The 2nd European Gender Summit brought together top-level researchers, science leaders, and policy makers to examine gender issues that impact on the implementation of the upcoming HORIZON 2020, European Research Area, and Innovation Union.

Distinguished scientists discussed opportunities for advancing excellence through greater awareness of the role of gender as a dimension of research content, and as an important driver to promote innovation and mobility of talent and knowledge.

A key conclusion of the Summit is that fully committing to gender equality in European science is not just a moral imperative, but strategically necessary in order to remain competitive and innovative.

Body of evidence

There is a large body of peer-reviewed evidence that a problem exists with gender inequality in scientific research. Women obtain 36% of science and engineering PhD degrees, but the percentage of women at each higher grade of research declines steadily until only 11% of ‘Grade A’ (highest level) researchers are women. In the biological sciences, the percentage of women obtaining PhDs is closer to 50% and yet the rate of decline is the same. This is called the ‘leaky pipeline’ effect.

The Summit also agreed that it is necessary to include a gendered perspective in the content of research, in its methodology, reporting and publication. See www.genderedinnovations.eu for more details on this subject.

Reasons for the problem

The leaky pipeline effect has been extensively studied and evidence shows that myriad different factors, some small, some significant, all contribute to female scientists’ failure to progress to the highest level. Some examples of these factors include: unconscious bias at every stage of progression and achievement, more administrative and committee responsibilities for women, a lack of female role models in top positions, and disproportionate time spent on domestic duties at home when compared to male colleagues.

What does this mean for research?

Allowing female researchers to be educated to PhD level and then disappear from research is a waste of human capital and this is detrimental both economically and scientifically. Mixed gender decision-making groups have been shown to be significantly better at critical analysis and problem solving than homogenous groups, and this has far-reaching consequences for the quality of research. To ensure European research and innovation retains its competitive edge, the full potential of all researchers must be utilised.

Possible solutions

1. Measures to improve access to research funding: Fair access to research funding early in a researcher’s career is vital to ensure progression. Measures include coaching activities, proposal writing workshops, special funding schemes, and bonus points for gender-balanced project teams.

2. Measures to facilitate progression to top-level positions: Measures include gender targets and quotas for gender parity on boards, work-life balance provisions that enable women to pursue a position of responsibility, and open and transparent appointment procedures to avoid discrimination.

3. Top-level policy support for gender balance: Examples of government support to promote gender equality include special bodies dedicated to the issue, anchoring gender equality in national Constitutions, and introducing special awards to support and promote talented young woman researchers.

The EACR Strategic Plan now contains specific commitments to promote gender equality in all of our activities as an Association.