



Contribution ID: 1374

Type: Parallel Talk

Gender mentoring inside INFN: a transformative path towards inclusion and equity in the research

Friday, 8 July 2022 17:25 (25 minutes)

How to foster gender equity in academia and in the research? Which gender equity practices could be able to counter the many gender inequality ones? Many measures are focused on the women, trying to increase the number of women at all career levels. In this framework, known as “fix the women”, the measures work from the equal opportunities side and help women to adjust to the male world. Among these practices, mentoring programs are quite diffused for enlarging women’s ambitions and making them visible for career progressions. These programs meet the organization needs without disrupting the gendered status quo. The masculine model of the ideal academic remains unquestioned. More women enter in the institutions, going also to top positions, but only when they conform to existing image of the ideal scientist, and this is especially true for the Physics cultural model. Even if important, these measures cannot be implemented alone. Gender transformative mentoring programs work both on mentees and mentors with the idea of raising awareness, especially among mentors, about the persisting gendered dimension of academia and research. These programs work on two lines: empower the individual and at the same time generate transformative process inside the institutions. In this process the role of mentors is crucial.

In 2018 we decided to start an INFN gender mentoring program with the intention of operating a transformative process within the organization starting from the younger generations (mentees) and their mentors. The program, inserted in the national INFN training plan for young researchers and fellows and senior researchers, has been the first gender mentoring inside an Italian research institute. A transformative program requires a tailored training specially for mentors not only on the significance of gender issues, but also to help mentors developing a broader understanding of what mentoring is all about. For the second edition we included some men in both cohorts because whatever structural change we speak of, this cannot fail to include the male component both among the “mentees” and the “mentors”. Each program lasted roughly one year with a fixed number of meetings one-to-one, several focus groups and training sessions. In order to foster an institutional change and better exploit the mentoring potential, during the 2020-2021 edition we worked, in a participatory approach, with mentee and mentors to bring concrete proposals to the management table for counteracting the multitude of gender inequality practices.

The mentoring model implemented inside INFN was designed, including some tools, by University of Naples “Federico II” researchers following an evaluation study conducted during the mentoring project inside the European GENOVATE project. Together with us, coordination group, the program has been adapted to our institute considering the INFN specific needs and organization.

Positive aspects and difficulties of the program will be discussed.

In-person participation

Yes

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Session Classification: Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

