

8 June, 2022

Ms. Bettina Stark-Watzinger  
Federal Minister of Education and Research  
Kapelle-Ufer 1  
Berlin 10117

**Re. OPEN LETTER: Call for oversight of the Max Planck Society**

Dear Minister Stark-Watzinger,

I write to you in your position as Germany's Federal Minister of Education and Research regarding the need for oversight and reform in the governance of one of Germany's premier research organisations, the Max Planck Society for the Advancement of Science.

As a publicly funded research organization, with an annual budget of around 2 billion Euros, the Max Planck Society (MPS) should be accountable to the German public. However, there seems to be no effective oversight of the Society's procedures or compliance by the nation's federal or state governments. Such an arrangement is not compatible with modern research governance.

Of particular concern to many are problems with the Society's handling of allegations of misconduct. These have been increasingly plagued by allegations of bias, conflicts of interest, and procedural and legal shortcomings.

I have experienced these problems at first hand. As a Canadian-British researcher, I joined the MPS as a Director in 2016, after a successful two-decade career at the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford. As one of the top female researchers in my field, and a respected academic leader, I was headhunted to join the newly founded Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History in Jena. Over the next 6 years, I established one of the leading research departments in my field globally, and received outstanding reports in two separate assessments by our Institute's Scientific Advisory Board.

Despite these achievements I have now been demoted from my position as a Max Planck director.

A particularly disturbing feature of my case is that my own sanctioning and demotion for alleged misconduct follows a complaint I made, in October 2018, of harassment against two male colleagues. My complaint detailed not only the year-long harassment and smear campaign to which I had been subjected by my colleagues, but also the failure of duty of care on the part of the Max Planck Society's President, Mr. Martin Stratmann, in repeatedly declining to seriously address it. Just two weeks after I made the formal complaint of harassment, I was informed by President Stratmann that I was to be investigated for alleged misconduct. No serious response has been forthcoming, then or in subsequent years, to my original complaint about harassment.

Instead, I myself was placed under investigation for more than two years, from late 2018 onwards. Some have suggested that this investigation, and my subsequent demotion, reflects institutional retaliation for making a complaint about well-connected individuals within the Society.

This appears to be borne out by the exceptional lack of evidentiary standards and due process in my case. Over the course of the two-year investigation, I was given no information about my alleged misconduct. This is obviously in contradiction of all established principles of fair treatment and German law. My supposed guilt was determined on the basis of anonymous allegations to which I was unable to offer any reasonable response, evidence or witness testimony. Subsequent proceedings over more than a year, including yet further investigation, as well as attempts to whitewash procedural violations, have only compounded these problems. Procedures established in the MPS for addressing whistleblower complaints, undertaking arbitration, preventing gender bias, and investigating allegations of scientific misconduct have not been applied.

My case highlights the pitfalls of leaving a powerful organization to regulate and police its own behavior and investigations of misconduct.

So too does the patterning of MPS misconduct cases in relation to gender. With an already entrenched gender bias at its top levels – only 18% of Max Planck directors are female – the Society can ill-afford to lose female talent. Yet no fewer than three female directors in my Section alone – the Human Sciences Section – have been sanctioned for misconduct in the past few years, with two of us losing our director positions.

This leaves just thirteen female directors amongst the sixty-one current Human Sciences directors. It would be difficult to find evidence for a higher rate of sanctioning of female leaders within any academic organization globally.

In order to demonstrate that Germany remains a global scientific leader in a rapidly evolving research landscape, change is needed. I therefore respectfully call on the Ministry for Science and Education to urgently implement oversight of scientific organisations like the MPS. In particular, I call for the establishment of:

1. new measures to ensure that German academic institutions follow established national standards as well as their own procedures for dealing with misconduct allegations and whistleblower complaints;
2. binding procedures to ensure the unbiased assessment of female leadership and alleged misconduct; and
3. a new supervisory body to ensure strict compliance to these standards.

In the continued absence of such critical controls and oversight, there is a major risk that poor governance, conflicts of interest, weaponization of allegations of misconduct, and institutional retaliation will lead to loss of female talent, as well as reputational damage to German science and a severe wastage of taxpayer funding.

The Max Planck Society greatly and rightfully values its research independence. Such research independence can certainly be retained alongside oversight of governance and procedural compliance to ensure transparency as well as accountability to taxpayers, stakeholders, and researchers. Countries like the Netherlands and Sweden, which have established government agencies to handle serious misconduct allegations, provide useful models.

At a time when trust in public scientific institutions is low, and science itself is viewed in many quarters with suspicion, it is critical that organisations like the MPS maintain the highest standards of integrity and accountability. It is my sincere hope that as Minister of Education and Research, and a female leader, you will recognize the urgent need for modernization and change in German science, and help to ensure that the Max Planck Society – and Germany more broadly – remains an attractive research home for people from diverse identities and backgrounds.

Sincerely yours,



Nicole Boivin

Jena, Germany