

Gender gap in prokaryotes: Only 14.8 % of bacteria and archaea named after women

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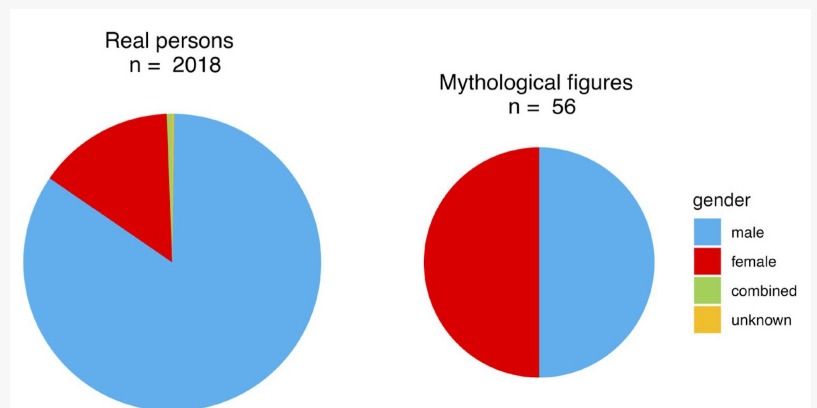
/EINPresswire.com/ -- In microbiology, microorganisms may be named after well-known scientific personalities to honour them. Such eponyms are common in the natural sciences, such as pasteurisation (after the microbiologist Louis Pasteur).

In the recently published study "The gender gap in names of prokaryotes honouring persons", Dr Heike M. Freese and Associate Professor Dr Markus Göker from the Leibniz Institute DSMZ-German Collection of Microorganisms and Cell Cultures GmbH, in collaboration with three other researchers, investigated the origin of the names of 23,315 prokaryotes, of which 2,018 names honour persons. Prokaryotes are microorganisms without a nucleus and include both bacteria and archaea. The researchers expected a gender discrepancy even before the study began. However, they also wanted to investigate whether the situation had improved in recent decades, as the proportion of women in microbiology has increased considerably.

A comparison of all honoured persons from 1823 to 2022 shows a large difference between names honouring a man (84.4 %) and names honouring a woman (14.8 %). Although more prokaryotes have been discovered and named in recent decades due to methodological advances, only four per cent of those honoured in 1993 and 2015 were women, compared to



Dr. Heike M. Freese, scientist at the Leibniz Institute DSMZ



Taxon names derived from real or mythical persons. Gender distribution of eponyms of real persons (left), on the right the distribution of mythological figures. Source: IJSEM, doi: 10.1099/ijsem.0.006115

zero per cent in 1991. Overall, the gender gap has barely narrowed since the first woman was honoured in 1947. However, the number of women whose contributions to microbiology could have been recognised has increased considerably over time. This gender gap may be due to the fact that many of the highest and most prestigious positions continue to be held by men. This study is the first on the naming of prokaryotes from a gender perspective and aims to motivate other researchers to gradually close the gender gap. Naming prokaryotes after females could at least increase the visibility of women who have contributed to microbiology or other sciences, helping young women to find role models. There are a sufficient number of outstanding female scientists to choose from when naming species.

Publication

Freese HM, Giner-Pérez L, Oren A, Göker M, Arahall DR. The gender gap in names of prokaryotes honouring persons. *Int J Syst Evol Microbiol.* 2023 Nov;73(11). [doi: 10.1099/ijsem.0.006115](https://doi.org/10.1099/ijsem.0.006115).

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