

BCSWomen report on the EU Gender Summit

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The GENSET conference in Brussels last week was the first to be held on an European basis and looked at all aspects of support for women in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) professions, both in academia and in business, although the focus was clearly on the careers and prospects of women working in Universities and research institutions.

The quality and intellect of the women delegates and speakers was clear to see, and it was really a pleasure to be amongst a group of people who have the same aims and aspirations for women as we do. We include here some of the key statistics and facts that struck us as new or meaningful, and a short writeup of the breakout sessions that we attended. Please bear in mind that our notes were rushed, so we hope to be accurate on what we report here but there are probably a few errors!

Keynote

Marje Markarow, the director of the European Science foundation, gave a keynote which left us with some startling figures; this was followed by EU Commissioner for Research and Innovation Máire Geoghegan-Quinn speaking via video link.

Stats, Facts and soundbites

- Marie Curie was awarded 2 Nobel Prizes and they would not let her into the French Academie of Sciences!! Also, she managed all that with two kids!!
- Of 813 Nobels, only 25 were women.
- In 2010 only 9% of EU Advanced Grants for research were to women.
- Today, greater than 50% of PHDs in the EU are women
- Finland insists on quotas, and they achieve a handsome 20% publicly funded research going to women with 23% female professors
- If the EU is to see 50% female professors, it is estimated it will take 400 years to get there at the rate we are going
- Women make up 59% of graduates in the EU, 78% in Poland, and 56% in Norway
- The Dutch are trialling courses in self esteem for school children

- 45% of EU PhD Grads are women, but only 30% of those in a research career.¹
- Gender should cut across research, not be “in a box in the corner”

Breakout: Collaborative Strength – Working Better as Teams [GA]

The session had three speakers, the first an exec from Unilever, the second two being academics. The woman from Unilever talked about how the company was convinced that there was better productivity and creativity from diverse teams and said that in Latin America where there was a far better gender mix on the research teams, they found that they were more creative and more able to give what the customer wanted. In fact, it was stressed that since 83% of purchasing decisions were from women, it was imperative to have women on the teams to ensure that they could reflect the customer requirements. Unilever were clear that they lost professional women between the ages of 30-39 and therefore before they reach Director level. The reasons they gave were

- Family and Social Pressures
- Work Pressures
- Poor Career Support
- Isolation and lack of role models

They have therefore worked hard over the last decade to remedy this situation adding career support at the critical ages to stop ‘self selection out’. They have initiatives to; gather insight on women, mentor women, support networking, help women to own their own career, and make sure that all employees understand the importance of diversity.

Of the two academics, the last one, was, for me – the best of the pair. He covered the economic benefits of having women in the workplace. He had a figure which suggested that the drop off of highly trained women in the labour market resulted in the loss of between 1.3-2% of GDP for a country! He was also an advocate of ‘Hard Edged Targets’ and suggested that we need to agitate strongly and make sure we have tight targets and quotas because things are just taking too long! One of the bright spots of his talk was the fact that one of the UK’s medical research bodies (one which awards grants for research) has agreed that they will not award research funding to a university unless it has reached Silver level on the Athena Swan standard – which is great news. I think I am going to have to go and see the Technology Strategy Board about this!!!

<http://www.athenaswan.org.uk/html/athena-swan/>

Breakout: Leveraging Policies and Legislation – The Norwegian Experience [GA]

This session included lots on the 40% target for women’s participation on publicly listed company’s boards. They are now starting a debate about whether privately owned limited companies should come under the same target. Fathers in Norway are entitled to 12 weeks paid leave when a child is born. Because they lose it if they do not take it, lots of men are taking the leave. The outcome of this is that employers are no longer worried about whether a woman will take time off for having a baby, because men do too! This means that employers are more inclined to look at both sexes more equally for recruitment purposes.

Norway has a charter which ensures that all institutions which receive research funding must lay out how they meet the code (on diversity) and there are targets to meet on this before funding is given. Finland has a new program called VINMER which aims to increase the competition and engagement and support for senior positions for under-represented genders (that is for both sides – but will depend on the subject). Individuals on the scheme are supported throughout their research career on a given project and the aim is to get them to the higher career levels.

¹ Turns out the most recent stats on PhD grads say 47.5% are women so the two keynotes disagreed but we can put it down to a rounding error!

The bit I really liked was the Norwegian Minister saying that you couldn't just start and stop on these programmes – that they had to be funded whatever the administration or no progress would be made.

Breakout: Scientific Leadership – equally valuing the talent of women and men [HD]

Anders Flodström from European Institute of Innovation and Technology and KTH, Sweden talked about collective leadership development and how we could move from fairness to excellence. What we ask of students today is not what we asked for 15-20 years ago – now we want skills, knowledge, creativity and entrepreneurship, but before we just wanted knowledge. This is a big change. Can we be fair to new researchers coming out of this new regime? Can we be fair to women and to other “non-traditional” (i.e. not white male) groups? There has been a change, turning universities from hotels for researchers into “Knowledge hubs”. This seems to be making a difference, in Sweden at least.

