

INTERVIEW

International Women's Day 2021 – Women in leadership: Achieving an equal future in a COVID-19 world is the UN's motto for this year's International Women's Day.

To this end, we speak with Professor Dr. Andrea Sieber, Women's Representative at the University of Passau, and about her volunteer work, as well as the new challenges for female students, staff, and junior researchers during the Corona Pandemic. Find out why the Corona crisis is pushing back the issue of equal opportunities here:



Dear Prof. Dr. Sieber, how did it come about that you became a Women's Representative?

Gender equality has occupied me on two levels for many years. On the one hand, academically: For example, I wrote my doctoral thesis on gender conflicts in medieval literature and published relevant articles in the field of gender studies. On the other hand, in terms of equality policy: because at the beginning of my academic career, I was fundamentally sensitized to questions of equal opportunities through committee work or participation in a women's advancement program. During the postdoc phase, I also underwent excellence mentoring and benefited from various role models on my way to professorship. Overall, this motivated me to contribute my positive experiences as a university women's representative and to help shape the University of Passau.

What does your work as a women's representative look like?

My task as University Women's Representative is to pay attention to the avoidance of disadvantages for female scientists, female teachers and students and to support the University of Passau in the actual implementation of equal rights for women and men. One of the central goals is to increase the proportion of women at all levels of academia, especially where women are underrepresented. In concrete terms, this means that as the University Women's Representative, I am represented in all central committees of the University of Passau. Overall, I coordinate all gender equality-related activities at the University of Passau and am in close contact with the Vice President for International Affairs and Diversity, the Faculty Women's Representatives, the Equal Opportunity Officer, and the Diversity and Equality Department.



Externally, I am a member of the board of the state conference of women's and equal opportunity officers at Bavarian universities and the federal conference of women's and equal opportunity officers at universities, which take up equal opportunity policy issues in the university context and represent the interests of women at the state and federal level, respectively. In addition, I am responsible for various measures for the advancement of women at the University of Passau, for example a scholarship program for female doctoral, post-doctoral and post-doctoral students, the mentUP+ women's mentoring program, travel and mobility grants for women or coaching offers. Finally, I provide advice in cases of sexual harassment or on issues relating to the compatibility of parenthood and studies or career.

What challenges do you face in your day-to-day work as a women's representative?

As the university's women's representative, it is part of my job to point out problems, call for transparency and sometimes "put my finger in the wound". This is sometimes perceived as a disturbance. Students in particular often expect changes to be made very quickly. In this context, it is always important to make it clear that changes require intensive communication processes and discourse in order to "bring along" as many university members as possible and actually achieve sustainable changes. In addition, gender equality issues are sometimes emotionally charged. Here, it is important to remain on a factual level and to exchange arguments constructively.

In August 2020, you spoke about the Corona crisis hitting women harder than men. What conclusions can we draw from the experience we have had? What opportunities for improvement do you see?

The Corona pandemic has shown that we work within structures that only seem to correspond to equality. The crisis has made problems in the area of equality, which already existed before, even more obvious and has shown that there is still a lot to be done: For example, a fairer distribution of unpaid care work between the sexes should be strived for; single parents need more support; professions in which a majority of women are employed - for example, in nursing, retail, education - should be upgraded and better paid; precarious employment should be reduced; the proportion of women in decision-making bodies should be increased; gender mainstreaming should be implemented across the board.



The economic stimulus packages and the social and labor market policy measures to cope with the crisis could open up new prospects for equal opportunities if they are indeed gender-sensitive. I also see opportunities at the University of Passau: We have all had experiences with home office in the past year. However, the expansion of these opportunities must go hand in hand with new forms of participation independent of a dominant culture of presence. I see further consequences in the area of scientific career paths, although there are still many questions to be discussed here: How, for example, will the pace of qualification or excellent academic profiling be changed by the conversion of research and teaching or academic self-administration and in the supervision of students to online formats? What influence do the university's support services have in this context, such as childcare facilities on campus?

Have you received an increased number of "calls for help" at the Women's Representative Office since the pandemic?

In the last summer semester and at the beginning of 2021, there was actually an increase in "calls for help". Due to the closure of childcare facilities and schools during the first lockdown, it was very difficult for many to combine family and studies or work. During the second lockdown, an increase in the area of psychological stress was particularly evident. The high number of online events also led to sexual harassment taking on new forms in digital media. We are currently in the process of developing a handout on the technical response options available in online courses, for example, when such incidents occur.

What were the biggest challenges for female students and early career scientists this year?

Particularly for female students and early career researchers with children, dealing with closed childcare facilities and schools, homeschooling, alternating classes, etc. has been a major challenge. Preliminary studies indicate that women in particular published less and submitted fewer research proposals in 2020 compared to men. This may put early career women scientists at a career disadvantage, although this will not become apparent for a few years. For many, further uncertainties were added in 2020: Research projects could not be carried out as planned because travel was difficult or impossible; part-time job opportunities disappeared; (foreign) internships could not take place; in some areas there were fewer job offers for graduates.



I fear that there have also been pandemic-related dropouts or that young women scientists have chosen a path outside of academia.

Why should International Women's Day be celebrated?

On the one hand, International Women's Day commemorates the pioneers of the women's rights movement and celebrates historical achievements, such as women's suffrage. On the other hand, it draws attention worldwide to the fact that gender equality is not yet a reality, that discrimination and inequality still exist, and that a commitment to gender justice therefore remains very important in principle.

What would you like to see before the next International Women's Day?

First of all, of course, I would like to see events in Presence again next year on the worldwide day of action. In general, I hope that the experiences from the pandemic will open up new perspectives for equal opportunities in society. For the University of Passau, I specifically wish that the trend from the last two years continues and that the proportion of female professors continues to rise.