

Top European research institutes move towards gender equality

- **Approximately half of the PhD students in Europe are women. However, the levels of women researchers decrease at the postdoctoral level and drop dramatically in leadership positions. These numbers demonstrate a dramatic waste of talent and resources in education, research and the labour market.**
- **Thirteen research institutes in life sciences in Europe, all of them partnering the EU-LIFE alliance, are to beat the current unbalanced situation regarding men and women in science. Supported by a gender expert organisation they will undertake the LIBRA project, aimed to evaluate the current status of gender equality in the different institutes and implement innovative actions to increase representation and participation of women in leadership positions in life sciences in Europe as well as raising science excellence by including sex and gender dimension in their research.**

Science is the main engine for advancement of knowledge and a key actor for the European economy and the development of its society. But, when looking at the organisation of the most excellent research institutions, which are leading novel, risky, and frontier projects, it becomes obvious that men dominating structures are still in place. An objective appraisal of the data on women in science, clearly indicates that although overt discrimination is now virtually absent in Europe, women have less chances to reach leading positions. Reasons are often hidden in still remaining discriminating structures such as language, symbolic dimensions, automatic behavioural patterns, so-called “common sense” and deep-rooted widespread beliefs. While these structures do not necessarily contribute to direct, active discriminatory processes, they definitely create a bias that facilitates discriminatory conditions for women.

Even in disciplines in which women are more numerous, as the life sciences (with ~56% female PhD holders at the EU-27 level), women’s strong presence among students and researchers does not translate into their proportionate access to senior and high-level decision-making positions. Only 20% of full professors in Europe are women as reported by She Figures 2012 for EU-27. “It’s time to get to work. We all know statistics related to this topic and now it’s time for action,” states Isabelle Vernos, ICREA research professor, senior group leader at the Centre for Genomic Regulation in Barcelona and coordinator of the LIBRA project. “*Thanks to the LIBRA project we will be able to evaluate our own institutions and to start a collaborative process that will lead to concrete actions and policies not only for the participating research institutions but also for the whole scientific community*” explains Vernos, who is also chairing the gender balance working group at the European Research Council (ERC).

Thirteen research institutes in life science, each in a different European country and all of them partnering the EU-LIFE alliance, are to beat the current unbalanced situation regarding men and women in science. The wide European dimension of LIBRA will allow the project to benefit from several national initiatives on gender currently running. An example is the UK Athena Swan Charter initiative, which is committed to advance women’s careers in STEM (science, technology, engineering, maths and medicine) in higher education and research. “*Leading the Athena SWAN application and receiving the Silver Athena Swan Award at the Babraham Institute has been a wonderful experience. As a result of this application, we have not only an ambitious action plan to promote women’s careers in science but also a new culture and*

awareness of gender balance and its benefits for all,” explains Dr Anne Corcoran, group leader at the Babraham Institute. “Our recent experience will definitively contribute to the success of LIBRA,” she states.

LIBRA’s approach includes monitoring and assessing initiatives by a gender expert organisation. ASDO, the Assembly of Women for Development and the Struggle against Social Exclusion, will assist the research centres with social sciences methodologies and deep knowledge and experience in promoting gender equality in science and technology. Giovanna Declich, sociologist and ASDO executive director declares *“It’s really an inspiring novelty that research institutions themselves lead a project like LIBRA. We have been professionally engaged in research on gender issues for more than 20 years and it is exciting for us to put our knowledge at the service of such a committed and enthusiastic group. It’s time to address gender inequality, resulting from a complex and multifold process, through an integrated approach, as LIBRA intends to do, so to launch structural and enduring transformations to make research institutions gender-equal and gender-aware”.*

The ten research institutes leading this project and the three associated research centres are members of EU-LIFE, an initiative aimed to promote and foster excellence in research in life sciences. *“EU-LIFE’s mission is to foster excellence, share knowledge, and influence research policy in life sciences. Gender has been an important topic for discussion, especially within a dedicated working group on recruitment and training. So, thanks to EU-LIFE we have now the LIBRA Project running. LIBRA will be a key activity to implement structural changes at the institutes and EU-LIFE will also serve as catalyser to spread and share the generated knowledge and know-how to other institutes in Europe and worldwide, thanks to our extensive network of collaborators,”* says Henri van Luenen, director of operations at NKI – The Netherlands Cancer Institute and member of the EU-LIFE Board of Directors.

