Daniela Corda, PhD, is a prominent scientist who is passionate about passing on her wealth of knowledge and experience to early career researchers, particularly women. Here, she shares key challenges that ambitious female scientists continue to face, as well as programmes she has initiated to help address gender equality.

**Could you begin with a preamble to your background and area of expertise?**

I’m a cell biologist and I’m interested in cell signalling. I’m an active scientist working in a lab of around 15 people. I started in membrane biophysics, and since then have become interested in the dynamics of biological membranes. Through the years this has evolved in various topics related to biological membranes and now the work conducted in my lab is centred on two aspects of cell biology: membrane traffic and lipid signalling. I’m also Director of the Institute of Protein Biochemistry (IBP) of the National Research Council of Italy. That means I take care of my lab but at the same time have administrative duties.

**How did you become interested in gender issues?**

I started my career in Italy, then obtained my PhD in Israel at the Weizmann Institute before working in the US for my postdoctorate. It was there that I started going to the American Society of Cell Biology (ASCB) meetings, where I discovered the ‘women in science’ sessions. This made me more and more aware of the gender issues in science, and this is really how I started thinking about it. Often, until a young female scientist is in her 30s, she doesn’t realise that there are gender problems. She thinks that the women older than her are just complaining and that they do not realise that the world isn’t just fair to anyone, with plenty of opportunities. Then, when she starts experiencing difficulties, and really looking at how things proceed in certain steps of the career, she starts realising that this is not the case. I have always liked these ‘women in science’ sessions at the ASCB meetings, and think that they are important for the training of the whole scientific community.

Once I was back in Italy and had started my lab, I realised that these issues were indeed serious and should be taken care of. When Kai Simons decided to start the European Life Scientist Organisation (ELSO), he wanted to create a meeting following the example of the ASCB meeting – an event with many posters and occasions for face-to-face discussions, scientific sessions and events dedicated to science policy and so on – in Europe. We knew each other as cell biologists and he knew I was a member of the Italian cell biology community, and when we discussed that, it seemed very important to me that there would be an opportunity to discuss careers as well – not only for women, as I thought that calling it ‘women in science’ or emphasising the ‘women’ aspect would fail to include all of the challenges that a young person (woman or man) faces when starting a career. I also realised that if you have a session that focuses solely on ‘women in science’ you may only attract a small audience of say around 30 people, whereas if it says ‘career in science’ – and the topics are still the same – there will be 200 people. In other words, I thought that speaking in more general terms would make the whole topic more interesting to the community.

**Have you personally been affected by gender discrimination?**

Usually when people ask that I say that you should ask the question, ‘where would this successful female scientist be if she were a man?’ Yes, I have had success – but if I were a man, where would I be now? This is the real point. Have I been affected by a precise discrimination I can mention to you? No. But have I always had the same opportunities as my male colleagues? No, I haven’t. This is discrimination, and it’s subtle.
Could you provide some examples of the unfair treatment women scientists encounter because of their gender? What steps are needed to overcome these problems?

Women don’t always have the same job opportunities. For example, for young women this is often just because of the possibility that they might get pregnant. Sometimes during an interview they might be asked, “Are you going to have a baby soon?” Nobody would ask a man that. Sometimes it’s not asked directly because now, at least in Italy, it would be against the law – but you can do it without asking directly.

In science, when you reach the top of your career, then I think it’s tougher. You find many examples; there are even books describing the additional challenges that women encounter.

At the beginning of a woman’s career – say, the first 10-15 years – women may have an easier life than in other businesses. But I think there is a problem in recruitment that is still very pronounced for women – at least this is what is happening in Italy. This is not a matter of opportunity, but it relates to the obstacles that have to be overcome to succeed. It’s subtle, but it’s important because it means that women aren’t even looking for jobs anymore. If you don’t have the opportunity to work in something that you like, paid correctly, and you have to pay for the babysitter, housekeeper and so on, then you stay at home. If everything is so difficult you say, ‘OK, I will save by doing all the childcare and housekeeping myself’. It’s a way to ruin your career before you have even started. And apparently you cannot blame anyone.

