

FRANCESCA CANTÙ*

An Introduction

The issue of women and science is at the core of the idea of a European Research Area (ERA).

In 1999, the European Commission adopted a Communication¹ *Women and science – Mobilising women to enrich European research*, in which it acknowledges the severe under-representation of women in science and sets out an action plan to promote gender equality in science. Moreover, in a Resolution on women and science adopted in May 1999, the Research Council backed up the Commission's Communication by inviting Member States to «actively engage in the dialogue proposed by the Commission in its communication by exchanging views on policies pursued at the national level so as to be able to analyse the situation and make a joint assessment of ongoing policies, taking into account benchmarking and best practice in Member States. Research institutes, higher education organisations and private enterprises should be involved in this process».²

Indeed, the under representation of women in science is hindering the full realisation of the ERA's potential and the achievement of the Lisbon objectives. Women must be able to participate more actively in science: their exclusion, in particular in senior positions, is an unacceptable and unaffordable waste of human resources, a threat to successful development of excellence in science and a distortion of the relationship between science and society. The *Science and Society Work Program* broadly represents the Commission's response to the Council's Resolution on science and society and women in science. Its overall objective is to support and intensify a greater social cohesion, implementing the political process in order to enhance the participation and role of women in research.

Although progress has been made, too many stereotypes still keep women out of science and deprive it of the diversity sorely needed for a more harmonious contribution to political, social and economic life. Starting from the above short outline of the European commitment to gender mainstreaming we can better realize the perspectives and goals of this European Conference «*Women in Science: Mainstreaming Gender Equality In the European Research Area*», held in Rome with the sponsorship of the Italian presidency of the European Union. We hope that this last circumstance will allow the achievement of a special objective that is to reach – in addition to a high level of scientific relevance – also a political meaning and public visibility, otherwise difficult to obtain.

* Full professor of Modern History, University of «Roma Tre» (Rome III). Co-ordinator of the European project ERA-GENDER.

¹ COM (1999) 76, 17.02.1999.

² OJ C 201/1, 16.7.1999

The Conference constitutes the top event of a project (acronym: ERA GENDER) funded by the EU Commission within the Sixth Framework Programme (SSA - *Science and Society*).

As a matter of fact, one of the most relevant objectives relating to *Science and Society* is the stimulation of the policy debate at national and regional level to boost gender equality in research and the mobilisation of female scientists to foster the integration of gender dimension throughout European research. Facilitating collaborative work to sustain mutual learning and progress is a clear European priority and perspective. The Conference seeks to develop synergy between Member States' and Associated States' experts, building upon the work of the Helsinki Group on Women and Science.³ It aims at maximising the European added-value by giving its contribution to search for proposals and solutions to problems with a European dimension. On the policy side, the enrolment of the overall event in the Italian Presidency agenda allows the participants to attend an interesting and innovative stage of the European Union policy process and public debate. In this opening session, I would like to heartily welcome the many delegations and participants from European institutions, Member and Associated States, Mediterranean countries involved or interested in European partnership or programmes, which are attending this meeting.

The Conference links three pivotal issues: evaluating *the presence of women* in science by measuring the progress done in the field of gender equality, through a compared analysis of available statistics and appropriate indicators; pointing out the relevancy and role of women's and gender studies in a European high education framework and raising public awareness of the potential for a gender dimension to research; discussing about the *visibility of women in science* and raising a number of questions about what kind of work has to be done in building up media representatives' knowledge of women scientists and mainstreaming objectives.

Consequently, the Conference will be broken down under three working sessions focusing on the following key issues:

- The first working session, «*Producing gender equality in science – measuring inequalities*», has the objective to enhance – through cross-national comparisons and from a European point of view – the value of guidelines for the harmonisation, publication and dissemination of gender disaggregated statistics on applications, recruitment and promotion. The ETAN Report *Science Policies in the European Union. Promoting excellence through mainstreaming gender equality* (Osborn et al. 2000) highlighted the importance of the availability of sex-disaggregated statistics and gender indicators. A relevant Report has been published by the Helsinki Group, illustrating the overall situation in MS and

³ As foreseen in its 1999 action plan, the Commission established a group of national civil servants (and/or gender experts) involved in promoting women in scientific research at national level. They come from the 15 EU Member States and from 15 countries associated to the Fifth Framework Programme. The inaugural meeting of the group was held during the Finnish Presidency of the EU in Helsinki, in November 1999. This group, now known as the “Helsinki Group on Women and Science” meets twice a year, generally in Brussels (cfr. The Helsinki Group on Women and Science, *National Policies on Women and Science in Europe*, Teresa Rees ed., Directorate-General for Research, 2002, p. 13).

ASS (*National Policies on Women and Science in Europe*, 2002). Monitoring the progress in the field of gender equality and implementing a set of gender indicators is essential to mainstreaming. It involves recognising the ways in which current systems and structures, policies and practices reveal their gender blindness and, in effect, discriminate. Women have been increasing their level of participation in higher education across the European Union and now constitute about half the student population but the risks of horizontal segregation by fields of study must be closely-fought from the very beginning through an appropriate education and career guidance. On average, female students perform better than men; however, despite this and whilst generally there are not official bars to women's participation in science, they remain a large minority at high level. Everything considered, I firmly believe that all the Universities and research institutions should have gender monitoring systems. Moving from the bottom-up approach to increase the value of the university and scientific research autonomy in order to foster gender equality objectives at national level could be an interesting and new way to gender mainstreaming.

