

WiSER – Women in Science and European Research

Full report

Introduction

WiSER – Woman in Science and European Research was a virtual event that took place on 4th December 2020. It was jointly organised by the **Polish Science Contact Agency (PolSCA)** of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the **Wielkopolska Region Brussels Office**.

The primary objective of the event was to bring together the EU decision makers and practitioners representing universities, research institutes and various stakeholder organisation to discuss opportunities and challenges in implementing gender-balanced policy in academia and research culture.

The event was opened by **dr Tomasz Poprawka** - Director the Polish Science Contact Agency in Brussels and **Małgorzata Sylla** – Acting Director of the Wielkopolska Region Brussels Office.

Keynote speech

The keynote speech was delivered on behalf of **Mariya Gabriel** - the European Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth by **Snezhina Petrova**, a Member of the cabinet. Ms Petrova started by stressing that the topic of woman in science and research is very important to the Commissioner. She referred to the latest '**She Figures**' report – the flagship document showing state of play relating to gender equality in research and innovation in Europe. It indicates that the gender balance has almost been reached on the PhD level in research as a whole. However, it is not yet the case for such subjects as engineering or mathematics. Ms Petrova further mentioned other findings from the report, which showed that women occupy only 24% of top academic positions and they constitute less than 10% of patent holders. She also referred to the situation in Poland – a country

that is below the EU average in terms of access for woman to decision-making positions e.g. at the head of the higher educational institutions.

Ms Petrova also pointed out that [the renewed European Research Area](#) encourages the implementation of the Gender Equality Plans (GEP). She mentioned that 27 projects relating to this issue are being funded and 3 new ones are yet to start. She underlined that the gender strategy implemented in the ERA has been a driver for many positive changes at the Member State and European level, but she noted a persistent heterogeneity in terms of development of the GEPs. In this context she emphasized that they would become one of the eligibility criteria in the future Horizon Europe programme.

Further, Ms Petrova indicated two particular areas that Commissioner Gabriel wanted to address: the gender-based violence in academia that will be a topic of a dedicated part of the new programme and the integration of the gender dimension in research and innovation context. Finally, she emphasised that Maria Skłodowska-Curie actions that support early-career researchers are the most gender-balanced part of the Horizon 2020 programme with 42% of women participants.

Panel session I: WiSER – European perspective

The panel was opened by **dr Michał Matlak** from the European Parliament – the moderator of the session. After welcoming everyone and introducing this panel's speakers, he asked them about the achievements to-date of their respective institutions in the field of gender equality.

Mina Stareva – the Head of Gender Sector at the Directorate-General for Research and Innovation (RTD) of the European Commission stressed that WiSER was a very timely event as just a few days earlier the [Council adopted its conclusions](#) on the New European Research Area that sent a strong message on mainstreaming gender equality. Ms Stareva also underlined an unprecedented institutional approach to this issue at the European Commission that presently has a dedicated Commissioner for equality – Helena Dalli as well as the Commissioner Mariya Gabriel who attaches particular importance to this subject.

Ms Stareva emphasised that one of the biggest achievements in terms of ensuring gender equality at the EU level is the introduction of this topic to the European political agenda. She listed three main objectives relating to gender equality in the context of research and innovation :

- Equality in research careers at all levels
- Gender-balance in decision-making bodies
- Integration of gender dimension in research and innovation context

She also mentioned the importance of fostering institutional change and noted that the approach adopted for the ERA in relation to gender equality has been a catalyser for the transformation at national and institutional level. Ms Stareva finished with two positive and hopeful messages. First, she underlined a correlation between institutions implementing GEPs and research excellence and

then noted the growing awareness on the subject of gender equality despite persistence of gender bias in all EU Members States. Moreover, [Gender Equality Index](#) published last month shows that if we continue with the same pace, we would achieve gender equality in 60 years. In the light of this, it is of great importance to make the sustainable change through European Commission and Members States commitment.

Professor Barbara Romanowicz, the Chair of the European Research Council's Working Group on Gender Issues started her speech by stressing the ERC's commitment to gender equality. She further mentioned that one of the Council's major achievements in this area is the equal success rate in the ERC competitions.

