

WOMEN ASTRONOMERS AT ESO

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1. INTRODUCTION

The European Southern Observatory, or ESO, is an international astronomical organisation sponsored by eight European member states. ESO runs the world's largest observatory, with 16 telescopes, at La Silla, Chile.

Astronomers from all over the world work at ESO. International staff in Europe comprises 150 persons, and 40 persons in Chile (plus 150 Chilean staff). Only a fraction of these persons are astronomers. In the following, we will investigate the number of women among these astronomers.

Since there are no statistics on this at ESO, my compilation is based on the “staff movements” as published in the quarterly ESO journal *The Messenger*,¹ starting with the first issue of 1974 up to today. Unfortunately, the published “staff movements” gives an incomplete record—either arrivals, or departures of staff members often are missing, and some persons are not mentioned at all, and position names sometimes do not tell whether a person is an astronomer or not. Recognizable omissions were corrected as much as possible, assuming an average duty period of two years per astronomer. The resulting statistics should be regarded as a first approximation. Better data are not available. Finally, one should bear in mind that affirmative action laws are unusual in Europe.

All numbers below record *arrivals* at ESO, thus not all persons employed at a certain time—these numbers are not available. This may imply that the ratio of female/male astronomers is actually smaller than listed.

2. DEVELOPMENT OF THE GENDER RATIO OVER THE YEARS

time period	women	men	ratio	all
1974 – 1977	2	19	11%	21
1977 – 1980	3	42	7%	45
1980 – 1983	3	41	7%	44
1983 – 1986	2	36	6%	38
1986 – 1989	3	43	7%	46
1989 – 1992	7	43	16%	50
Whole period	20	228	8.8%	248

Even though we are dealing with small number statistics here, the number of women astronomers at ESO has risen during the last three years. Before, the ratio stagnated at less than 10%. It is to be hoped that this positive trend is real.

3. GENDER VERSUS POSITIONS

ESO offers a variety of positions for astronomers, such as student and coopérant positions (alternative military service) for graduate students, fellow and associate positions for PhD astronomers, and staff positions, *e.g.*, senior astronomer.

Position	female	male	ratio	all
Students	3	13	23%	16
Coopérants	0	29	N/A	29
Associates	7	57	12%	64
Fellows	9	91	10%	100
Senior Astronomers, etc.	1	38	3%	39
All	20	228	8.8%	248

In student and postdoc positions, the number of women is 10% or more, while there are practically no women in senior or tenure positions.

Generally, the number of women in Europe who study science is slowly rising, which may account for part of the higher number of women in positions occupied by members of the younger generation. However, this is also a strong function of the country of origin, as we show in the next section.

4. GENDER AND NATIONALITY

Nationality	female	male	all
Belgium	0	14	14
Canada	0	5	5
Chile	0	7	7
Denmark	0	8	8
France	8	57	65
Great Britain	1	12	13
Germany	1	21	22
Greece	1	1	2
Italy	6	33	39
Japan	0	2	2
Netherlands	0	22	22
Poland	1	1	2
PRChina	0	4	4
Soviet Union	0	2	2
Spain	1	1	2
Sweden	0	12	12
Switzerland	0	3	3
US	0	14	14
All	20	228	248

Countries with one male representative each: Austria, Australia, Brazil, Bulgaria, India, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, and Romania.

Only France and Italy have had more than one woman astronomer at ESO. The ratios are 14% and 18%, resp. This may be linked to the relatively high number of female astronomers in these countries—their ratio there is about 30%. In northern European countries, the ratios are typically 10% or less. This surprising phenomenon would bear closer investigation.

Summarizing, the number of women astronomers at ESO is low, but there seems to be a recent slight improvement.

A final point: with one exception, all women astronomers ever to work at ESO worked in Headquarters (Garching), not at the observatory.

ENDNOTES

¹All *The Messenger* issues from no. 1 (1974) to no. 68 (1992)

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