



Ingrid zu Solms-Wildenfels of the Ingrid zu Solms Foundation for the Promotion of Female Elites in Sciences and the Arts.  
(Isabelle DePommereau)

### **Ingrid Zu Solms-Wildenfels, Germany**

When Christine Hohmann-Dennhardt joined the executive board of the big German automaker Daimler AG last year – the first woman ever to do so – many women's advocates were jubilant.

Others in Germany weren't. In interviews, the executive said that throughout her career she had sometimes been made to feel like a "Rabenmutter," or "raven mother," the derogative way of describing mothers who go to work, "abandoning" their young.

The stories surrounding Ms. Hohmann-Dennhardt's rise to the top illustrate what Countess Ingrid zu Solms-Wildenfels, a medical doctor who has no children, sees as one of Germany's inherent handicaps: a modern society with an old-fashioned view of women.

German women are still expected to either have a family and stay home, or – sans children – carve out a place in the working world, says Countess zu Solms-Wildenfels. How can a society that limits women – including those with families – fulfill its potential?

In 1994, inspired by her mother, a full-time doctor when working mothers were rare in Germany, the countess made a move toward changing the country's culture by investing her wealth in women. "I wanted to support the weakest; and in Germany today, the weakest are still women," says Solms-Wildenfels. "They have it harder than in France, sometimes even harder than in Turkey. Most women in Germany cannot say 'I.' They always have to hide behind a father, a boss, a husband."

Every two years her foundation, the Ingrid zu Solms Foundation for the Promotion of Female Elites in Sciences and the Arts, awards grants to five young women who show exceptional promise in these areas. She focuses on fields where women are often invisible, like gene therapy research or music composition.

"Women themselves have to apply," she says of her grants, which range from €5,000 to €10,000 (\$6,400 to \$12,800). "They can't be

recommended by teachers or institutions. In this way, those who believe in their own potential get the money. Women have to learn how to say 'I.' "

From her eighth-floor apartment overlooking the river Main, the countess can see the new European Central Bank under construction. Farther off, the outlines of other banks pierce the skyline – symbols of Frankfurt's place as a financial hub. Solms-Wildenfels feels too little has changed in those glass towers: Only five women sit on the management boards of the 30 major firms on the Frankfurt Stock Exchange. Germany also trails many industrialized nations in female representation in science and academia.

Nearly seven decades after the war, many Germans have a problem using the word "elite" about either gender because of Third Reich connotations. "Ingrid zu Solms has no fear using the word," says Renate von Köller, president of Frankfurt's Zonta Club, a women's advocacy group. "We need elite women. It's good for them. It's good for society."

Many of the young women who early in their careers received Solms Foundation awards today dominate "Who's Who" lists of people in science and the arts. When Germany looked to realign its energy policy in the wake of the nuclear disaster in Japan last year, Chancellor Angela Merkel called on one of them, Rafaela Hillerbrand, a professor of philosophy and physics in Aachen. Simone Fulda, a medical researcher at the University of Frankfurt, was appointed recently to the prestigious German Council of Science and the Humanities. Composer Isabel Mundry has gained recognition for her music around the world.

Roughly half the students at German universities today are women. But many of them, even those with PhDs, often don't pursue a career. The foundation "shows that women are excellent researchers in all areas," says Ekaterina Kostina, the first woman mathematics professor at the University of Marburg, who sits on the foundation's scientific board.