Professor Romanowicz shortly presented the [ERC Working Group on Gender Issues](#) that was established in 2008 and has had the following goals:

- to inform and raise awareness about the opportunities of the ERC grants
- to give equal opportunities for men and women in the competitions
- to monitor the gender distribution within the ERC's peer-review system
- to take account of the gender dimension in the ERC grants

She informed the participants that the WG has already presented two 7-year ERC Gender Equality Plans and the updated plan for the period post-2020 is under preparation. As examples of concrete measures, she presented the 18-months eligibility extension for the ERC grants for young mothers, reversing the order of the evaluation process (first the project, then the PI track record) and the introduction of a model CV template to prevent underestimating own achievements, which was often the case for female applicants.

Professor Romanowicz further explained that in the recent years the ERC has tried to raise awareness about gender equality amongst the evaluators. To this aim, gender issues-related materials have been presented as an introductory package at every evaluation panel. Moreover, an unconscious bias training has been offered to programme officers, the management of the ERC as well as the Scientific Council members.

Before finishing her speech, Professor Romanowicz presented some statistics related to female participation in the framework programmes. She pointed out that women represented only 25% of the FP7 applicants and 29% in H2020, as well as 20% of grantees in FP7 and 29% in H2020. Moreover, only 25% of evaluators in FP7 were women and this percentage raised to 29 in H2020. She also emphasised that there were still less women than men in the ERC and that reflected the general situation in the European science.

More information about the ERC's WG on Gender Issues can be found [here](#).

Building on this speech, **dr Simona Isler**, the Head of Gender Equality in Research Funding at the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) and coordinator of the [AcademiaNET](#), underlined that the EU initiatives on gender equality are important drivers for the Swiss scientific partners. She added that the academia in Switzerland wants to be a part of the European science ecosystem and participate in

various actions. Dr Isler also presented the national context of women scientists by evoking the 2019 Swiss women's strike in which the science community participated actively and in large numbers. She stressed the role of such general movements related to women rights as they give the momentum for advancing gender equality in science as much as in other sectors.

Dr Isler also underlined the importance of the organisational context that consist *inter alia* of having women on top positions in research institutions. She listed some measures allowing to foster gender equality implemented in the Swiss National Science Foundation. They include 40% quota in the evaluation panels at the Research Council, as well as taking the responsibility of hosting AcademiaNET – a databased providing profiles of excellent female researchers, which also allows the SNSF to strengthen its European network of partners. Dr Isler also stated that both top-down and bottom-up initiatives are complementary and very much needed.

After these first speeches, the moderator asked the panellists about the planned initiatives that aim to foster gender equality in research and innovation under Horizon Europe and within a renewed ERA.

Ms Stareva evoked the new eligibility criteria for the new Horizon Europe programme, which include the obligation for all the public organisations to have a Gender Equality Plan (GEP). She stressed, however, that this requirement will be introduced after 1-year transition period. Ms Stareva also underlined that it is crucial for the European Commission that every organisation is able to apply for funding. Therefore, the EC tries to support all institutions and organisations in development of such plans through capacity building measures, webinars and peer-review activities.

Ms Stareva presented the criteria that will have to be filled in relation to the GEP, describing them as a minimum-criteria and stressing the importance for applicants to go beyond them.

These 4 minimum criteria are the following:

1. The strategy has to be public and should show the commitment of the top management
2. It has to have dedicated resources (e.g. an office with responsibility to implement it)
3. The strategy needs to be evidence-based
4. It should mention types of activities that has already taken place to address gender balance

The EC representative also presented the second measure related to gender equality that will be a novelty in Horizon Europe – the integration of gender dimension in research and innovation content by default. As she further explained, this means that we would have not anymore gender flagged topics but all R&I actions in Horizon Europe will in principle integrate sex and gender dimension.

Ms Stareva further mentioned the new action within the European Research Area relating to the inclusive Gender Equality Plan. She explained that the notion of inclusiveness spreads over 3 levels. First, it requires (1) opening gender equality to other topics linked to discrimination – e.g. based on race, age, sexual orientation, disability or socio-economic status, and it further assumes (2) involving the private sector and (3) a geographical balance.

