



European Research Council  
Established by the European Commission

## **On the way to the top: providing equal opportunities for men and women in science and technology**

Workshop sponsored by the Gender Balance Working Group  
of the European Research Council

ERC Executive Agency, Brussels December 2, 2013

### Summary remarks

Prof. Alison E. Woodward Vrije Universiteit Brussel

The European Research Council prides itself on excellence. Here the organizers have brought together some of the most excellent practitioners in an extremely well-designed workshop. That the ERC focuses on the persisting lack of gender diversity at the top of European scientific research is a reflection of its quest for excellence, and its role as a benchmark for scientific practice. The ERC and scientific funding agencies in general are extremely important players in shaping the expectations and providing the resources for science. They act as gate keepers, but also arbiters of what excellent science is all about, and thereby create the norms. By founding a working group on Gender Balance in the ERC, it demonstrates a commitment to change. We heard today that through analysis the ERC is also attempting to address continuing obstacles to gender balance. In this way they can provide an inspiration for other funding agencies. These initiatives are important both symbolically and in terms of changing practices and raising awareness of the continually persisting issue of gender balance at the top of academic and research institutions.

There are at least three reasons why this effort is important:

**FAIRNESS AND JUSTICE:** The continuing situation of underrepresentation at the top when the pool of talented and well trained women at the bottom has changed so dramatically is an indication that things are not fair.

**HUMAN POTENTIAL:** The talents and training that are demonstrably going to waste in the unbalanced climb to the top are a colossal waste of both societal investment and human potential.

**GOOD SCIENCE:** Well balanced and humanely organized research environments are better poised to deliver consistently good and excellent science.

Here are some observations and summary of the morning. The two sessions were well-structured, bringing the testimonies of the right players. On the one hand were the actors involved in changing institutions, and on the other those involved in changing science. Included are both those with long experience in leading institutions that have committed to gender equality and researchers bringing the latest picture of where women and men are in science, primarily in north-western Europe.

The first observation is one that is common to most events on this topic. Although there are some seventy plus people on the participant list, the few men are present either as speakers or formally have to be here. While we can hope that these men are interested and committed to the topic, it is nonetheless the case that 'Equality seems to be a 'Girl Thing', to paraphrase the campaign of the EU for more women in science. Gender balance in interest about 'gender' would be a good start for a change in science.

A second observation is also in order. The European Research Area is located in a scientific global arena. The issues of diversity within Europe and beyond its borders are too seldom raised in the discussion of opportunities in science and technology: this lack of diversity has to do with the imbalance in research opportunities in some regions of Europe, but also the questions of mobility that impact men and women scientists, and issues of discrimination in academic environments that are complicated by national differences. The workshop paid little attention to aspects of geographical and national diversity and how they intersect with gender and scientific excellence.

The first session focused on what we know about improving gender balance at the top of research, with examples of practices that have worked in making changes in organizations and working climates to encourage women in scientific careers, and retain them and lead them towards the top. They primarily illustrated the first two steps in Londa Schiebinger's famous three step program of *Fixing the Numbers*, *Fixing the Institutions* and *Fixing the Knowledge*.

The introductions from the ERC's Mr. Pablo Amor and Professor Isabelle Vernos outlined the initiatives already being taken by the ERC to improve the representation of women among the grant holders by adjusting practices in the application process and paying attention to the gender composition of reviewing boards and expert panels. The ERC closely monitors gender balance and evaluates results at each step. The evidence indicated that despite some progress it is clear that there is a loss of female talent at every step of the way. Thus the first session treated experiences in improving gender balance.

Professor Curt Rice University of Tromsø and Professor Gerd Bjørhovde shared experience from inside a Norwegian university and from national policy through the Norwegian Committee for Gender Balance in Research.. At Tromsø University dramatic increases in both female staff and students have been achieved by a battery of directed and creative instruments. Norway has been generous with documenting the kinds of practices that work as well as working hard to monitor institutional progress using a visitation method. Sarah Dickinson provided the heartening experience from the UK where an astounding 75% of institutions are involved in the Athena SWAN Charter program. Evaluations of the Charter's many pronged approach to increasing women's presence in STEM indicate that not only do female staff feel encouraged, but participating institutions themselves feel they are doing better for staff overall.

