

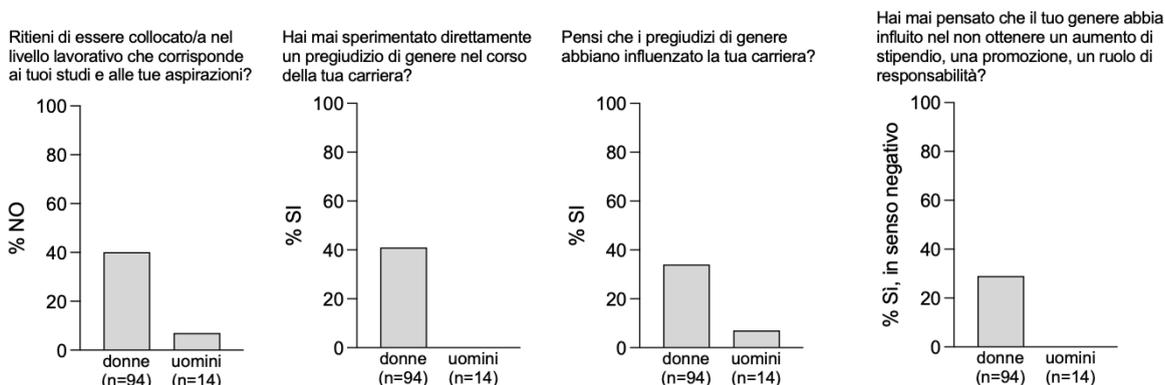
WHICH ARE THE OBSTACLES TO GENDER EQUALITY IN SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH? SOME ANSWERS IN A SURVEY IN THE SIICA COMMUNITY

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There is a lot of talk about women in research, in the mass media, on social media, and in scientific and specialty magazines. Yet this discussion does not seem to turn into concrete actions to find solutions. One reason could be **the perception that this problem is not relevant in our community**; another reason, the difficulty in reaching the institutions. To try to fill these two gaps, our Commission has decided to launch a survey on the occasion of International Women's Day, March 8, 2022.

The survey was mainly addressed to SIICA members but also open to external scientists, and the questions regarded the perception of opportunities in career and institutions, and an opinion on parenting. In about 10 days, we collected 110 responses, of which 94 were women and 14 men (2 preferred not to respond on their gender). Among the men who responded, there is a high percentage of fathers, perhaps indicating a greater sensitivity to the issue of men who have dealt with parenting.

35% of respondents think they are not placed in the job level that corresponds to their studies and aspirations, and the main reasons include not only the lack of funds for research but also having children. About 30-40% of women, versus 0-7% of men, have experienced a gender bias that has affected their career:



We asked to describe some examples of gender bias and how these have influenced careers: the vast majority of comments refer to **the difficulty of reconciling a scientific career with motherhood**, and some reach the level of real denunciations. Just a few examples:

"I was asked not to have children"

"Do not receive contract renewal because of pregnancy"

"During my period as a short-term researcher, my three pregnancies were reported on my personal file as critical"

"Sexist jokes to diminish the role and authority"

"Years ago my colleague of the same rank (both hired by a private foundation) had a higher salary"

"Women can be satisfied because they have so many other things to do in the family"

"you made the choice to procreate so you queue up in career progression"

"The idea that having a child was not compatible with an academic career led me to devote myself totally to my career and not have (yet) had children"

