

Action, not words

Japan is beginning to recognize that the status and treatment of women researchers must change — but it has yet to take decisive action to address the problem.

The under-representation of women in Japanese science, particularly at its higher levels, is not exactly news. The latest figures on the problem are nonetheless sobering. According to an annual government report on gender equality published in May, fewer than 12% of working scientists in Japan are women — the lowest proportion of any leading industrial nation. Even more strikingly, fewer than 4% of full university science professors are female.

There are some signs, however, that the issue is at last gaining the recognition it deserves. For example, the dismal statistics in the report provoked a barrage of critical coverage in the Japanese press, which might once have been inclined to ignore the issue.

Japanese institutions have started to publicly acknowledge the problem and set targets to redress it. Back in 2000, the Science Council of Japan, which is the interface between Japan's academic societies and the government, said it would raise the number of women on its 210-strong central committee to 10% by 2010. The number, which had hovered around 1% before the announcement, crept past 3% during 2000 and to 6% in 2003.

A cabinet committee on gender equality, meanwhile, set the target of having 30% of all 'leading positions' in society — which should include senior researchers — occupied by women by 2020. A national five-year plan on gender equality, when it is renewed next year, will add the question of women in science to its list of a dozen 'priority objectives'. The Council for Science and Technology Policy, the top science policy body in the government, has also pledged

action. According to one official working on the gender issue, "the little voice of women researchers is starting to be heard".

All of this official activity may start to pull more women into science. But even if that happens, too little is being done to address the set of circumstances that keeps them on the lower rungs of the research ladder, and prevents them from building productive and independent careers.

Junior scientists, for example, are usually dependent on fixed-term grants from research agencies that do not take account of maternity leave. Laboratories in universities and elsewhere make little provision for nursery care. They also lack an accessible and effective body to investigate allegations of discrimination.

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The time is now ripe for the science and education ministry, the universities and the research agencies to put all their fine words into action as they prepare their annual budget requests for submission next month. The Council for Science and Technology Policy will review these requests in the autumn. When it does so, it should consider carefully whether institutions are acting quickly enough to implement Japan's gender-equality objectives. Agencies and institutions that aren't doing so, and prefer to pay lip-service to the issue, need to be made aware that their failure will carry a cost. ■

Two cheers for the G8

World leaders made modest but welcome progress on poverty in Africa and climate change.

Last week's meeting in Scotland of the Group of Eight leading industrialized nations was preceded by the usual game of raising and lowering expectations by pressure groups and the participants, designed to ensure that the summit could afterwards be pronounced a 'failure' or a 'success'. The London bombings of 7 July were timed to undermine the summit, but in fact had the opposite effect. The aftermath of the terrorist attack tempered criticism of the meeting and allowed the G8 leaders to receive credit for at least attempting to tackle the two main items on their host Tony Blair's agenda: Africa and climate change.

The meeting will not, of course, end African poverty but, on balance, the UK prime minister can be reasonably satisfied with its contribution to that end. No less an authority than Bob Geldof, the Irish rock star who organized a series of concerts and demonstrations to focus public attention on the summit, said afterwards that he gave

the meeting "10 out of 10" for its commitment to increased aid for Africa, and "8 out of 10" for its provisions on debt relief. Few development economists would be as generous as Geldof, but the commitments made at the summit did exceed early expectations.

The G8's recognition that development projects must be African-led is particularly welcome, as is its pledge to tie aid to good governance. In this regard, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, which the summit communiqué agreed to refinance, has been leading the way: most of its support goes to countries that show determined and sustained commitment to a project, and to get more money they have to meet agreed milestones.

The communiqué did not say much directly about the role of science and technology in African development. But scientific staff and infrastructure are needed to make policy and tackle disease, develop agriculture and promote an educated workforce. Africa's leaders have recognized this themselves and, through the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), are developing plans for science on the continent. It is to be hoped that some of the aid money committed during the meeting will be used to support these plans.

With regard to climate change, the pattern to emerge from the summit is altogether less impressive. Ignoring a plea by the G8