For women who have had a successful science career, is there often a choice between having a career or having a family?

In my generation, I must say yes. I couldn’t find any colleague who said, ‘I will not have children because I want to be a successful scientist’. Having said that, if you keep postponing the event, there comes a certain point when you discover it is too late. This is, I think, less frequent today, but I know many colleagues my age who don’t have children, like myself. Not that it was a decision we consciously made or that we have suffered because we don’t have kids, but it’s just an aspect of life that we kept postponing, and in the end we were left out.

You have been heavily involved in organisations such as ELSO, the European Commission (EC) Marie Curie Programme and the Federation of European Biochemical Societies (FEBS). Could you provide some examples of the programmes you have implemented with these groups? Which initiatives have been most successful?

In ELSO, I started the Career Development Committee – dedicated to promoting the careers of young scientists. I organised the functions of the Committee and together with Simons, we organised the list of members. We had sessions at the ELSO meeting where we invited experts from different organisations (ASCB, EMBO, the EC and many others) to discuss and promote the initiatives to support young scientists (women, men and minorities) in pursuing their careers. We also held a ‘career lunch’ to discuss the different aspects of melding a career and life, such as having a family, the dual careers, the interaction with colleagues and so on. This was successful and very well attended.

In FEBS, I was elected chair of the young scientists’ forum. Although this is more related to PhD students and about them starting a career and less geared towards women in science, the issues facing women in science are discussed there too. In this context, as a FEBS officer, I promoted the participation of the organisation in the EMBO Laboratory for the laboratory management course to support the training of young principal investigators or postdoctoral researchers in the complementary skills needed to run their own lab.

Do you have any words of advice for women scientists, particularly those who may be at the start of their careers?

First of all, I say people should listen to the news and to others with an open mind. We live in a very pessimistic world, so if you have dreams don’t let them disappear just because you hear that the world is in crisis and going bankrupt. In our society, in this world, we’ve always had problems, all through history. I think that in order to be successful in life and in science, you need to be excellent, but you also have to not give up.

At the Gender Summit 4 you chaired the session, ‘Understanding Effects and Interactions between Sexual Dimorphism, Gender and Environment’. Could you sum up your thoughts on this subject?

Speaking generally, one problem in the gender issue is that we need to have equal opportunities, but we have to take advantage of our differences. We don’t have to think that women must be like men to be successful. Biology teaches us that we are different, so men and women have to exploit that to the maximum of their peculiarities. I believe a lot in equal opportunities – but you must be what you are. Women have a chromosome that is different; this will never change. Likewise, men will never bear children. Biology affects your life and the way you are. We are different. But in life, in jobs, in opportunities, we have to have the same perspectives.

Part of your work focuses on youth and career development. How does this relate to your work on gender?

One is part of the other; how can you discriminate between the two? When you speak about career development, gender is part of it. As I said, equal opportunities, the fact that young scientists should approach their career without any obstacle relating to their gender – the two things are very much interconnected. When we speak about careers, one aspect we discuss is equal opportunities for women and men.

Looking ahead, how do you plan to further your work on gender equality?

For me, working on gender and equal opportunities is a way of life, it’s not something that I plan. My efforts are in my everyday work in the lab or with my colleagues. Almost unconsciously, I work to ensure that I see those principles fulfilled around me. I will go on in this way. I think raising awareness is the most important factor – you should always try to make people understand that this is not an opposition between two groups, but it is something that we all have to work on and address until one day we reach an absolute equality that is not based on rules but rather on feelings. I am hopeful that this will happen.

I think that we must be aware that there are improvements all the time. We must keep on going forward and try to be critical of what’s going wrong but also see what aspects are improving. Doing nothing but complaining doesn’t help – you must recognise what is getting better and what has been achieved. We are wasting our time if we think that nothing can change.

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