

KATRIN AMUNTS

NEUROSCIENTIST

Katrin Amunts chose medicine and biophysics because of that combination's pure and applied science elements, later concentrating on the brain, motivated by curiosity about how specific behaviours, feelings, ethical concepts, and diseases come about. The brain makes human beings what they are, Katrin says, and the question of how it works has fascinated researchers like her for millennia.

Her parents, a bookseller mother and film sound engineer father, supported Katrin's early interests in the arts, music and architecture, enabling her to play instruments and visit exhibitions; later both backed her wish to go into medicine.

Gender equalization in practice

Katrin was among the initial six women offered permanent positions when Jülich established its gender-supporting programme. Her early years in the former East Germany meant that Katrin was already used to working women being on a more equal footing with men. At Jülich, despite the 50:50 gender split at doctoral level, inequality remains at the top. This is also true for the HBP – only two of 12 subproject leaders are women, a situation often seen at higher management levels, not to mention gender-biased unequal pay for equivalent work. Nonetheless, equality is a political issue of fairness and democracy. Katrin noted that, “Women often come by unusual pathways to their positions, while men have comparatively straightforward careers”. Some 50 years on from the start of discussion, women still have some way to go.

Changing challenges

Katrin had to meet child-minding costs herself. One kindergarten worker told her, “Your child probably cannot develop normally because you work full time and you live alone.” Attitudes are slowly changing. Now there are many more programmes supporting young women, stipends, and childcare, which is important. The HBP took it seriously, analysed its gender imbalance in depth, and is implementing change, by supporting young female researchers, in particular. Nonetheless, pressure and expectations are growing, e.g. with respect to research expertise, flexibility, and the ability to handle huge workloads. Many contracts are now short term; this can be problematic for a young family planning ahead. Further, Katrin thinks that now the obstacles might be more subtle; many will say “Of course we support women”, but it can still be hard to move ahead. And opposition, sometimes unpleasant, can come from other women; instead, the opposite is needed – respect, sympathy, and mutual support. While the greatest obstacle might be culture, Katrin says, there is also a danger from those who say that we do not need gender equality any more.

As for hobbies, Katrin enjoys nature, and jogs regularly. She still listens to musical favourites like the *Goldberg variations* (Bach) and *Moldau* (Smetana). Currently, Katrin is reading a biography of Alexander von Humboldt, “while he mapped continents, I map brains!” she says.



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