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Structural Change Promoting Gender
Equality in Research Organisations

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Principles and Practice of Gender Equality Management in science

To a degree, national laws and internal rules of the large majority of European research institutions ensure equal treatment to men and women, but regulations may control behavior, not attitudes. Thus it is possible for research institutions and organizations to have a facade of inclusiveness yet still perpetuating historic gender divisions. Women scientists have basically the same legal rights as men, including the right to have a professional career that can lead them to the top grade of the academic hierarchy. Yet arguments over the need for gender equality in science continue and they will not disappear from the academic and political agendas any time soon. The reason for the continued existence of requests for gender equality in science on the part of women is simple: the fight for equality is not yet won.

The root of continued gender inequality can be found in science's faith in the existence of equality of opportunity; in other words, in science's faith in neutrality and in science myth of striving for excellence and rewarding merit. This ideal system is both normatively praiseworthy and materially unrealised. While progress has been, and is being made, in reducing gender unbalances, change may come about very slowly and is subject to significant variation according to country, research fields and other factors. In Italy, for example, I calculated that gender parity at the top of academic hierarchy (i.e. 50% of women among full professors) will be reached in the year 2138, if the same growth rate will be maintained; at University "La Sapienza", the largest university in Europe, 50% of female full professors will be reached in the year 2487. In other terms, the process of reaching gender equality even in numbers is going too slow.

Despite undeniable progresses made towards gender equality, the idea that gender equality laid down by law is synonymous with equality per se is entirely fallacious. A mere principled and legal commitment to gender equality is not enough, does not create equality of opportunity in research institutions, as it does not solve the problems of gender inequality within science. Modernisation of research institutions should start from bringing into discussion their lack of capacity and willingness to analyze and transform the rich and often complex gender knowledge they have accumulated into specific gender management applicable to their structures and procedures.