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NOTES TO THE EDITORS

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Available spokespersons for interviews:

- **Isabelle Vernos, ICREA research professor, senior group leader at the Centre for Genomic Regulation and LIBRA coordinator.** Dr Vernos chairs the working group on Gender Balance at the ERC within the scientific council and is member of the Advisory Council for Science, Technology and Innovation of the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness. At the same time she is a well-recognized researcher in the field of cell division.
- **Anne Corcoran, group leader at the Babraham Institute.** She is a member of the Babraham Executive Committee, its highest decision-making committee, and she is Chair of BI’s Athena Swan Team, which recently gained the Athena Swan Silver Award for the institute, the established UK marker of excellence in supporting women’s career progression

in science. Dr Corcoran's research is focused on the epigenetic mechanisms that underpin immunoglobulin recombination in B lymphocytes.

- **Giovanna Declich, sociologist and executive director of the gender expert organisation ASDO (Assembly of Women for Development and the Struggle against Social Exclusion).**
- **Henri van Luenen, director of operations of NKI – The Netherlands Cancer Institute.** As director of operations of the NKI, he carries responsibilities of the infrastructure, organisation and policies of the institute. Dr van Luenen is member of the EU-LIFE board of directors.

[About LIBRA \(Leading Innovative measures to reach gender Balance in Research Activities\)](#)

LIBRA, a Coordination and Support Action project funded by the European Commission's framework programme H2020, brings together ten research institutes in life sciences in ten European countries. They all participate in the alliance EU-LIFE, which aims to build and promote excellence in life sciences throughout Europe. Their commitment to excellence is also a commitment to gender equality. Together with the support of a gender expert organisation, they will first assess their current policies and procedures to identify gender biases and obstacles. This will be a participatory process of mutual learning that will lead to the design and implementation of ten harmonised and tailored Gender Equality Plans. These plans will aim to bring about long lasting and profound structural changes to remove institutional barriers and empower women to be equally successful as men in their research careers. Specifically, they will address four main areas of interventions: 1) recruitment policies and procedures; 2) career development and training; 3) work-life balance; and 4) gender dimension in research.

Importantly this will culminate in the partner research institutes developing sustainable policies that promote the recruitment and retention of women in science, remove any gender biased decision making processes, and integrate the consideration of gender in experimental design leading to a gender aware and unbiased European Research Area.



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Website: www.eu-libra.eu

Partners:

- Centre for Genomic Regulation (CRG) – Spain – www.crg.eu
- Assembly of Women for Development and the Struggle against Social Exclusion (ASDO) – Italy – www.asdo-info.org
- Research Center for Molecular Medicine of the Austrian Academy of Sciences (CeMM) – Austria - <http://www.cemm.oeaw.ac.at/>
- Institut Curie – France - <http://curie.fr/en>
- The Babraham Institute - United Kingdom - <http://www.babraham.ac.uk/>
- Istituto Europeo di Oncologia (IEO) – Italy - <https://www.ieu.it/en/>
- Biotech Research and Innovation Centre (BRIC) – Denmark - <http://www.bric.ku.dk/>
- Friedrich Miescher Institute for Biomedical Research (FMI) – Switzerland - <http://www.fmi.ch/>
- Max Delbrueck Center for Molecular Medicine in the Helmholtz-Association (MDC) – Germany - <http://www.mdc-berlin.de/en/>
- Central European Institute of Technology (CEITEC) – Czech Republic - <http://www.ceitec.eu/>
- The Netherlands Cancer Institute (NKI) – The Netherlands - <http://www.nki.nl/>

Associated partners:

- Institute for Molecular Medicine Finland – Finland - <http://www.fimm.fi/en/>
- VIB – Belgium - <http://www.vib.be/en/>
- Instituto Gulbenkian de Ciência (IGC) – Portugal - <http://www.igc.gulbenkian.pt/>