

# Women at Swiss Universities: A majority of students and a handful of professors

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Seriously: who of us could ever think of Swiss universities as institutions where equal opportunities are not ensured, as places in which gender discrimination still occurs? We are all led to believe – proud as we are of our long-standing Swiss tradition of peaceful coexistence between different languages and cultures – that our university education system needs to be fully equipped and adequately trained for appreciating and promoting difference. However, there is something wrong here if the actual situation of women at Swiss universities can be described as follows: a majority of female students with a handful of female professors. Strictly speaking, and according to the latest data of the Federal Statistical Office, at the beginning of 2016, there were about 146,000 students registered in the Swiss university system of education and more than half of them were women. Nevertheless, in keeping with this study, although their number has recently doubled (increasing from 9,7% in

2002 to 18% in 2012), **women are still strongly underrepresented at a professorship level** while current projections do affirm that the national proportion of female professors could reach between 22% and 25% by 2023<sup>1</sup>. Hence: in six years, through working intensely and with the right tools, we may have one female professor out of four. It is enough to give this basic numerical figure in order to understand that the idea of a non-discriminatory academic environment is simply wrong. The problem is a very complex one, and it thus cannot be faced ingenuously, neither by ascribing the low female presence in the teaching body to the ill will of the experts in hiring committees, nor by simply attributing it to the lack of women with suitable academic profiles. In order to comprehend the many forms of this “something which is wrong here”, we could therefore try to subsume its different facets under one category, be it structural or indirect discrimination. Contrary to direct discrimination, which is

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/fr/home/statistiques/education-science/scenarios-systeme-formation/hautes-ecoles-professeurs.html>



given when a single person or a social group is put intentionally in an unfavorable position (“I do not hire her/him, although qualified, because she is a woman/he is a foreigner, etc.”), **indirect discrimination takes place when seemingly neutral regulations or parameters put people at disadvantage**. For example: to list among the qualification requirements for a professorship an age limit of 35 together with international mobility may appear a good way to apply objective and neutral criteria for measuring excellence, but, as a matter of fact, this results in a discrimination against women who want to give birth to children precisely within the same age range. Therefore, while we could say that political correctness has introduced in the academic world formally adequate manners to prevent the expression of purposeful discrimination, it is rather the subject of indirect discrimination that needs to be primary focused on if one really wants to put the principles of equal opportunities into practice.

The University of Zurich (UZH) pursues equality thanks to a two-tier system. The Gender Equality Commission (EC), composed by representatives of all faculties and of all academic bodies, is active on a strategic level. It advises the Executive Board of the University when it comes to gender and equality issues as well as by developing strategic measures about the advancement of gender equality, for instance in the implementation of a gender policy, a regulation against sexual harassment and guidelines for a gender-sensitive language usage and a diversity policy<sup>2</sup>. Further, on behalf

of the Office for Gender Equality (OGE), the UZH also offers a central office to which all staff and students may turn to with any gender-related issues concerning their studies and/or working conditions. In collaboration, the EC and OGE coordinate gender equality action plans in the context of a federal program. Since 2013, among other things, the UZH succeeded in both analyzing the professors’ salaries within an equal pay study and constantly increasing the female rate of professors (Full prof.: 18% > 21%; Assistant prof.: 18% > 29%)<sup>3</sup>. Currently, the following three areas, where indirect discrimination seems to be particularly effective, are specifically monitored: the recruitment practices and the unconscious biases linked to them, the acquisition of research funding and the organization models for part-time management positions<sup>4</sup>.

Actively working against indirect discrimination is an effort that requires a complex approach. Above all, one needs a data research in order to analyze the situation, then a strategic vision to promote fair standards and, last but not least, civil courage in action. For everybody and at all levels – cultural, political and economic – **the aim of equal opportunities goes far beyond the numerical question**: within the changing context of the current global civilization, in which universities have a leadership role in proposing new visions, we must have the possibility to count on the best creative forces. And how can one be certain of not having discarded excellence if one excludes without even being aware of it?

<sup>2</sup> All documents are available online: <http://www.gleichstellung.uzh.ch/en/politik.html>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.gleichstellung.uzh.ch/de/kommission/projekt.html>

<sup>4</sup> More information for the Action Plan can be found here: <http://www.gleichstellung.uzh.ch/en/politik/aktionsplan2017.html>