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Women and science: an important challenge

Female presence in science events and communication is facing a momentous change in trends. Men have always occupied a predominant role in the sector, not only as «developers» of science but also as communicators. Women's contribution has always been underestimated, with an unacceptable waste of human resources.

But trends are changing, and many initiatives are underway to enhance women's role in scientific research and communication. The European Commission also recognises the under-representation of women in science and has defined an action plan to foster gender mainstreaming in this field.

The Italian National Institute for the Physics of the Matter has developed a gender policy in the last years, showing particular attention to the role of female scientists in research activities. The Institute pursues the objective of improving gender balance through many actions, including the interaction with both national and international working groups on gender mainstreaming, the monitoring of female involvement and responsibilities within the Institute, promoting equal opportunities in the personnel recruitment, introducing flexible working time and through special actions to support motherhood.

However there is still much to do: interesting proposals could entail the fostering of equal membership in scientific councils, the allowance of extra grants for equal speakers conferences, and also extra funds for nursery service at conferences.

The INFN is at the forefront to face this challenge, and has already implemented a number of initiatives in favour of women. For example, at the annual conference INFN Meeting, a nursery service is already available for women taking part to the congress.

Furthermore, policies in favour of women have given the following results: the percentage of women in the scientific staff has increased from 16% in 1998 to 30% in 2003, and women's careers have been supported at all levels. Women have been invited to participate to all selections for the scientific staff, and at least one female has been included in all search committees. These are examples of good practices that should be extended to the whole scientific community.

But the most important steps should be taken at a higher level. Women visibility in the participation to science planning and to scientific events is still faraway from being comparable to that of men. However examples exist that show a trend reversal, and I am referring in particular to the case of the *Festival della Scienza* in Genoa.

The first edition of the Festival was held in Genoa from 23 October to 23 November 2003 and was a great success, with around 136.000 visitors. And it also had the merit to represent a step forward for female presence at science events. As a fact, although the number of male speakers was still preponderant, with 130 male speakers as compared to 25 women, females prevailed in the other sectors. Among scientific animators, 73 were women as compared to 48 men, and the same can be said as regards collaborations, with 66 women and 37 men. The organisation staff percentages were 39.8% men and 60.2% women. But the most interesting figure involves communication: the Festival press office was almost completely made up of women, and as regards the presence of journalists, 51 women out of 122 accredited journalists were recorded. It can therefore be observed that the gap remains within the world of research: men communicate what they do in first person, while women tell what the others do. However female presence is facing a continuous growth, and many women are taking part into the process of "making" and communicating science.

The Festival seems to represent a good example of female integration in the scientific process, and our hope is to further improve figures with the 2004 edition. In 2003 we had 130 men and 25 women. This year we wish the figure could be reverted, with 130 women and 25 men.