Next up was Kevin Dunbar from the University of Maryland who gave a fascinating talk about problem solving strategies in research teams; what Prof Dunbar's team have done is to look at real teams of real scientists doing real science; videoing their weekly meetings, and working out how scientific discovery actually comes about in the real world. The kinds of reasoning that scientists do fall into three broad types – causal, analogical, and collaborative. It's the collaborative reasoning that's interesting, as this is where scientific discovery happens and is distributed over individuals. Dunbar's team found **no difference** in women's' and men's' reasoning when it came to analogical and distributed reasoning. In particular, they'd expected to find that in discussions women might be less likely to challenge, but this was not the case in the teams under investigation. They did find that **there were differences** in the way the genders handled unexpected findings, however. The best performing teams? Well, they were the diverse teams.

Prof. Teresa Rees of Cardiff university was up next, who's a social scientist studying women in science and who's been PVC (director) of research at Cardiff. She talked about diverse leadership styles and the way in which situations can change the appropriate styles. What you used to have to do was to be a lean mean and aggressive leader, but now things are more relaxed, and there are opportunities for women to lead without aping the style of men. One question that is key (and that we returned to time and time again over the course of the conference) is **who decides what constitutes excellence in science?** Rees describes interdisciplinary research as being a good place for breaking down hierarchies and existing structures; if the various discipline representatives have to listen to and respect each other then this can really help. Don't concentrate on what you can do to the women to make them better suited for science, concentrate instead on changing the situation.

Breakout: Excellence and responsibility of Science: gender as a scientific quality value [HD]

Dr Ingrid Wüning Tschol, Senior Vice President and Head of Department “Health and Science”, Robert Bosch Foundation spoke about academia-net. Academia-net is a new website in Germany that maps successful women in research, and is set up to challenge the low percentage of women in top research positions. Right now, there are 13% in unis and 9% in research institutions. Whilst Ingrid did not directly support the idea of a quota, she did support the idea of “corridors” of (say) 40-60% [editorial note: I am not sure about the semantic distinction here, surely that's the same as a 40% quota?]. Academia-net is only available in Germany now but it is expanding in the new year across Europe.

Next up was Prof Ineke Klinge, Associate Professor of Gender Medicine, Maastricht University - Gender, Biomedicine and Health. The question here is about making *the gender* question central to all scientific research – particularly health. If all of your lab-rats are male, and your human testers... She talked about the issues surrounding sex & gender actually *in* research, as between 1997 and 2000 10 drugs were withdrawn, 8 of which showed more severity in women. It's not enough to just identify bias, we actually have to work differently.

Prof Elke Anklam, Director, JRC (Joint Research Centre), IHCP (Institute for Health and Consumer Protection) - Gender Equality in customer driven research based policy support. Elke described the gender position in the JRC, which is a cross-Europe research centre with many organisations, providing technical support to the European commission.

Prof Martina Schraudner, Fraunhofer & Technical University Berlin talked about Involving Industry and markets in the research we do and involving gender at all levels. Many typologies of innovation have “young men” in their enthusiast/early-adopter categories, and women, particularly older women, are seen as being anti-innovation and resistant to change. Investigation of what people actually want shows that women are not resistant to change and innovation – we need to insure that they're involved in the process. Perhaps unsurprisingly, young men are strongly attached to things made by young men.

Other bits about the conference

The poster session was fascinating – there were over 50 posters, describing interventions and policies and all sorts of stuff. You can find the full list with abstracts here http://www.gender-summit.eu/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=17&Itemid=30

There was also a “Tweetup” enabling those who'd been contributing to the twitter feed during the conference to put some names to faces; this really helped with networking and it's something I'd like to see more conferences do.

[GA] Hannah did a poster about the Lovelace Colloquium and its objectives, history and successes. She seemed pretty busy chatting with all and sundry, and had to be fetched a beer from time to time!

Conclusions

These are some sentiments that came out again and again throughout the conference, and that we think are take-home messages

- Diverse teams perform better than teams of all men. This is true in business, in innovation, in science, and in management. The gender question affects not only equality but excellence.
- It would have been good to see more men there; the event was about 20% male, and if *the gender question* is only ever addressed by women-dominated groups we're going to stay marginalised in science.
- There are a lack of women at the top: on boards, in committees, in parliament, in decision making roles.
- The serious question is *who defines excellence*. There's a serious risk right now of producing a fantastic piece of research within the gender domain and having it dismissed because it's all about the women – we need to change the structures and get on the boards and committees so we can influence this.
- There are tons of initiatives to support women in male-dominated fields, but finding them all is really hard!
- The power to change things in the Universities comes from the funders (like the research

councils) who can grant or deny research funding to universities who do not exhibit gender equal policy adherence (for example – not signing up to Athena Swan would suggest a certain reluctance).

Gillian Arnold & Hannah Dee, November 2011