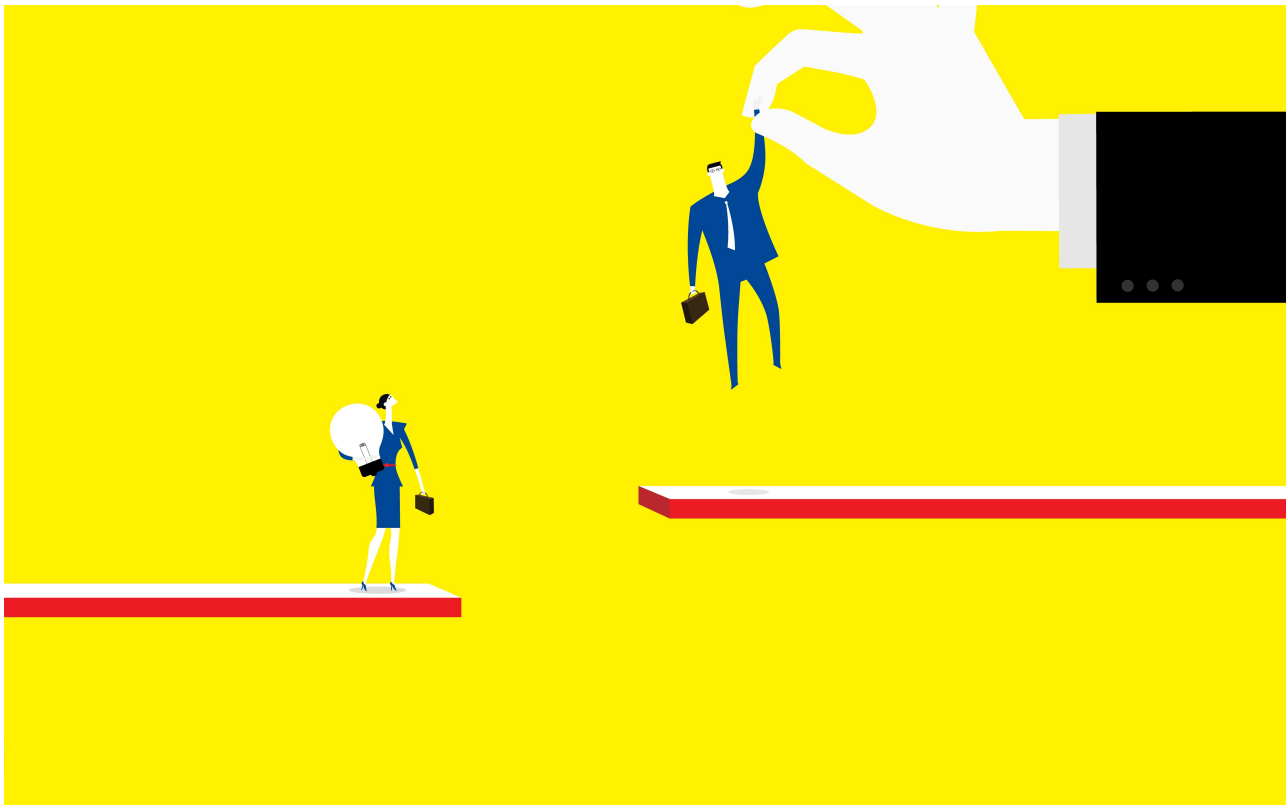


Published in [EuroScientist](#) via [SciencePOD](#).



Gender bias, whether conscious or unconscious affects women at each level of academia. In this exploratory piece, EuroScientist explore the factors driving such bias and looks for solutions to remedy them. Find out more by reading the view of experts from across Europe and decide for yourself about the type of interventions that have been implemented to fight gender bias.

Gender Bias: a ladder made for men



How does explicit and implicit bias affect gender balance in academia?

Addressing gender inequality in academia is a complex issue. As the saying goes, numbers don't lie. And the numbers point to a thick glass ceiling for women striving to reach academia's upper echelons. According to the European Commission's (EC) 2012 [She Figures](#), 46% of PhD graduates, 33% of researchers, 20% of top-level academics and 10% of university rectors in Europe are women. Women are also paid 30% less than men in similar academic positions in the European Union. That's according to [Marcella Corsi](#), a professor of economics at the Sapienza University of Rome in Italy, who is also gender consultant for the European Parliament.

But 'fixing the numbers' is only one approach to fostering gender equality in academia, adds [Maren Jochimsen](#), managing director of the Essen College of Gender Research at the University of Duisburg-Essen in Germany. She believes, we also have to 'fix the knowledge'. This means integrating sex and gender analysis in research itself. Lastly, policy makers in Europe must take into account the continent's different cultures and societies.

To tackle these issues, policymakers and their advisors must understand how different types of bias sway academia towards men, experts agree. Explicit bias, for example, entails gender viewpoints that individuals consciously report. By contrast, implicit bias involves unconscious gender stereotyping. In this article, *EuroScientist* explores the triggers in academic environments that lead to both forms of prejudice.

