

# Harmonising gender and science

**Dr Shirin Heidari**, speaker at the European Gender Summit 2012, looks back on her experience of the event and champions a gender-sensitive approach to research and policy delivery



As the executive editor of the *Journal of the International AIDS Society* and Chair of the EASE Gender Policy Committee, could you explain how the publication promotes gender-sensitive HIV research?

The *Journal of the International AIDS Society* is a platform for dissemination of HIV research from across the globe and across disciplines, and strives for the publication of relevant and high-quality HIV research. We encourage authors to disaggregate their data by sex and, when applicable, to include a gender analysis or provide a justification if a gender dimension was not included in the research.

One of the objectives of the International AIDS Society (IAS) is to close knowledge gaps at every level of HIV response. One of these gaps concerns sex and gender differences in HIV and, in particular, our knowledge about HIV in women. Similar to other scientific areas, female subjects are often underrepresented in HIV research; sex- and gender-based differences and/or similarities are seldom investigated or reported.

Promoting gender-sensitive research responds to the IAS values of excellence, relevance and responsiveness. Sex and gender are valid variables that can influence wellbeing and health outcomes, and must be taken into consideration across the research process to ensure excellence in science. More than half of people living with HIV are women, so it is only reasonable that HIV research findings are relevant to all affected and infected by HIV, and that women have as much an evidence-based HIV response as men.

**What are some of the issues you discussed at the most recent European Gender Summit? What were your areas of focus?**

There were some sobering – if not altogether surprising – data presented at the Gender Summit, reflecting how gender bias results in different opportunities for women and men. Concerns about the lack of sex and gender dimensions in research were also reiterated, and this is an area that is of particular interest to me. Despite our knowledge about differences between men and women across almost all disciplines, as a scientific community, we have failed to ensure that sex and gender differences are routinely examined and reported, even though the outcome of research is ultimately applied to both sexes.

**How can policy be shaped to better support these gender issues?**

It is critical that the outcome of these discussions are effectively and widely disseminated and shared with those responsible for policy formulation at different levels – institutional and national research institutes, funding agencies and editors' societies. Policies should be critically reviewed and

## Reporting gender differences

Dr Shirin Heidari details the efforts of science editors to promote gender balance in the research community

Editors are considered to be gatekeepers of responsible science. Historically, editors have helped shape frameworks for scientific publication, able to enforce standards for increased transparency and reporting complete information from research. Science editors can play an important role in raising awareness and can promote better reporting of science. An illustrative example is the case of registration of clinical trials in a public database, where editors could help enforce a federal policy that, despite being in place for years, did not succeed in achieving the desired results.

In my capacity as editor, I believe that we, alongside other colleagues, are making huge efforts to raise awareness of the importance of sex and gender in science.

The European Association of Science Editors (EASE), a gathering of editors, publishers and science communicators, is taking a leadership position and has established a Gender Policy Committee to advocate for better and more complete science reporting by including sex and gender. We hope to work with other partners to encourage gender mainstreaming in all existing standards and guidelines on reporting of research. The EASE Gender Policy Committee also intends to promote gender balance in editorial boards and pools of reviewers.

However, as editors are positioned towards the end of the research process, our efforts will have a much deeper impact if similar actions are taken by, for example, research bodies and institutions, as well as ethical boards and funding bodies.

revised with a gender lens, and we must hope that seeing it in such a way will eventually become the norm. We have a series of science policies and standards for conducting research, but few include a gender dimension. These have to be established as basic requirements in scientific enquiry. A few gender policies have been established to address, for example, sex and gender in clinical research, but most of them are toothless. Policies should be effective and combined with education. Perhaps we should also consider how to address non-compliance.

Such a cross-disciplinary event can build momentum, help generate new ideas and support joint directions that drive policy changes across several areas of work and research – changes that may have greater impact than individual efforts



DELEGATES SPEAKING AT THE EUROPEAN GENDER SUMMIT 2011, BRUSSELS.

**What are the personal benefits of speaking at such events? To what extent do these events form the basis for future partnerships and collaborations?**

I found the Gender Summit very informative and productive. Not only do you gain information and knowledge about new studies, policies and practices, but it is also an excellent opportunity to meet colleagues from other fields with similar interests and vision. We initiated some very fruitful and productive collaborations in the first Gender Summit, which resulted in a commentary in recognition of International Women's Day in 2012. The second Gender Summit was an opportunity to strengthen those partnerships and build new ones.

**Was there anything at the Summit that you feel deserves further attention?**

Perhaps the need for the sex/gender dimensions in research (design, conduct, funding and scientific reporting) could have been highlighted further. The presentation by Professor Marie Vahter from Karolinska Institutet was an excellent example demonstrating why it is imperative for all medical research to include the gender aspect. There is growing evidence about the relevance of the gender factor in a variety of disciplines, and the audience could have benefited from more presentation from different fields on the consequences of the shortcomings we face in this aspect, as well as the challenges and opportunities to address this.

**Bringing together top-level researchers, science leaders and policy makers to examine gender issues that impact on Horizon 2020 is a bold task. How do you think the Summit fared in this regard?**

Raising awareness, critically reviewing our policies and practices and stimulating dialogue are all valuable features of the Summit, and result in a greater understanding of issues and different perspectives. Policy makers rely on evidence for improving existing policies or putting new ones in place. The research community needs to become informed and encouraged to be more proactive in addressing the gender imbalance. Programme managers and implementers can provide examples of best practice and creative solutions to overcome barriers. We are all interconnected and dependent on each other's expertise, knowledge and efforts. Nevertheless,

engagement of high-level officials is crucial for the issue to be taken more seriously and to reassure actions towards structural changes.

The EU Gender Summit has been an excellent example of creating such a platform for dialogue. The set of recommendations outlined in the Gender Manifesto from the first Summit seems to have had a positive impact on shaping Horizon 2020, ensuring gender is treated as a cross-cutting theme. However, in addition to promoting gender equality in research organisations, requirements of sex and gender dimensions throughout the entire research process – from design to reporting – must be explicit.

To what extent the final instrument will include the recommendations by experts and succeed in mainstreaming it across all documents remains to be seen. Naturally, adequate monitoring must be in place to evaluate implementation to determine if the desired effect has been achieved.

**Looking ahead, what needs to be done to better manage gender issues in science?**

As Martin Rees has said, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. As a scientific community, we must ensure that we routinely and systematically investigate potential sex/gender differences and/or similarities in research. Only then we can claim that our research findings apply to and equally benefit women and men. To achieve this goal, we have to change not only our policies, but also our mindset.



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