News stories must account for gender bias

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The Science Insider piece “Max Planck director loses post after probe of misconduct” (A. Curry, 5 November, p.671) is the latest in a series of reports of dismissals, demotions, and conflicts involving prominent women in academic research. This story and previous reports have highlighted leadership issues and bullying by women not only at the Max Planck Institute (1) but also in top academic positions at ETH Zurich (2) and the University of London (3). We urge caution in reporting such stories given that women face more obstacles to attaining leadership positions and are often held to a different standard than men when it comes to how their behavior is interpreted.

Professional women face many biases that disproportionately delay their advancement along the career track and compromise their effectiveness and even their tenure in positions of power and authority (4, 5). The same biases may result in greater and more detrimental visibility for conflicts involving women. Although gender bias in individual institutions can be difficult to assess because of the small numbers of women in leading scientific positions, the Max Planck Society has a large number of directors. It would be useful to know how many Max Planck Institute directors have left their positions before retirement, whether women are disproportionately represented in this group, and whether the publicity accompanying the departures differed between men and women.

To provide fair coverage, news stories should always pursue the question of possible gender bias, both in the treatment of women in positions of academic leadership and in the reporting on cases of leadership conflicts.

REFERENCES
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