Professor Romanowicz subsequently underlined the equal success rates in the ERC competitions, but also mentioned that the work on gender equality in the ERC has to be maintained and continued. It

relates e.g. to raising awareness on gender bias at every level and monitoring of all the calls and statistics on gender balance. She also mentioned the importance of more gender-balanced groups of peer-reviewers and in evaluation panels. Prof. Romanowicz further emphasised that despite the fact that the ultimate aim is to reach full equality, in reality it is still quite distant. Therefore she expressed hope to reach the level of 40% within the next 7 years.

Dr Isler followed by shortly presenting the Academia-NET initiative that was established 10 years ago by Robert Bosch Stiftung. She explained that it is a database that includes the profiles of excellent women researchers that have to be nominated by a research institutions. It aims to improve the visibility of female researchers and makes it easier for funding organisation, conferences organisers or even journalists to find a woman scientist with a required research profile.

Dr Isler also stressed the limits of funding organisations in guaranteeing equal opportunities for men and women. She emphasised that the success rates were similar for both sexes, but the difference was noticeable at the application levels. To prevent this [PRIMA funding scheme](#) for post-doc researchers was established and is only available for women. Dr Isler underlined that it had become the most competitive instrument in the SNSF's portfolio.

She further insisted on the importance of the topic of motherhood in science and pointed out that the lack of childcare facilities in Switzerland presents a real problem for female researchers. The speaker mentioned two important issues related to this topic: unequal distribution of care chores between men and women and the accessibility of daycare facilities, also in relation to their prices.

Finally, dr Isler indicated issues linked to hierarchical academic systems that are in place in some European countries that include long periods between PhD and professorships, and having only fixed-term contracts and low salaries. She agreed that this concerned both men and women, but stressed that harassment that hierarchy can facilitate and motherhood-related duties aggravate the situation of female researchers.

Before finishing this panel the moderator asked about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the situation of women in academia as the data shows that they have been greatly and disproportionately affected.

Professor Romanowicz started by mentioning that the ERC was well aware of the problem, but the decision of how to handle the issues had not been taken yet. She remarked that there was a significant increase of the requests for grant extensions, but pointed out that the ERC has not yet had an evidence of significant differences between the impact on men and women. However, she noted that less applications from women are to be expected in the forthcoming period as they have not had the possibility to prepare their portfolio, e.g. due to additional care-related chores. She highlighted that the extensions of eligibility, similar to those related to motherhood, are presently considered.

More information on the ERC COVID-related measures can be found [here](#).

Ms Stareva also remarked that the EC was conscious of the impact of the pandemic on the researchers. She stressed that the Commission was looking into the impact on sex and gender and the response needed and explained that an external expertise had been requested to this aim. The projects that are in progress were asked to look into the issues related to the pandemic and report back to the EC. A number of feedback-responses has already been collected. She further pointed out that the Commission was planning to launch a specific action on the impact of COVID-19 particularly on women researchers.

Dr Tomasz Poprawka from the PolSCA Office followed by inquiring the speakers about some specific points from their speeches. After referring to Professor Romanowicz's speech and the information about the ERC gender equality-related materials, he turned to Ms Mina Stareva asking about the Gender Equality Plans. As they were – as he pointed out – one of the hot topics related to the new Horizon Europe programme, he asked for more details and in particular, the starting point of the 1-year transition period.

Ms Stareva replied that the EC's understanding was that the transition period would start on the second year of the calls for proposals. She also emphasised that the Commission fully understood as a brand new requirement they would ask many participants to develop such a plan for the first time. Therefore, the EC wants to support institutions in its development by e.g. sharing practical tools.

Next, **Ms Sylła from the Wielkopolska Region** enquired dr Isler, who has a unique experience of the research funder and the coordinator of the AcademiaNET initiative, about the benefits of such projects. **Dr Isler** explained that on one hand it effectively facilitates finding women researchers and on the other it allows for networking between female scientists themselves to share experiences that are often similar.

Panel II: WiSER - organisational insight

Dr Matlak introduced all the speakers of the panel and asked about the key drivers to implement gender equality at universities and research institutes.

