



Believe in Yourself and Fight for Your Rights

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Dr Eleni Tsaliki graduated as Agriculture Engineer with specialisation in Food Science and Technology from Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH) Department of Agriculture in 1992. She embarked for her post-graduate studies at the same university in Chemistry Department, obtaining first a MSc (1997) and then a PhD degree (2002) in Chemistry. In her PhD she has studied the physicochemical properties of proteins and fibres of cotton (*Gossypium hirsutum* L.). She had taken part in EU research programs of Agriculture Department of AUTH (1992-1995) and since 1997 she worked as agriculture engineering in the former Cotton and Industrial Plants Institute of NAGREF with specialisation in cotton fibres evaluation, cotton cultivation and seed propagation. Since 2016, she is researcher at HELLENIC AGRICULTURAL ORGANIZATION DEMETER, Plant Breeding and Genetic Resources Institute. Her research activities are focused on agronomy and technology of field crops, evaluation of industrial crops varieties (cotton, tobacco, hemp, sesame), cotton and tobacco seed propagation and fibre quality evaluation. She has participated in many national and world scientific programs and is member of the International Cotton Research Association – ICRA Executive Committee. She has rich published work, has participated in scientific committees of international conferences and is a reviewer in international scientific journals.

Describe your professional journey and the challenges of working as a woman scientist

I have been involved in Greek cotton research since 1997. I am now the main researcher at the Hellenic Agricultural Organization – DEMETER. Looking back is highly emotional for me. I did not experience any gender bias. I have been lucky enough to come across excellent cotton researchers who helped me a lot through my first scientific steps and of course my family and my husband who support all my choices. I believe that hard work, flexibility and treating everyone with respect are the key elements that help you to face challenges.

Tell us about your professional accomplishments.

All my career choices have been good. I take pride in stating that I have been able to overcome challenges by communicating openly and thoughtfully taking into consideration all of the multitude of views and opinions which led to proper solutions and actions.

Have you had a role model who inspired you?

Frankly, I do not know who exactly inspired me but I always admire all of the female scientists who work hard with passion and talent and finally achieve a work-life balance.

What did you dream of becoming when you were younger?

When I was young, it was not clear to me what I was seeking to accomplish in terms of my career. However, in my mind there was never any other option other than science. It was normal and logical that I had to follow the research path and make the choices that I did.

Did you encounter gender bias as a female researcher? How did you deal with it?

People tend to view women as less competent. As women, we need to be motivated and willing to promote ourselves because it has an implication for our own success. My motto is, 'Believe in yourself and claim for your rights', and I try to transfer it to all young students and scientists.

Are you part of major decision making in your workplace?

In the Institute of Plant Breeding and Genetic Resources, there are 14 women in the team of 24 researchers. As the main researcher, I take part in many research programs either as coordinator or as a partner and this requires having the ability of making decisions and offering immediate solutions along with charismatic communication with many different persons.

How would you improve the contribution of women in cotton research?

I would advise all women in every field to defend their choices and ignore the obstacles in order to achieve their goals. More specifically, I wish to encourage young women to love science starting from their adolescence, work in research fields and debunk the notion that for a woman, career and family are two opposite words.

What policies has the Government adopted for the benefit of women scientists?

In recent years, the participation of women researchers in total employment in Greece was ranked 4th among the EU 28 member states (according to metrics of National Documentation Centre, 2017) reaching the 1.51% while the average of EU countries is 1.02%. Even though the number of women PhDs is the same as that of male PhD holders, the representation of women in the R&D departments of the Higher Education Sector is only 46.5%. Women comprise 43.6% of the staff in government departments while in the business enterprise sector women are only 30.4%. Therefore, special initiatives will be needed to ensure that highly skilled women advance into leadership positions in the public and private sectors.

What do you think can be done to mitigate gender inequality?

It is not just sexism alone, there are also invisible barriers that are holding women back. To achieve gender equality, the governments need to create special rules for female employees, with family-friendly policies and flexible work schedules that allow employees to set a timetable that accommodates other responsibilities such as childcare, parental care, or continuing higher education. I think that the education system, from primary to high school, must adopt gender action plans for the promotion of gender equality and strategies in order to increase the engagement of females in science.

What is the one thing that you would like to suggest to remedy gender inequality?

All forms of gender inequality need to be tackled and change the fact of the underrepresentation of women in traditionally male-dominated fields. The division of scientific work into 'female' and 'male' areas, which correspond to differentiated work schedules, job responsibilities and salaries must be reset.

What can an international organization do to recognize and facilitate a reduction in gender bias?

National and international organisations can take an active role in awareness campaigns and training to change attitudes and behaviours. They can also provide services to help their members to increase women's participation in science and engineering. Moreover, they can engage with their members and the business community to raise awareness of the impact of unconscious gender bias and 'male thinking' or patriarchal perspective.



Photograph: Lorena Ruiz, ICAC