



European Platform of Women Scientists | Rue d'Arlon 38 | B-1000 Bruxelles

Commissioner Máire Geoghegan-Quinn
Research, Innovation and Science
European Commission
Berlaymont Building
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European Platform of
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The President

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Open Letter

Dear Commissioner Geoghegan-Quinn,

The European Platform of Women Scientists EPWS would like to express its serious concern about the contradictory and sexist messages sent out by the European Commission campaign "Science: It's a girl thing!" that aims to attract young girls and women into science. We fully acknowledge that the aim of this campaign is extremely important and timely, and EPWS warmly supports European Commission actions of this kind.

However, the video used to launch the campaign has appalled not only us but a large number of scientists across the world, male and female, young and old, as well as parents of future female scientists, by its naive, sexist and one-dimensional portrayal of girls of today. We note that after unusually extensive protests in the media and social media the video has now been withdrawn from the campaign website. However, some questionable elements are still in place like the image of lipstick replacing the letter "I" in the logo and the logo written as with lipstick.

The campaign press release states: "The campaign will challenge stereotypes of science and show young girls and women that science is fun and can provide great opportunities. It will challenge outdated views of science careers and show how contemporary research practices are connected with societal needs." The connection of girls and science in the video is hard to grasp. What the video shows is grossly stereotypical and sexualized images of young women cat-walking and posing in the fashion magazine or Music TV style in short skirts and high heels, with lipstick and nail polish as important accessories. A male scientist is practically ogling the girls in a suggestive manner – should the girls learn to expect that sexual harassment might take place in the lab? The girls in the video seem to be more interested in how they look and are looked at than in anything else – hardly in a career in science?

This video does not challenge but subscribe to outdated stereotypes of women and girls – and how this is thought to attract different kinds of girls into science is indeed difficult to fathom. The video also fails in that it presents a far too narrow vision of science, evidencing that its creators do not really understand the broad scope contemporary science deals with.

We have learned that the Commission used a background advisory group of gender experts in the early planning phase of the campaign. That they apparently were not kept on to give continuous feedback throughout the planning may explain why such hugely misjudged advertising material could be accepted to be released in the name of the European Commission.

The European Commission has done high-quality and highly influential work to promote gender equality and women in science – both in close consultation with the scientific community. We strongly urge the European Commission to build future campaigns of this kind in closer consultation with gender experts and well-informed stakeholders in the field such as the European Platform of Women Scientists EPWS and other women scientists' networks.

Respectfully

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Brigitte Mühlenbruch'.

Dr. Brigitte Mühlenbruch
EPWS President