



Interview with Ingrid Molema, the new president of the  
Dutch Network of Women Professors, LNVH

## Men and women together make the difference

**Recently, the Faculty of Medical Sciences of the University of Groningen (UG) took part in the regular evaluation round of the quality of scientific research. An evaluation committee comprising 14 men reported to Hanzeplein 1, much to the dismay of Ingrid Molema, Professor of Life Sciences at the University, who works at the University Medical Center Groningen (UMCG).**

‘I immediately contacted the person who set up the evaluation committee and told him that I found this composition unacceptable. Just to be clear: I do not have a problem with any of these men personally, I just feel that this kind of committee should automatically be gender balanced. It is simply impossible to have a perfect committee if men and women are not equally represented. Later we learned that the composition of the committee had been decided by the old boy network again, when in fact there are plenty of women who would like to be members. It’s the general attitude that needs to change.’

On 1 January 2016, Ingrid Molema became the new president of the Dutch Network of Women Professors (*Landelijk Netwerk Vrouwelijke Hoogleraren in Nederland*, <http://www.lnvh.nl/>). This organization aims to promote a balanced representation of women within the academic community in the Netherlands.

Molema: ‘My main goal is to make sure that in six to ten years from now, 35-40% of the people involved in teaching and research at Dutch universities are female. Nationwide, this is currently a meagre 15-20%.’

### **Taking the best of both worlds**

‘By systematically excluding women from academia, you’re missing out on so much potential, because men and women – fortunately – tend to approach matters in completely different ways. Our capacity for empathy is not the same, and we have different ways of communicating. Research has shown that innovation thrives in diverse environments. By taking the best of both gender worlds, we can create the most effective and distinctive academic organization.’

‘For me, an effective academic organization is an environment in which combined efforts deliver the best possible product. In this case, the best product would be an academic environment providing the best possible teaching, producing the best students at the highest level, and facilitating the best possible research. An organiza-



**Prof. Ingrid Molema, UMCG**

tion in which both men and women, each from their own unique perspective, motivate, question and challenge each other to take new steps within the research field in which they are active. There’s a whole world of opportunities out there.’

‘Just look at my own field, vascular molecular biology. That’s another traditionally male-dominated environment in the upper echelons; women are usually found further down the scale working in the laboratories. It turns out that when you provide proper careers guidance and these women are taught to appreciate their particular qualities, they are more than willing to make their way to the top. Power or salary are less important to most women than having an impact on the quality of policy, teaching and research.’

‘There is one problem as far as hiring women is concerned, and that’s the fact that they tend to leave right after gaining a PhD. Outflow is a key issue here. This can



**Rosalind Franklin Fellows 2014**

*To promote the advancement of talented international researchers at the highest levels of the institution, the University of Groningen has initiated the prestigious Rosalind Franklin Fellowship programme. The programme is primarily directed at women who have a PhD and aim for a career towards full professorship in a European top research university. Website [Rosalind Franklin Fellows](#)*

mainly be attributed to the one-dimensional nature of science itself, according to which quantity takes precedence over quality. Research results must be published as quickly as possible and in as many journals like *Nature* or *Science* as possible. Students are asked to do the impossible and process as much information as possible in a short amount of time. But is that really quality? As far as I'm concerned, the best researchers are those who engage in a dialogue with their environment and start a scientific debate through their research, research that triggers fellow researchers and generates new insights. This kind of academic debate thrives in environments where research groups are gender balanced.'

'I personally experience the added value of a gender-balanced environment on a daily basis, in my own research group in Groningen. In our group, men and women work together in harmony every day, motivating each other and continually consulting each other on research and teaching issues, who does what, not only here at the University but also in private contexts. If one colleague's child is ill, then it's only natural for another colleague to take over the ongoing research or teaching tasks. In this kind of environment, people feel safe; they can be themselves and the work progresses continuously.'

### **Monitoring**

At national and international levels, the balanced representation of women is now encouraged at all levels within the academic community. Researchers who submit a research proposal within the European Horizon 2020 programme are required to include a section on gender issues in their Grant Agreement. The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO – *Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek*) has in turn set up the Aspasia programme. Through Aspasia, bonuses are awarded to increase the number of female academics at the level of associate professor or full professor. And in 2003 the UG initiated the Rosalind Franklin Fellowship (RFF) programme. The RFF programme aims 'to attract

women, an under-represented gender in all fields of research.' So far, 58 very talented female researchers have been awarded a Rosalind Franklin Fellowship.

This initiative certainly seems to be bearing fruit. From the Women Professors Monitor 2015, published by the Dutch Network of Women Professors late last year, it appears that the proportion of female professors is growing at practically all Dutch universities and University Medical Centres. Nevertheless, compared to other Western European countries the Netherlands still scores quite low: women are still underrepresented in the highest echelons of academic management and female academics still earn on average less than their male counterparts. In the national Monitor 2015, the UG ranks as an average achiever.

Molema: 'The objective of the UG is to achieve a balanced representation of women (i.e. 25%) within the University community by 2020. However, this objective was already in place before 2015. In other words, there has been no real progress. Why don't we aim for 30% by 2020? I'd like our Board to take our Master's slogan to heart and "Think Boldly".'

### **Gender balanced strategies**

'The boards of Dutch universities do aim to actively pursue a policy of gender equality, but these good intentions are often diluted when this policy is implemented on the work floor, at the faculty level, in the appointment policy of research institutes. Part of the solution would be to make sure that selection committees are always gender balanced and that suitable male and female candidates are alternately selected for interview from shortlists (see '*M/V – Ritsen verplicht*,' 5 January 2016 [M/F – turn about]). If this is made mandatory, however, you also need to monitor whether this policy is actually being upheld and, if necessary, you need to impose sanctions when this is not the case. As soon as these gender-balanced strategies are considered obvious, people will automatically become aware of all the qualities of the opposite sex. And you can start straight away. It's not rocket science.'

Because there are two things on which the academic community agrees, according to Molema: 'Women are just as smart as men – this is not about a difference in intellect. And there are more than enough women with the potential to become a full professor, women who would love to take this next step in their careers. It is up to policymakers to make sure that this gender-balanced strategy is actually followed in real life, and that people become aware that everyone benefits from a balanced representation of women within the academic community.'

### **Information**

Contact Prof [Ingrid Molema](#)

*The interview with Prof. Ingrid Molema has been published in the Catching Innovation newsletter (March 2016 edition) of the Research & Valorisation department, UG*

[Website Research & Valorisation](#)