- The second working session, «*Promoting new gender competencies through gender mainstreaming*», is based on how to form the gender competencies in order to analyse the gender issue, in relation to both the promotion of specific new training areas and the introduction of gender aspect within traditional disciplines. This item is relevant according to the Proceedings of the Conference *Gender and Research*, held in Brussels, 8-9 November 2001, published by the European Commission, Directorate-General for Research. The Synthesis Report *Gender in Research. Gender Impact Assessment of the specific programmes of the Fifth Framework Programme* (2001) emphasises the need to strengthen the number of experts with knowledge and experience of gender issues. In fact, the lack of women in key decision-making position is not just a matter of equity and gender balance. It may affect the extent to which the gender dimension is treated seriously in research itself. The Helsinki Group is very concerned and committed to gender mainstreaming being integrated into the Sixth Framework Programme. It means developing and using expertise in gender mainstreaming, improving the gender dimension of scientific projects, increasing the relevance and the role of women's and gender studies in a European high education framework and raising public awareness of the potential for a gender dimension to research. Then specific gender research is needed; but we must be aware that gender invests also the construction of scientific concepts and practices. The meaning of gender issues can vary a great deal depending on location; so gender can be an interesting and useful indicator of crucial regional differences within Europe. This session of the Conference aims to discuss this topic and to compare different experiences seizing the opportunity of a situated approach.
- The third Conference session, «*Women's in Science visibility: a challenge*», has the objective to address the issue of the relationship between women scientists and media. The aim is to discuss and compare experiences within specific media contexts, addressing the modalities of women participation to scientific information and public understanding of science, the contribution of media to a wider visibility of women researchers and reflecting on how a better interaction

between the two can be encouraged. This issue deals also with the promotion of suitable role models for attracting and encouraging girls in science. At this stage, the task is to make proposals to provide know-how to analyse sex stereotyping of science and to build up journalists' knowledge of women scientists so that they receive more exposure on the media to counteract stereotypical images of scientist. These are pivotal issues if we are trying to raise public awareness about the gender dimension in science, the stereotypes that create barriers to the access of young people to the scientific career, the necessity of increasing female recruitment to scientific and technical disciplines. To gain free access to the media will stimulate the policy debate at a national level and the mobilisation of female scientists. Finally, stressing the public role of women in science can give a sound contribution to step up the science-society dialogue.

The three topics of the Conference are voluntarily put together because they are interrelated aspects of the same problem: how to increase gender mainstreaming according to the objectives of Commission's Action Plan on Science and Society and to the Helsinki Group Work Plan. The enhancement of this integration process represents an opportunity to stimulate new approaches and synergies and contribute to outline innovative strategies, to implement new initiatives and to integrate the gender dimension in the European Research Area. This will also enable the Conference's participants to compare national policies and put forward concrete proposals.

The reference to the Helsinki Group Plan does not mean a choice at random. The Conference is linked on purpose to the Group of Helsinki Ninth Meeting, specially planned in Rome from 4th to 5th December 2003. The concomitance of the two events represents an added value that we cannot underestimate. The University of "Roma Tre" gives hospitality to both the Conference and the Meeting pointing out the connection of the two events as almost two stages of the same project. The aim is not only to facilitate the presence of the Helsinki Group delegates in the Conference, but also to take advantage of such a relevant European partnership. The Helsinki Group is in itself a relevant example of co-operation between national and European levels. Helsinki Group countries should acknowledge that by working together and exchanging experiences they can move faster on mainstreaming gender equality at national level than they might do working in isolation. The Conference also aims at interacting with the monitoring and evaluating activity that the Helsinki Group is carrying out. My warmest thanks to the members of the Helsinki Group who are kindly co-operating with us taking part in the proceedings of the Conference.

In a short presentation I can acknowledge only my most pressing debts. I wish particularly to thank all the experts who will direct and enliven up our working sessions: they have promptly accepted our invitation placing their competencies and authority at our disposal. I should also address a very warm thanks to the Unit «Women and Science» of the Directorate-General Research of the EU Commission and a very special one to Nicole Dewandre and Véronique Degraef: without their qualified and friendly commitment many obstacles would not be overcome. The Minister of Education, University and Research, Mrs. Letizia Moratti, has agreed to the proposal of including this event (Conference & Helsinki Group Meeting) in the official programme of the

Italian Government during the semester of EU Presidency in order to highlight the promotion of women's presence in science and research, at different levels and in different functions, as a key priority in structuring the European Research Area. The President of the Italian Republic, Mr. Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, has granted his official and personal support to the Conference. I am very grateful to them because their initiative will certainly increase the impact and resonance of these events and represents a very appreciated acknowledgement.

Finally, I express my special gratitude to the Rector of the University «Roma Tre», professor Guido Fabiani, for his generous hospitality. Thanks to the unceasing efforts of his staff and of the organizing and secretarial staff which has supported my personal commitment to the project we have successfully reached the target of this inauguration day.

References

Rees, T. (ed.), The Helsinki Group on Women and Science, *National Policies on Women and Science in Europe*,., Directorate-General for Research, 2002, p. 13