, but is to be found in the institutional structures, which hinder a continuous academic career for women.

bridges: What special efforts would you suggest to make sure that women are more strongly represented in science, technology, and engineering?

Schwinghammer: A lot of effort has been put into the transformation of the institutionalized structures. The policy makers, universities, and research promotion agencies have responded to the loss of female high potential: They have adjusted their personnel policies; raised the age limit for research programs; have accepted the circumstance that most women cannot follow a linear career; have initiated part-time research programs, etc. But even though these activities are essential for the deconstruction of the institutionalized imbalance, they have to go even further. Women have to learn how to present themselves, how to "sell" themselves in a very positive way. It is evident that women consider a lot of their projects, publications, capacities, or skills as "not important," while their male colleagues tend to stress every single thing they have achieved. The fFORTE_Coaching helps women to have trust in themselves and their know-how. I think to effectively change the situation one has to start already in schools. Girls have to be convinced that it is "normal" for a woman to choose an academic career. The establishment of new female role models will help in this development.

bridges: For female scientists interested in the fFORTE programs in general, where can they get further information?

Schwinghammer: They can address either the general fFORTE_Web site (www.fforte.at) or the specific program Web sites (www.w-fforte.at and www.femtech.at). Here one can find information on the activities of the specific programs and the respective contacts. Information on the fFORTE_Coachings and the new fFORTE_Coaching Alumnae Network will be online soon at www.fforte-alumninetzwerk.at.

bridges also talked with Dr. Henriette Loeffler-Stastka, of the Department of Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy, Medical University of Vienna, one of the 20 scientists selected to participate in the fFORTE_Coaching program in 2007/08.

bridges: Ms. Loeffler-Stastka, you are one of the 20 scientists selected to participate in the 2007/08 coaching program. What is the scientific research project you are currently working on?

Loeffler-Stastka: My main topic of interest is the empirical psychoanalytic research and its implications for clinical work in medicine, psychiatry, psychology, and mental health. One focus of my research field concerns affect regulation and interpersonal functioning in personality disorders, especially its impact on utilization of psychotherapy, the clinical outcome and treatment process.

bridges: Why did you apply for the fFORTE_Coachings? What has been your experience so far, as a woman in scientific research?

Loeffler-Stastka: I applied for the coaching program because I am interested in interdisciplinary research. As a woman in scientific research I know about the skills and competence women have, the ability to contain and work through difficult and complex issues, the competence in cooperating and integrating different models of thinking and experiencing, and the strength in generating hypotheses through centralizing and synthesizing knowledge and experiences.

bridges: What are your expectations of the coaching?

Loeffler-Stastka: To become better known to networks and centers of excellence, which concentrate on the transmission of psychoanalytic knowledge to other fields of science and to clinical work.

bridges: Where do you see the biggest need of catching up, when it comes to women in science?

Loeffler-Stastka: To strengthen women in their abilities in order to get them into positions of influence concerning publication policy, e.g., onto editorial and scientific boards, or decision-making units; to foster their coherence among themselves; and to look upon women's abilities (creativity, generative function) favorably in order to sublimate the generative role and to incorporate this way of thinking into scientific fields.