Participatory Gender Audit

Kemijski inštitut -- National Institute of Chemistry, Slovenia

11 – 14 April 2011

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Executive summary

Statistics at EU level show that despite relative progress, women’s academic careers are markedly characterised by vertical segregation: the proportion of female graduates (59%) exceeds that of males, who then outnumber women among PhD graduates (45% female). Furthermore, women represent only 44% of grade C academic staff, 36% of grade B academic staff and 18% of grade A academic staff.¹

GENIS-LAB, a four year project funded by the European Commission’s 7th Framework Programme (www.genislab-fp7.eu) aims to implement structural changes to overcome factors that limit the participation of women in research in six scientific organisations in Europe, namely CSIC Spain, IPF Germany, FTM Serbia, INFN Italy, BTH Sweden, and NIC Slovenia. Three additional technical partners provide support to the scientific organizations: Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini, project coordinator, Associazione Donna e Scienza, and the International Training Centre of the ILO. The latter is the project partner with technical leadership for this first phase, namely the “gender-based organisational assessments”, which provides the initial basis for further, tailor-made action over the four-years of the project. Two facilitators from the ITCILO and one from the FGB carried out the methodology described below at NIC during April 2011.

This report consolidates the results of the first phase of GENIS-LAB for NIC. The methodology used for it – an adaptation of the participatory gender audit methodology of the ILO – consisted in preliminary preparation with involvement of staff at NIC, a desk review of key documents, interviews with staff at different levels, an on-line survey, and a focus group discussion. These are all components of qualitative gender analysis of careers, resource allocation, and organizational culture. There were 49 female and 27 male respondents to the on-line survey (26% of NIC staff) ranging from technicians and administrative staff to senior researchers; 15 women and 8 men were interviewed representing top management through to technicians; 3 men and 4 women participated in the focus group discussions, all of them researchers.

Slovenian legal and institutional framework on gender equality is positive: there is an Equal Opportunities Act, (2002) that defines and prohibits direct and indirect discrimination, provides for positive measures to ensure equality and fight stereotypes through education, as well as requires the establishment of an Ombudsperson on discrimination (active since 2003). The EU directives on equal treatment are incorporated into the Parental Protection and Family Benefits Act 2001 and the new Employment Relations Act, 2002, including the principle of equal pay for work of equal value and provisions on sexual harassment. In addition to the Office for Equal Opportunities that has a mandate of policy analysis, advocacy, coordination and that contributes to the legislative processes, there is a Commission for the Promotion of Women in Science an expert body working within the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology. This Commission prepares annual work programmes mainly involving public awareness raising, gender mainstreaming into research and development policy documents and relevant legal acts, and the promotion of networking of researchers who are engaged in gender studies in various areas.

NIC is a public sector research institution oriented towards the development of new technologies, which are of long-term importance to Slovenia. Its work is in line also with EU Framework Programs. Funding comes from several sources, mainly: the Public Agency for Funding of Research (up to 70% of the budget), the EU (up to 20% of funding), and the private sector both domestic and foreign (up to 20% of the income).

¹ Grade A: Senior; grade B: Mid-level; grade C: Entry level (note made by Polona Pečnik, Project manager)
NIC's Board of Governors is composed of four women and five men and the Scientific Council counts four women and six men. NIC employed 290 people at the end of 2010, organized in the Research Sector the General Sector. Women constitute more than half of NIC’s staff, but their representation decreases in the higher levels of the research career and in managerial positions: there has been no woman director in NIC’s 60 years of history and out of 16 heads of laboratories, 5 are women. Women occupy the majority of administrative, engineering and technical positions. Among researchers men represent 54% of all staff. There is no explicit gender bias in NIC’s legislative and regulatory framework, neither in those of ARRS, which provides the largest part of funding to it.

