Press release

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Women worldwide underrepresented in economics

Now as before, women are underrepresented in many academic professions. That this is also the case in economics shows a study conducted by economist Guido Friebel from Goethe University and his team in cooperation with the Toulouse School of Economics. Especially in senior positions and at universities particularly strong in research, the situation for women is difficult.

The study on the ratio of women in economics has revealed some surprising facts: that Europe can at least boast better numbers than the US, for example, or that women are noticeably underrepresented in particular at universities strong in research. To obtain a meaningful overall picture, the team, comprising Professor Guido Friebel, Alisa Weinberger and Dr Sascha Wilhelm (all from Goethe University) and Professor Emmanuelle Auriol (Toulouse School of Economics), used what is called a web-scraping algorithm. “We fed the algorithm with web addresses from universities, and from there it derived information on the number of professors and junior scholars. Classifying the identified persons by gender was done on the basis of names and using a facial recognition software. To verify or correct the data we’d collected, we contacted all the institutions. Almost all of them replied, and many deans congratulated us on this initiative, which was supported by the European Economic Association,” says Friebel, describing the project.

In total, the study incorporated data from 238 universities and business schools worldwide and involved over 34,000 individuals. The subsequent analysis revealed that in the US women hold only 20 percent of senior-level positions, that is, professorships, while in Europe the figure is 27 percent. The global average is 25 percent. At the entry level, 32 percent of positions in US-American institutions are held by women, in Europe 38 percent. Worldwide, the average is 37 percent. But there is no reason for European countries altogether to rest on their laurels as far as support for women is concerned, let alone give themselves a proud pat on the back: “Once again, we have the Scandinavian countries to thank for the positive numbers, but also Spain, France and Italy,” explains Friebel, who was surprised at the US’s poor result. Also surprising for him was that few women work at institutions with a particularly high research output. Here, too, women are far more at a disadvantage in the US than in Europe.

What could be the reason for women’s sluggish progress in economics? The causes can have different origins, as the study shows. Correlating the figures with existing statistics revealed a close connection with the general attitudes prevalent in the respective society. The organisational culture of the respective university, institutional rules, but also the behaviour of women and men in economics are additional factors.

Friebel and his team now want to investigate how the situation could be changed over the longer term. As far as Germany is concerned, he sees one reason for the underrepresentation of women in economics in the fact that when a professorship becomes vacant and is advertised again, it is often dedicated to the same topic – and thus concedes to the research preferences of men. Women are less likely to be involved in macroeconomics or economic theory than men, he says, but instead are more interested in development economics, health, labour and organisations – areas that should be strengthened anyway in view of the global situation and societal development. This is, in principle, better regulated in the US, says Friebel, because professorships there are often not so narrowly defined in job adverts. However, women have not yet benefited appreciably from this.
In the authors' opinion, research institutions should do their utmost to ensure fairness when assessing male and female candidates, while mentoring programmes and gender parity in seminars and conferences can contribute to increasing women’s visibility and to reducing implicit prejudices when filling academic positions.

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