

**Opening Address at the Women's Careers and Networks
(WoCaNet)**

Madam President (*or as an alternative*) **President Beisiegel,**

Fellow Women, Special Guests

Thank you very much affording me the opportunity to speak at this conference.

I feel greatly honoured to be able to share my views and experience with you today.

As you can well imagine, I have often asked myself: “Why is it crucial for us women to build women’s networks, even though many people assume that we are now living in a period in which we supposedly have equal rights?”

At the beginning of the 1990s I was a student representative on the Agricultural Faculty Council at the University of Bonn. Not surprisingly, I was one of the only female members. In fact, at that time there was only ONE female professor on the entire faculty, one among many men. You are correct in assuming that she did not have any children.

Men were only partly aware of this “problem” or to use a more neutral word and one perhaps more palatable to men: **phenomena**. They were

also, to put it mildly, lacking the necessary intrinsic willingness to pursue, let alone implement necessary societal changes. Since then, as we are all aware, any sort of development has been met with marked resistance and any improvements have been very, very slow to occur.

The only thing which is now widely accepted is that this ongoing situation needs to change, **needs to be changed**. The advancement of women (“Frauenförderung”) is included in the guidelines of most universities in Germany. At the same time it is clear that, in spite of gains in numbers, the number of female professors and women in other academic professions needs to continue to grow, **needs to increase at an even higher rate**.

However, the term “Quotenfrau” (sometimes referred to as “token woman” in English) still carries with it a sour tasting, negative connotation. Moreover, it continues to be used as a kind of insult. As a woman in the Green Party who has profited immensely from our quota system I have learned to not be defensive about this term.

Whenever somebody attempts to defame me or any other women by calling us “token women” and argues that whoever receives a position should be chosen on “merit” and not because of gender, I tend to respond, in a very serious tone, of course: “As long as the number of incompetent men in higher ranks/positions remains so unbelievably large, I have absolutely no problem climbing the ladder and breaking through the glass ceiling by means of a quota.” In light of the present situation, a quota for women is an appropriate means for women to attain positions which they **would not** and **could not** otherwise occupy.

Still, many sectors are currently controlled by (networks of) men, which is certainly not due to the incompetence of women, but rather to their limited access to such networks. Unfortunately, many women also lack the confidence to strive for positions in which they would not only be the first woman to occupy such a position but would also be the only woman amongst a large group of male peers. As women we can and must not be afraid of becoming true pioneers. We must **strive for**, not **shy away from** such positions.

We women must be more self-confident. Of course, having to deal with a constant state of conflict in a professional setting does not seem very appealing to anyone. The alternative: retreating and, as a result, being constantly on the defensive seems to me to be even less appealing, not to mention fruitless in furthering our aims.

Obviously, social awareness has, at least somewhat, long since evolved in this matter. Nearly everyone has accepted the wisdom that companies with heterogeneous teams and women on executive boards are also more successful economically. The Scandinavian countries, which are way ahead in this area, are long standing empirical proof of this fact.

Why is this true? Well, there are several possible explanations:

- 1. First of all, the preconditions have seemingly improved. The time spent in school and at university (Bachelor-Masters) has decreased. Women tend to be younger when they make choices which are decisive to their careers; they tend to be younger when they enter the workplace.*

2. *Social awareness has changed. More people, both men and women have become more aware of inefficacies.*
3. *At first glance, the institutional and formal circumstances have adapted to meet women's careers needs.*

Yet, it seems that a long and time-consuming process still lies before us. A great deal of time will pass until the day finally dawns on which we actually find more women serving as professors and working in other leading academic roles.

There is, however, one fundamental problem which must be addressed: the lack of job security for young- (not only female) – academics. Many researchers are only on temporary contracts and are, therefore, unable to make long-term plans. This unfortunate circumstance will hardly lead to more young women wanting to have children early in their careers. Without a professional academic teaching staff and permanent positions, scientific institutions are becoming an increasingly unattractive employer for future young families.