Recently NIC has been involved in activities, which have given visibility to issues related to women and science. There are also instances where NIC is giving good visibility to equal representation of women and men in science; the “Polymer centre of excellence” managed by NIC is often quoted as a good practice in gender balance (50% of women and men). Gender equality is considered as an “aquis” and most staff involved in the participatory gender audit did not express feelings of explicit or voluntary gender bias in access to decision making in scientific or administrative careers. NIC is perceived as a good place to work for and, in general, concerned at the wellbeing and professional development of its staff. The Basic Certificate of family-friendly company was granted to NIC in 2010 at the end of the voluntary “peer review”; by 2013 NIC aims to obtain full certification as a family-friendly workplace.

This participatory gender audit reveals however some possible challenges regarding the further promotion of gender equality:

NIC as an institution has not yet entered into a conscious reflection on how to address this set of challenges. No specific institutional mechanisms are in place to facilitate re-integration of mothers when they return from maternity leave; on the other hand, there is no conscious effort to support those young men who may wish to take more progressive views of their parental role. While parenting is progressively accepted by younger generations as a shared responsibility, in fact the primary child minders and caregivers for all of the family remain women.

The majority of NIC staff is women, but no woman has ever led the Institute. The low presence of women in leading and managerial positions does not amount exclusively to women’s personal life choices. The weight of family responsibility, along with a lack of ambition is the main reasons given for the limited presence of women at higher hierarchical levels among researchers. However, the interviews shed light on the possible influence of traditional gender stereotypes when choices are made in relation to career advancement, such as the practice of encouraging leadership traits in men (both by their peers and mentors) while assuming that women may not be interested. While specialisation opportunities are offered and enjoyed by men and women, the survey shows that more men would benefit from these opportunities (including funding). Another perception is that existing evaluation criteria - though per se objective - may in practice benefit men more than women.

It also appears that age or some lack in inter-generational dialogue plays a role in the quality of working relationships and to some extent of the research output.

This participatory gender audit allowed only a superficial view of the possible gender aspects of resource mobilisation and allocation within NIC. The apparent lack of a specific institutional gender equality paper or policy makes it difficult to assess the specific budget allocations for the promotion of gender equality. Positive initiatives funded by NIC exist that benefits the wellbeing of staff and encourages a family friendly workplace. The resources of GENIS-LAB project (both from EC and NIC sides) are obviously contributing, including financially, to gender equality at NIC.
Some of the recommendations that derived from the participatory analysis are:

The institutionalisation of NIC’s commitment to gender equality could be a key step to guarantee that the achievements gained in women’s representation in top scientific positions are maintained and improved and that NIC enhances its capacity to foster scientific excellence and increase its human capital profile. The initial implementation of the Action Plan could be supported in the framework of GENIS-LAB project.

Assess possible differences or address possible gender bias in career advancement through a simple system to monitor career trends of both women and men scientists.

Consider re-assessing the current criteria and procedures for recruitment and evaluation of academic excellence in a gender perspective, relying also on the EU Charter of Researchers and Code of Conduct. This may include a more flexible implementation of the one-year-abroad rule to accommodate needs of scientists with children/ family responsibilities.

Encourage young women to fully exploit their research and managerial ambition through mentoring, coaching and other existing good practices such as the “rotating head of lab” mechanism. The Centres of Excellence could be also exploited.

Support and promote realistic female manager role-modelling through an open dialogue between different generations of female scientists at NIC. Encourage all those in managerial positions - both women and men - to emphasise collaborative working models and balance what are perceived as “female” and “male” styles of managing laboratories.

Contribute to reconciliation of family responsibilities with high quality scientific work also through open discussion, testing and if necessary formalising some working conditions e.g. teleworking, flexible hours, work-space arrangements, child care facilities, etc. Debates and education on active fatherhood and equitable share of family responsibilities between men and women as part of a strategy for career advancement of women should be considered.

The idea that the management of family responsibilities is a private matter needs to be challenged because of the impact that these responsibilities visibly have on the advancement of career for women researchers. Assess the contribution that men and women give in the workplace and at home through periodic opinion polls and collection of data on topics such as: career advancement, use of time; division of tasks at home and at work, etc.

Information and education in the workplace related to gender stereotypes is key for the implementation of any and all strategies for promotion of gender equality in research and science. NIC has its role to play in this sense as an actor of both forefront scientific thinking and societal change.
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