CHAPTER 14

CONCLUSIONS AND A FORECAST FOR THE YEAR 2000

Better, or more of the same?

An almost overwhelming amount of data about the status of women scientists exists in hundreds of research reports and many books (most of them published by university presses). As is often the case, however, interpretations of the data and conclusions drawn from the data may vary markedly. This can be seen clearly in the matter of comparative salaries in which some authors emphasize the persistent gender-related differentials, whereas others (and we are included) point to the narrowing gap, especially at lower professional ranks. Similar variability in interpretation can be seen in the matter of causes of gender differentials in scientific productivity and publication. Some find a correlation with the demands of child rearing; others feel that the consequences of early acculturation can influence scholarly output; and
still others find the multiple disadvantages of discrimination as obvious causes. Reality undoubtedly resides in some central zone within the range of current statistical analyses, but not fully detectable by even detailed probes and therefore subject to wide variations in interpretation.

Searching diligently for a simple descriptor for the findings discussed in this book, we have identified "cautious optimism" as one leading contender. As with many social phenomena, gradual positive change, interrupted by plateaus of lessened activity, is the most likely course of the movement of female scientists toward equality. Much of the decade of the 1980s can be discerned as such a plateau, even though some improvements during this period can be detected. The record for the years 1980 to 1990 is erratic. The salary gap between male and female professionals seems to be closing, but a gap still exists; a leveling off has occurred in the numbers of women entering science and in the proportion of women on university faculties; and only slight improvement can be seen in the numbers of women at higher professional ranks and in involvement of women in international science endeavors. Women are appearing with somewhat greater frequency in positions of power and influence in science, but their numbers are still disproportionately small.

Changes in attitudes are more difficult to discern. Few near-term (the past ten years) changes in attitudes of male scientists about female scientists can be detected. With many males, there is still fear of the very competent woman scientist, combined with a deep-rooted feeling of superiority and inability to accept females as peers. Many, if not most, junior level female scientists classify themselves as "feminists"—either active or passive—and the feeling persists among them that women are not encouraged to join the