

Webinar N°8 - I did it! Experiences from leading scientists

within the SCNAT webinar series Gender Equality and Diversity in the Natural Sciences, 2021



Summary of inputs and conclusions

by Romaine Jean

For this webinar women scientists in high-level positions, women leaders, women role models, who can inspire young scientists, talk about their career paths and share their personal experiences.

Janet Hering is Director of the Swiss Federal Institute for Environmental Science and Technology, Professor at ETHZ and EPFL. She is a member of the US National Academy of Engineering and the Academia Europaea. Related to the title of the webinar she says "Success can be fragile in careers", meaning that also a high level position continuously needs hard work and support by the institution, work team and societal environment. There have been examples of flamboyant beginnings that ended badly. Success is often a matter of luck and chance, for women and men alike. For her as an American, the chance was the offer to come to Switzerland, to Eawag. Men still dominate the STEM fields, science, technology, engineering, mathematics. Changes cannot be personal, cannot be done on a case-by-case basis. It is about promoting systemic changes.

Nouria Hernandez is a professor at the University of Lausanne, which she headed as rector until summer 2021. Prior to that, she directed the Centre for Integrative Genomics at the University of Lausanne. She says that like many women she had a problem with self-confidence at the beginning of her career. Often women, even Nobel laureates, are under pressure to prove that they can hold the current position. Nouria Hernandez also highlights the difficulty for a woman to combine an academic career with family life. "For my husband and I," she says, "it was clear from the start that we were not going to compromise. We both had to be able to lead our own professional lives". For Nouria Hernandez, as rector, the issue of equality and diversity has been a major concern. She believes that women in management positions bring a diversity of approaches. In some faculties in Lausanne, there are 40% women professors, but the average is still between 20% and 30%.

Pilar Junier is a professor at the University of Neuchâtel, where she heads the microbiology group. She is originally from Colombia, a country where it is difficult, if not impossible, for a woman to have an academic career. "I love teaching," she says, "I wanted to have a career, but I also wanted to have a family life and I have three children". What struck her in Switzerland were the opportunities but also the difficulties of reconciling family and professional life. She sees still many gaps in childcare.

Dr Prisca Liberali is head of an independent research group at the Friedrich Miescher Institute for Biomedical Research in Basel. She is of Italian origin, has two children and also points out how difficult it is in Switzerland to combine a family life with an academic career, moreover if the partners work in geographically distant institutes. Yet, she says, women need to try their luck. Too many women give up on an academic career. Prisca Liberali was awarded the prestigious Friedrich Miescher Prize this year, but she says it is still difficult for a woman to be recognized or even rewarded, in the world of science. The criteria for excellence are still marked by gender discrimination.

In conclusion, the four women guests all stressed the importance of diversity at all levels of scientific careers.