Dr. Claartje Vinkenburg, who is carrying out a study commissioned by the ERC itself, gave insights into the problems in how career progressions mesh with the potential for individual scientists to achieve excellence. Many times the conventional progressions dictated by academic institutions offer insufficient leeway for alternative approaches, which can lead to the loss of creative talent of both men and women. Her data indicated that men are as likely as women to

look for exemptions and that better ways of measuring output as related to available time for research are needed. Further, when granting agencies allow for this, the philosophy has to extend across the grant process including appropriate training for evaluators and panels.

We save Professor Londa Schiebinger for last as her presentation directly leads to very concrete recommendations of what can be done to integrate gender knowledge in science, and thereby provide an internal support. Her recipe for gendering innovation aims to go beyond surface tinkering and weave gender equality into science for the betterment of science itself.

## RECOMMENDATIONS SESSION ONE

The recommendations coming from the first session for funding agencies and the ERC included

### BUILDING IN GENDER KNOWLEDGE INTO THE CONCEPT OF SCIENTIFIC EXCELLENCE

- Gender equality in organizations as stipulation for funding
- Requiring that scientists explain how gender is relevant in their proposed research
- Demonstrating (with indicators) that the research organization of a Principle Investigator takes gender seriously (for example meeting the criteria for a SWAN award)
- Training administration and evaluators for gender sensitivity
- Maintaining networks of gender knowledge expertise to do communication and analysis (as will be done in Horizon 20/20)

### MONITORING AND CONTINUED ANALYSIS OF RESULTS (Athena SWAN, Norway and as the ERC is already doing)

There is a need to tailor solutions as evidence shows that natural science is different than humanities in terms of criteria for excellence.

A need exists to rethink how careers look in science (track careers and think through careers - adaptation for part time?)

### PRIZES AND ENCOURAGEMENT FROM TOP LINKED WITH FOLLOW UP

- A good practice example is the requirement of Athena Award to get funding in the UK
- Funding programs can stimulate integration of gender knowledge in proposals

### INTEGRATION OF GENDER KNOWLEDGE IN SCIENCE

Funding agencies need to require the consideration of sex and gender analysis in project proposals and make this part of the evaluation criteria

Evidence from the Gendered Innovations projects shows that this integration can lead to cultural change and different science for society

The second session zoomed in particularly on the issues of gender bias in research granting decisions and instruments to remedy unintended bias in research funding. Barbara Limanowska of the European Institute for Gender Equality emphasized the usefulness of a gender mainstreaming approach, and the sophistication of the tools that have been developed in the last 20 years. These tools, ranging from training to analysis guidelines, are readily available. However ongoing research shows that the tools are little utilized in the member states or scientific organizations. She likened the situation to a luxury car sitting in a field, lacking a highway.

Viviane Willis-Mazzichi from DG Research and Innovation emphasized the continuing commitment to gender in science from the European Commission and outlined actions that will be forthcoming in Horizon 20/20 including the explicit inclusion of gender expertise in expert panels. Long-standing expert on Gender Mainstreaming Professor Teresa Rees reflected also on experiences as a top university administrator in making gender mainstreaming work to transform gender balance and scientific practice for both men and women. Finally Dr. Gerlind Wallon presented results from research and studies with EMBO members on gender bias, and launched a provocative argument that both family considerations and bias are working against gender equality in science. All four of the contributions emphasized that laissez-faire will not work to counter persistent gender bias, but that useful tools are available to research institutions and granting agencies.

## RECOMMENDATIONS SESSION TWO

### MAKE USE OF GENDER MAINSTREAMING,

Gender mainstreaming based on gender analysis should be linked to hard and/ or legal obligations for research organizations and research content.

Gender mainstreaming provides tools to enable the integration of gender knowledge.

Including results of gender studies at early stages in scientific careers and curriculum is a means to develop gender reflexes in researchers and research. (See examples in Germany in medical curriculum, in Austrian in funding evaluators' training)

### IMPROVE GENDER COMPETENCE IN FUNDING ORGANIZATIONS AND ADMINISTRATIONS FOR BOTH MEN AND WOMEN

Capacities need to be developed

Information exchange

Given the strict timing, there was little opportunity for discussion with the participants after the sessions themselves, but clear interest from the audience in the possibilities to include both men and women in scientific settings promoting gender equality.