Professor Bogumiła Kaniewska, the Rector of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan started by pointing out that in order to fully approach a problem, one has to notice it, than diagnose it to finally find solutions. She explained that to go through this process in relation to gender equality, the University in Poznan developed a project entitled '**When science is a women**'. Professor stressed that it was crucial to involve both men and women in the project as the key component was to raise awareness. One of the actions in the project related to women who were co-founders of the University. This historical approach aimed to change the lens that we look at past events that is often a history written by men. The second step focused on give women the courage to make changes at the university. It consisted of 'the laboratories of women' which tried to understand the challenges they face and to support their academic careers. Professor Kaniewska also highlighted another part of

the project that focused on promoting women's academic achievements as they tend to be more modest about their accomplishments. The project also undertook to monitor the needs of women working and studying at the university and showcase solutions and good practices related to women scientific careers. Professor mentioned that as a result a set of [10 recommendations](#) was developed in the project. She also emphasised that the ultimate goal is to create a women's network at the university so they can actively support one another.

Rector Kaniewska further underlined that there was a variety of challenges that women face. They can relate to motherhood and other care responsibilities or to their age. She also mentioned that an important element of it was reluctance, also among women, to feminise the language.

Following on that **Professor Agnieszka Dobrzyń**, the Director of Nencki Institute of Experimental Biology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, pointed out that the Institute she directs is over 100 years old and she is its first female director.

Professor Dobrzyń further stated that the problems men and women face are actually the same. They can consist of childcare obligations, taking care of an elderly parent and other issues, but they should be shared by both sexes. The important issue – she stressed – is to overcome existing stereotypes. In this context, she emphasised that it was crucial to become aware of the unconscious bias during the job application process or during the evaluation of research grant applications. She also provided some examples from her professional background that include a tendency to question women's independence related to their academic achievements. She also pointed out that the challenges relating to the language describing men and women in reference letters, which tends to be far more modest for women and puts men in favourable position. She concluded by saying that in general the bar was set much higher for women in the evaluation processes.

Professor Dobrzyń also remarked that men have often better communication skills, whereas women tend to be shyer. She finished by pointing out that it was extremely important to remove all kinds of bias as it could lead to losing valuable people in the process of recruitment or evaluation.

Dr Matlak has subsequently turned to **Professor Claudine Hermann**, the President of [the European Platform of Women Scientists](#) to ask about the state of play concerning gender equality in academia in Europe. She presented her experiences related to the French Association ["Femmes et Science"](#) that has had two objectives: promote women scientists and promote science education for girls. She further explained that the European Platform for Women Scientists was an outcome of an EU-funded project and aimed to present women's perspective in the field of science and give voice to women scientists in Europe. Professor Herman also mentioned activities aiming to sensitise the science community to the issue of gender equality and referred to in-depths reports concerning this topic.

Prof. Hermann underlined that gender-related activities were always compulsory in scientific projects financed within the EU programmes. As an example of concrete actions, she pointed out the European Network of Excellence Complex Metallic Alloys project in which AGH University of Science and Technology in Cracow took part. Under this initiative, the dedicated [workshop on promoting Gender Mainstreaming in Central and Eastern Europe](#) was organized in 2008 in Cracow. However, she

highlighted the problem of continuity of such initiatives after the project funding ends. Professor Hermann also referred to [the European Institute for Gender Equality](#) that published templates for gender equality action plans on its website that can be adapted to needs of a specific institution.

The moderator subsequently turned to Prof. Kaniewska and Prof. Dobrzyń asking for type of support from the EU research and innovation policies in terms of gender balance that is needed in their respective institutions.

Professor Bogumiła Kaniewska stated that in her experience women scientists often encounter problems when they start managerial careers. She emphasised that men and women are equal in theory and the division of caring responsibilities can serve as a good example of this situation. In this context she pointed out the need for institutional help. In relation to the support from the EU she referred to her earlier speech mentioning the need of equal and inclusive language. She also called for promoting discrimination-free environment supporting women's aspirations and efforts as well as equal standards related to career development and promoting research funding. Rector Kaniewska also seconded Prof. Dobrzyń's mention of women being shyer than men and underlined that in consequence, the promotion of women's success in science is key. She indicated that it could be facilitated by female academic networks.

She further brought attention to the issue of awareness of the issue of gender-equality in academia that is, in her experience, higher in humanistic studies than in science.

Professor Agnieszka Dobrzyń emphasised that recommendations received from the European institutions are always helpful for such organisations as the Nencki Institute. They can concern e.g. the gender balance in the composition of decision-making bodies or of evaluation panels. However, Professor stated that the crucial aspect allowing to overturn the inequalities was to become conscious, identify and remove our own gender biases. She also pointed out that events like WiSER which allow for discussion on this topic are very helpful.

