

## The New York Times

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Dr. Christine Nüsslein-Volhard, director of the Max Planck Institute for Developmental Biology in Tübingen, Germany, has been described as “one of the most important developmental biologists of all time.” In 1995 she and two collaborators won the Nobel Prize in Physiology of Medicine for identifying the genes that guide the transformation of a single cell into an embryo.

With that prize comes fame and some fortune, and Dr. Nüsslein-Volhard is using hers to promote a fledgling project that working women everywhere may think worthy of a second Nobel- maybe the Peace Prize this time. She is not financing science, she is financing scientists— women scientists who can use her money to pay for help with the children, the cooking, and the cleaning.

It’s not just here in the United States that academics are arguing over why there is a death of women in the sciences. True, the stateside debate has been louder lately, ignited by the suggestion by Harvard’s president, Lawrence H. Summers, that women may have less “intrinsic aptitude” in science and engineering than men. During the height of the shouting, the thought that kept nagging at me was this: The only relevant thing male scientists have that female scientists lack is a wife. And everybody needs a wife.

Let me take a moment to define my terms. I use this word to mean the person who keeps the family functioning, who holds the mental lists of who needs new shoes and where the extra laundry detergent is stored, and the timing of the middle-school dance (meaning if it hasn’t come up at the dinner table yet, odds are someone is suffering quietly because she wasn’t invited). Wife means the person who raises the scaffolding and secures the ladder rungs, so that everyone in the family can climb.

The early feminists knew all about wives. On my office wall I’ve taped a reprint of an essay by Judy Syfers that ran in the first issue of *Ms.*, titled “I Want a Wife.” (“My God,” she concludes, “who wouldn’t want a wife?”) Today’s most successful businesswomen know this, too. Women who have reached the top rungs of corporate life are increasingly likely to be married to men that have either quit work to stay home or have stepped back their own careers to clear the path for them.

But these couples are the exceptions. In most families the role of the wife is still played by, well, the wife. (Or more accurately, the mother, since couples without children don’t report nearly the same level of work-life conflict as those with children.) Women with money can buy their way out of the labor-intensive part (though not the emotionally intensive part) by hiring nannies and housekeepers, and many certainly do. At the crux of the Nüsslein-Volhard plan, however, is the realization that until you reach a certain level of professional success you don’t have the money to hire help, and you will have more trouble reaching that level of success unless you are free to work with the undistracted

intensity of, say, a man.

The grant idea- essentially a new twist on the familiar child care financing debate- was born when Dr. Nüsslein-Volhard discovered that a woman working in her lab was struggling. A very talented graduate student with a child said she had to give up science because she did not have enough money, Dr. Nüsslein-Volhard explained to me in an e-mail interview. "So I rescued her. She was worth it."

The situation for women in the sciences is even more disheartening in Germany than in the United States, she writes. "There are even fewer women in the higher levels," she explains. "The intellectual powers of women are as good as those of men," she continues, but they do not have housewives "who do the laundry, buy presents for the friends and decorate the home."

German women with children who want a career "are socially not well accepted," she wrote. "It is expected (mostly by the women!!) that the women mother herself takes care of everything personally or she is a bad mother. I want to send a signal telling the women that I think it is O.K. to have the child in a good day care and let other people do the laundry and clean the floor. It sounds trivial but it's not! The idea is to keep uniquely talented women in science who otherwise would end up working for their husbands."

Her foundation will award its first five grants this summer- 400 euros a month, about \$500 at current exchange rates, for each woman, for a period of one to three years. She is looking to raise additional money because the number of exceeds the available funds.

It is an idea with the potential to spread. Dr. Summers, for one, announced last month that Harvard would spend \$50 million in the next decade to recruit, support, and promote women (and other underrepresented minority groups). On Dr. Summers's long list of ways the money might be spent: giving financial aid to help pay for day care.

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