There is a lot of pressure on young researchers to make the biggest possible use of their first productive phase: They spend a great deal of time and energy applying for scholarships, for outside funding, for an internship abroad. There never seems to be a right point in time to even consider starting a family, let alone taking parental leave. Even though women now enter the work force at an ever earlier age, they start having children at a later point in their lives. Granted, there are often personal/individual reasons for this; however, reproductive medicine

has seemingly developed a “long-anticipated”, almost “perfect” solution, a way out of this dilemma.

Women are now offered the opportunity to have their egg cells frozen and preserved, thus giving them an option which is perceived by many as a new and additional degree of freedom. This is supposed to relieve women of the pressure of having to make family decisions early on.

The employers’ „deal“ is as follows: “You give us your most productive years between the ages of 20 and 40, and, in return, we will present you with the possibility of having children during a later phase in your life. You can determine when this will be.”

But is this really what you want?

Is it really more appealing to have children after you have passed through the optimal time period on your biological clock? And is it truly personally liberating for a young woman to have to devote this period solely to her employer for the sake of her career?

Would it not be better, would it not make more sense- if we were really willing- to attempt to optimize the conditions allowing for family-friendly time management? This is something which affects both men and women, even if a man’s biological clock does not tend to tick as fast. This represents one more reason why women need to be able to make the right career and family choices at the right time, when the natural ticking of the biological clock is loudest.

From what I have been told by young female scientists and female departmental heads, fundamental changes on an institutional level are a

dire necessity. In addition, changes in the (male) minds within the upper echelons of universities are also necessary to muster the support needed for making dual careers, especially for young women, on both a professional and personal level, a living reality.

Let us now consider a few possibilities for making this happen, not only at universities but in the “real world” as well.

- Very often in Dual Career partnerships, the male partner is often quite a way up his career ladder when the female partner is offered a position she would like to accept. In such cases it can be very difficult to find appropriate employment for the male half.
- Professional working women rarely have partners who like staying at home and taking care of their children, who perceive their own role to be one of supporting their wives' careers and who are content with neglecting their own careers and working in a less sophisticated job. On the contrary, young female professionals tend to have partners who place similarly high demands on their own careers. This fact is rarely taken into account in contract negotiations.
- When young female professors receive their first appointments at smaller universities (“Erstberufungen”), it is usually even more difficult to find adequate jobs for their male partners at that university or elsewhere in the same city. In such cases it is often the woman who ends up commuting to work and, as a consequence, facing even more new challenges.

- (Married) couples teaching and researching at the same university is still, more often than not, taboo.
- Many meetings in a professional setting take place in the late afternoon, at a time when many women, and (sometimes) even men, wish to spend time with their families. Changing such “traditional organizational rhythms” is possible, but it requires a tremendous amount of cooperation among the participants. There is little chance of facilitating necessary changes exclusively at the institutional level.
- When in cases, where push comes to shove, it is usually the women involved who find themselves negotiating these things privately, i.e. they are forced to find another means for caring for their children.
- In Germany synchronizing school and university vacation periods would be one sensible way of enabling parents working at these institutions to reconcile family and professional life.

So, what are my recommendations to you, as young aspiring professionals, who perhaps intend to have children and who do not want to rely on the so-called advantages of reproductive medicine?

Allow yourselves to take time off, if necessary.

Organize yourselves and things in a way that guarantees you the greatest degree of independence possible.

Furthermore, take steps within your private and your professional networks enabling you and your female peers to extend your

professional productivity over a longer period of time. It cannot be expected that anyone accepting a professorship has to voluntarily renege on having children or has to postpone the fulfillment of this right to sometime in the future.

*Do not let yourselves be misled or deceived by new, empty promises. Always remain confident while retaining a healthy portion of scepticism. Always be fair but drive a hard bargain. Never and I mean **never**—remember you are confident—**never** sell your selves short!!*

And my recommendations to the universities: if you really want to give women a fair chance and promote their development, you will need to guarantee financial and personal security. Otherwise, even the noblest of manifestations will have but little credibility and lack any longevity.

Thank you for your time and attention.