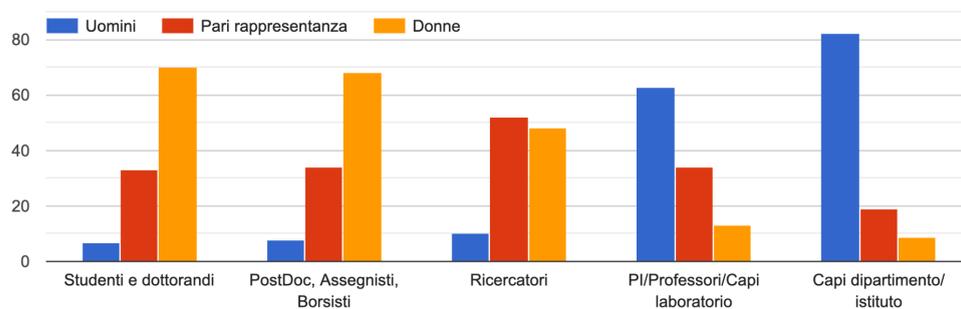
"Insecurity and sense of inadequacy often unjustified"

"No support from the institution, from colleagues, from the environment (male in the management of power)"

These comments reveal a **great hidden suffering in our community**, which is not intercepted by the institutions. When we asked what the solutions could be, rather than the so-called "pink quotas" or loans dedicated to women/mothers, what found the greatest consensus was the introduction of policies to support family management, in access to nurseries and in parental leave.

Confirming many other statistics in the same area, even in our community the gap between men and women widens as the career level increases:

Nel tuo Dipartimento/Istituto/Centro le seguenti figure sono in maggioranza uomini o donne?

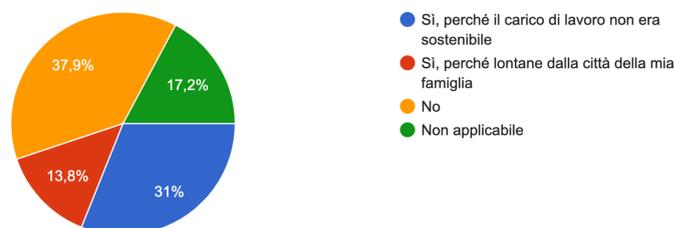


About half of the respondents, both men and women, think that women have fewer career opportunities in their institution. It is comforting to **observe this awareness also among the men interviewed** (albeit few and particularly sensitive to the subject). As many as 77% of respondents think that their institution should do more to ensure gender equality at different career levels, and more than 60% think it is important to have role models, as many social and psychological researches also suggest.

Parenthood is confirmed as a decisive event in the career of researchers. 45% of respondents state that they lost job opportunities with maternity or paternity.

Con la maternità/paternità hai dovuto rinunciare ad opportunità di lavoro?

58 risposte



Many interviewees declare that they did not take parental leave, and the most frequent reason was being in a contractual position that did not provide for the “right” to leave (scholarships, fixed-term contracts, etc.).

Finally, we asked the interviewees to suggest the strategies that **SIICA could and should adopt to improve gender disparities** in the Italian immunological community. Many responses indicate raising awareness of this problem, promoting dedicated funding, ensuring gender equality in scientific events. SIICA has been committed to all these fronts for some time, as demonstrated by the various social events on this issue and above all by the Ricercata initiative, set up by Francesca Di Rosa and aimed at financially supporting researchers returning from maternity or paternity leave. In addition to these comments, however, a real request emerges for our scientific society to **take charge of the issue of equal opportunities**. Just a few examples of comments and suggestions:

“Raise awareness among the ministries”

“Set up a training / mentoring and psychological support service only for women who work in the research field”

“A real active gender equality policy (not words)”

“Have a contractual form that recognizes us as workers”

“Put pressure on university institutions”

“Speak at the top as a representative of a large community, get to dialogue at the government level”

“Collect information and send it to the relevant ministries”

“SIICA can have a role of moral suasion towards university institutions, research centers and the ministry. It should assert itself ”

These comments confirm the widespread feeling that these issues do not reach the attention of the institutions, and ask SIICA to speak out for them. Whether a scientific society is really the right intermediary in these processes is a legitimate question, to which our Commission will try, in the coming months, to give an answer, acting accordingly. There is no doubt that every human action, including scientific research, is affected by the social and political context in which it is carried out. It follows that **good science can descend from good politics**, and that, once more, science and politics can and must advance side by side.