Fixing Numbers: an Irish case study

In the experience of [Micheline Sheehy Skeffington](#), implicit bias against women is still alive and well in academia. As a lecturer in botany at the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG), she has fought her own battles with gender bias. By 2009 she had applied for promotion to senior lecturer three times without success. After taking a look at the numbers, she was astonished—only one woman out of 17 had been promoted to senior lecturer at NUIG in 2009.

That same year she took NUIG to the Equality Tribunal for gender discrimination. Sheehy Skeffington argued that, among other things, inconsistent scoring favoured men during the 2008-09 round. Some men had received more points for less substantial contributions to society than women, she says. The [Tribunal ruled in her favour](#). And in 2014, Sheehy Skeffington was finally promoted. [Five other women](#) have also brought court cases against NUIG, and she believes they have a good chance of winning.

Sheehy Skeffington's case "has really shaken up the university sector here in Ireland," says Aoife Cooke, the equality manager at NUIG. Before then, "people didn't seem to be overly bothered about the fact that so few women were in senior academic positions." Cooke points to NUIG's "absence of a detailed marking scheme" as one "weakness in the selection process in the 2008-09 promotion round."

To improve this selection process, NUIG developed a detailed scoring method, which Cooke claims helps reduce reviewers' implicit bias by forcing them to score all "candidates in a consistent manner." As a result of this and other changes, 39% of successful candidates for promotion to senior lecturer in 2013-14 were women, compared to 6% in 2008-2009, says Cooke. Still, the process was far from transparent or fair in 2013-14, says Sheehy Skeffington. There is much work to be done at NUIG, in Ireland and abroad, she says.

Fixing Institutional Structure: gender in societies and cultures

Prominent gender biases appear in the upper echelons of many professions, says [Nicola Lacey](#), a professor of law, gender and social policy at the London School of Economics in the UK. Women perform in terms of participation and earnings on a broadly comparable level up until about 30 and then things start to come apart, she adds.

One sociocultural cause for this glass ceiling is the unequal distribution of domestic labour, she argues. Other experts agree. “I often tell young women that one of the most important career decisions they’re going to make is whom they choose as a partner,” adds [Curt Rice](#), head of Norway’s Committee on Gender Balance and Diversity in Research, who is also rector of the Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences.

In Norway, for example, “there’s tremendous gender balance in terms of household work and childrearing,” he says. And the Norwegian government has facilitated this balance. The country has State-subsidised daycare and flexible working hours. Consequently, Norway has a “good rate of participation of women in the workforce,” says Rice.

A country’s political structure can also affect gender balance, says [Éva Fodor](#), an associate professor of gender studies at Central European University in Hungary. For example, socialist countries like Hungary tended to have more women in managerial positions than capitalist countries, she says. Why? The inclusion of women “in all aspects of social life, including education and the labour force” was part of the state socialist agenda after World War II, she explains.

Still, explicit gender bias runs rampant in Hungary. Based on polls conducted by the [International Social Survey Programme](#) (ISSP), “Hungarians are convinced that women cannot be happy without children” and are better off staying at home to raise children, says Fodor. But ironically, “almost half of the labour force are women,” she adds.

Associating women with child rearing, or lack thereof, has even embedded itself in the Italian academic jargon, says Corsi. The phrase *Vestale della Scienza* can often be heard in the halls of Italian universities and translates to *vestal virgins of science*. The term implies that women scientists must often give up having children due to the profession’s demands, she adds.

Addressing cultural and societal norms may not be enough to facilitate gender balance in science in particular, a 2014 [study](#) in the [Journal of Educational Psychology](#) reported. The researchers found that, “even nations with high overall gender equity...had strong gender-science stereotypes if men dominated science fields.”

The Netherlands, for example, ranked high in overall gender equality. Yet the country ranked low in women’s participation in science and had some of the strongest explicit and implicit gender-science stereotyping. This suggests the gender issues in science may be harder to surmount than those in society as a whole. So what is the solution? Attack the problem from inside as well.

Fixing Knowledge: men have gender, too

Society and culture affect the balance between men and women scientists. But scientific findings also affect members of each sex and gender differently, points out Jochimsen. And biases in scientific research translate to imbalances in society in an endless cycle. To stop this spiral, one approach is to make it “the core business of science to look at the world in a gender sensitive way,” she says.

What is more, “everyone looks to women” to address gender equality and the [gender dimension in research](#), Jochimsen adds. “Why? Men have gender, too.” To solve the gender problem in academia,

the solutions have to come from members of both genders, she notes. This includes changing our way of thinking about gender issues to begin with. Addressing gender in research should not be for the sake of women, she says—it should be for the sake of scientific quality.

So is the solution to gender inequality in academia and science as simple as enforcing quotas? Decidedly no. And will the same solution work across Europe's diverse societies and cultures? Probably not. Policy makers must undoubtedly do their part. But researchers themselves can level the gender landscape of their profession—much like Sheehy Skeffington's case did in Ireland. In the end, the problem of gender inequality will remain complex, and the solution must be correspondingly holistic, says Jochimsen.

Vanessa Schipani

Photo credit: [Pan JJ via Shutterstock](#).

EuroScientist is now available on a pay-it-forward basis.

This means that the content currently available on our web site has been paid for by some generous supporters before you. Now that you have enjoyed reading our articles, you are kindly invited to share the enjoyment by [paying for the next readers](#).