

Visibility as a Structural Question: Innovative Women in Science and Business

Only those who are visible are also recognized, cited, invited, and regarded as relevant. In a media-shaped society, visibility is not merely a symbolic issue but a political one, as it is tied to recognition. And the degree of recognition, in turn, depends on one's position within power relations: who is seen and heard? Who gets to speak? The conference proceedings [“Innovativ – Exzellent – Sichtbar: Frauen in Wissenschaft, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft”](#) (“Innovative – Excellent – Visible: Women in Science, Business and Society”) address these questions and demonstrate how unevenly visibility is distributed and how these conditions might be changed.

In order to address such mechanisms of exclusion from a gender equality policy perspective at a structural level, [the funding guideline “Innovative Frauen im Fokus”](#) (“Innovative Women in Focus”) was launched in 2021. At the central expert and transfer conference on 20-21 March 2025 in Berlin, research findings, policy recommendations, and tested measures were presented. The proceedings bring these contributions together and organize them into four fields of action: research and development, media and science communication, companies, as well as start-ups and academia.

Practice-oriented yet analytical

The volume presents concrete research and transfer projects, programs, and initiatives that have been tested in a wide range of contexts. As a result, the contributions remain closely connected to everyday equality work rather than addressing fundamental theoretical questions. Especially for readers working in equality, diversity, or inclusion roles within organizations or higher education institutions, the documentation offers numerous points of inspiration and practical points of reference. The contributions are concise, accessible, and provide links, QR codes, websites, and presentation slides for further resources.

At the same time, the volume is more than a collection of good practice examples. Several contributions provide epistemic evidence, findings from quantitative and qualitative studies that uncover the structural mechanisms of visibility. As the authors emphasize, visibility should always be understood as the result of institutional, media, and social orders rather than as a purely individual achievement.

Where to begin?

One key lever lies in making women visible not only as role models but as *experts*. The idea of strategically using visibility points in this direction: rather than

foregrounding the “exceptional woman” (p. 52), emphasis should be placed on the professional expertise of diverse actors across different levels.

A second lever concerns *media selection mechanisms*. If women worldwide make up around 41 percent of researchers but account for only 25 to 32 percent of cited experts, this indicates a structural imbalance in public perception (p. 62). Formats such as [“Liebe auf den ersten Blick”](#) (“Love at First Sight”), in which short videos of female scientists are intended to facilitate journalists’ research work, address this issue. Media training, targeted public relations, and cooperation with media organizations should be established as part of institutional gender equality strategies, particularly within universities.

Recognition in retrospect

A third lever concerns symbolic orders, particularly the effort to recover previously overlooked figures in academic fields. This is illustrated by the example of Cécile Vogt, a key founder of modern neuroscience who was nominated for the Nobel Prize multiple times but until recently did not even have a Wikipedia entry (p. 54). Initiatives such as “Hauptstadt der Wissenschaftlerinnen“ (“Capital of Women Scientists”) (ibid.) and contributions like “Versäumte Bilder” (“Missed Images”) (pp. 22f.) show that invisibility has been historically produced and that emerging technologies such as artificial ‘intelligence’ can be used to retrospectively bring into focus those women whose recognition was denied. Exhibitions combining images and texts of these figures have the potential to stimulate local and international debates about who is included in scientific memory cultures and who is made invisible.

Visibility is relational

It is also crucial that the volume conceptualizes visibility in several places as a relational social practice and as embedded in institutional and cultural action, a “doing visibility” (pp. 56f.). This comes with the call to understand perception as always embedded in societal and organizational power relations and micropolitics. Women are often confronted with contradictory expectations: those who present themselves confidently are quickly perceived as disruptive, while those who hold back remain invisible, as an interview excerpt from the project “Prof:in Sicht” illustrates:

“I don’t know, with women’s visibility it still feels like: either you’re annoying, or you’re this ‘sweetheart’ navigating strange diplomatic strategies to get by.” (p. 57)

Visibility can therefore provoke different reactions depending on the gender of the visible person. The volume thus highlights the importance of women’s networks and solidaristic empowerment, which can help expand perceived and actual spaces of agency.

Visibility makes one vulnerable

An important aspect is also the risk of hostility and digital violence. In this context, the contribution on the research project “Digital Hate – Digitale Gewalt gegen Professorinnen umkämpfter Wissensgebiete” (“Digital Hate – Digital Violence against Female Professors in Contested Fields of Knowledge”) is particularly relevant. It not only seeks to generate insights into digital violence affecting this group but also aims, together with civil society non-profit organizations HateAid and Scicomm Support, to strengthen institutional support structures. Current political debates clearly illustrate the tangible risk when [public funding](#) for such organizations is threatened (cf. [Bebenburg/Rüssmann 2026](#)). The example of HateAid shows how contested and fragile state funding for protective infrastructures can be. A sustainable policy of (gendered) visibility must therefore systematically include protection against arbitrary sanctions and reliable support structures.

Limitations of the volume

At this point, it becomes apparent where the volume, and by extension the ministerial funding line, risks falling short of its ambition to bring about structural change. While many contributions accurately identify structural problems, tested solutions often remain project-based, which is linked to the inherent issue of time-limited funding. Successful formats are not continued, as illustrated by the example of the platform [#InnovativeFrauen](#) (“#InnovativeWomen”). Visibility is thus built through digital platforms but not consistently institutionally secured. It must therefore be emphasized: structural change can only be achieved to a very limited extent through temporary projects.

An intersectional perspective is another important yet not consistently developed dimension of the volume. In particular, the perspectives on women with migration backgrounds and professional networks show that visibility offers do not work equally for everyone. Networks, access, and informal structures are unevenly distributed. Similarly, contributions from Spain, Switzerland, and Austria broaden the scope of the publication without always being systematically compared.

Conclusion: diverse contributions, open questions of institutionalization

Overall, the proceedings offer not a closed framework, but a range of concrete ideas. This is precisely a key strength, as it highlights where visibility can be addressed politically and institutionally: through expert databases, media transfer formats, interventions in the history of science, networks, gender-sensitive communication strategies, and funding measures that address social structures. The volume is particularly compelling where visibility is understood as the outcome of institutional, media, and symbolic orders.

Its weakness lies where this insight, well established in gender studies and already integrated into science policy funding programs, is not consistently extended to the question of institutionalization. Those seeking to change the structural conditions of visibility must shift institutional routines, resource distributions, and power relations by turning projects into institutions. The volume offers many entry points for this and thus serves as an inspiring “toolbox” that sharply raises key questions about gender-equitable visibility of “innovative women.”

References

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Short Biographies

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