Professor Dobrzyń also reiterated that she strongly believed that men and women can have equal opportunities - also in relation to caring responsibilities and house chores. She also gave an example of an institutional support that is of the Institute's childcare facility.

Dr Matlak returned to **Professor Hermann** asking for her recommendations in relation to improving gender equality. Professor expressed her full support for the introduction of the Gender Equality Plans as a requirement in the future Horizon Europe programme. She also underlined the importance of the EU gender-related projects. However, she emphasised that it was crucial that they were well disseminated so the fellow scientist could be aware of such initiatives. She also reiterated that the sustainability of projects is essential. Professor Hermann also stressed two issues that are key to her in advancing gender equality – combatting sexual harassment and introducing gender dimension in science.

She referred to the 2015 Conference of the European Platform of Women Scientists (EPWS) on gender dimension in science entitled “[Ready for dialogue](#)”. It raised the issue of better dialogue between policy-makers and researchers in the field. She also pointed out many recent initiatives including last month’s ERC workshop [Sex and gender dimension in frontier research](#) which was aimed to raise awareness on how gender dimension, in the way research is designed, carried out and administered, influences the quality and usefulness of the results. She also referred to gender issues related to development of Artificial Intelligence.

Describing the issue of sexual harassment in higher education she referred to [2018 European Parliament’s report](#) on measures to prevent and combat mobbing and sexual harassment at workplace, in public spaces, and political life in the EU. Building on this report, the EPWS published its [Pisa Declaration on Sexual Harassment in Higher Education and Research](#) that called for a common initiative on the EU level as one of the identified problems related to women’s mobility across Europe, which increased their vulnerability. She also referred to the Velvet Triangle – a cooperation between women politicians, women present in networks and women researchers, and mentioned the importance of men’s as support men in the issue of equality.

Dr Justyna Kramarczyk from the PolSCA Office subsequently asked the speakers to elaborate on the topic of childcare and motherhood for women scientists. In response, Professor Dobrzyń presented the daycare facility in her Institute that was established with the support from the Polish ministerial funding a few years ago. She explained that despite the initial interest from the employees, the creche had to be moved to a location that was too far from the Institute, which made it less interesting for the parents and therefore had to close. Professor Dobrzyń praised such form of support for young parents-scientists and expressed hope that the childcare facility could be reopened.

Following on this, **Professor Kaniewska** underlined her personal commitment to this issue by pointing out that childcare facilities were included in her rectorship programme. She explained that Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan planned to open its first kindergarten on one of the campuses. Moreover, a daycare facility will be established at the Faculty of Pedagogy, however, this initiative has been put on hold due the COVID-19 pandemic.

Professor Hermann emphasised that the solutions for the childcare vary from country to country and therefore parents might face different challenges. She also underlined that the issues of gender equality – also in the context of the childcare – require a long-term approach.

Closing words & conclusions

Dr Tomasz Poprawka thanked all the speakers and participants. He then stressed the importance of discussing the issue of gender balance as it can help to advance the process of combatting existing inequalities. He also highlighted a number of issues raised during the event that merit further discussions that relate to the EU policy dimension as well as to the situation on the ground at various R&I institutions, e.g. relating to the availability of childcare, hierarchical structure and the challenges faced by female leaders. Dr Poprawka emphasised the importance of overcoming stereotypes and

biases – particularly the unconscious ones. He also referred to a point raised earlier by Prof. Hermann speech raised concerning the issue sustainability and continuity of projects and initiatives. Finally, he expressed the will of the Polish Science Contact Agency to continue these discussions and further engage on the issue of gender equality in the scientific world.

He also referred to an event [“Women in Science: Past and Present”](#) that took place on 7th June 2018 in Brussels and was co-organised by the PolSCA office

Małgorzata Sylla joined dr Poprawka in thanking all those that took part in the WiSER event. She referred everyone to the [event’s website](#) where a summary and materials relating to the discussions, projects and initiatives mentioned at the event will be available soon. She has also expressed the will of Wielkopolska Region Brussels Office to continue the discussions about this very important topic.

