

NAME

Gender Equality.mp3

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5 SPEAKERS

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START OF TRANSCRIPT

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I'm super happy to be a mother, but my life's purpose has always been science as well

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As a scientist, I know that the gender equality is a very delicate subject. Many steps have been done in the last years, but still, I think we have a long way to go, unfortunately.

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In this episode of the ETH podcast, we're discussing balancing family life and scientific careers, a matter which is more critical for women than for men. We're talking about gender equality today. My name is Jennifer Khakshouri and I'm glad you're joining us. The sheer numbers show us there's a problem to solve. According to the latest equality monitoring report of ETH, only one third of the student body is female, and that's a lot compared to the professorships, where only 14 percent of all full professors are women. On the occasion of the International Women's Day on March 8th, we want to have a closer look at all of this. Julia Dannath, the vice president for personnel development and leadership at ETH, she's in charge of bringing, among other things, gender equality forward.

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I think ETH has already done a great deal in the past to improve the situation, and I think the energy, the courage and maybe also the perseverance of at least the female professors of the first and second generation at ETH were certainly decisive for this. So when I talk to women like, I don't know, Sarah Springman, or also Janet Hering, they have experienced a lot of resistance and had to fight hard for themselves and for women as a whole and where quite often discriminated against for a long time. And so from today's perspective, their merit cannot be appreciated enough. This is what I think. And in the end, where do we stand today? I think we have succeeded in raising the level of awareness about this topic, but we are not already successful in all points. Definitely not.

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This has a lot to do with practical things in life. Most excellent scientists have a tough time landing the perfect job. At the same time while pursuing career questions regarding having an own family or not arise and balancing work and family life isn't easy.

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I would never question the choice to be a mother and a scientist. I just wish it wasn't so darn hard all the time. My name is Rachael Garrett. I'm an assistant professor of environmental policy in the departments of Environmental Systems, Science and Humanities, Social and political science. My research focuses on ending deforestation globally by improving agricultural systems and improving policies.

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Rachael is a top scientist. She studied at highly renowned universities in the U.S., and she has two little children. One of them is in kindergarten now and the other is in day-care. When Rachael came to ETH and therefore moved to Switzerland, she was surprised by a few things.

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First, I was shocked by the hours that there were so many events that were after five o'clock, and I immediately started to say things like, I'm sorry, I can't do this event at night, or, oh, I have to leave our faculty meeting. And so then on the one hand, I started feeling a conflict between being a scientist and being a mother. But then all of this got much worse this year because we went to the kindergarten system and then I was not just in the ETH bubble, which is, of course, slightly more progressive, but I was more in Switzerland.

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While in Switzerland, women got the vote only 51 years ago in 1971, and up to then men only could participate in political life. Not a very good excuse, but maybe this explains the state of things in this country. And the Swiss school system and most of Switzerland is challenging for parents who work full time. Kindergarten, for instance, is only in the mornings, so there is an after-kindergarten care facility for lunch and the afternoons. Parents have to pay for that. Rachael lived in Boston and had to adjust when she started working at ETH and Zurich, the after-school caregiver often questioned why Rachael's daughter had to be there every day.

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The teacher was constantly saying that she shouldn't be there every day and that it wasn't good for her. And then even at our evaluation with the kindergarten teachers, they were also saying that it's too much for me to be working one hundred percent. And after so many events like this, at one point I just was like, this come on, this cannot be my reality. This was so normal when I was living in Boston, nobody questioned it. Many people work and especially women and send their kids to school. So that's just normal. And so, then I send this tweet that was just saying how frustrating it was to be hearing all the time that I'm failing my children.

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And her tweet created a shitstorm, and one of the national newspapers picked up the story.

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So then that led to them writing an article in the 20 Minuten and of course, a lot of positive feedback from the community, from tons of women writing me from everywhere, writing me on all social media platforms, writing emails to me, thanking me, sharing their stories. And what's really struck me from that experience was how long women have been struggling with this issue. I could not believe that women 10 years ago still couldn't even organise day-care, so I was lucky to have the option.

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And what Rachael noticed as well: No one ever confronted her husband with questions about working full or part time. He was never put on the spot by any teacher for parental duties. Most women, especially mothers, are bothered with questions men never get to hear. So, I decided to ask two men at the ETH a few of these biased questions.

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I'm the oldest. I'm vice president for infrastructure in the executive board of ETH.

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Ueli has two children who are in their 20s. What would you usually put in their lunchboxes when they would go to school or kindergarten?

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This was done by my wife at the time and later by a nanny we had.

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At the time when your children were younger. I mean, now they're adults, full adults. Did you work full time or part time?

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Oh, I always worked full time.

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So you're a bad father.

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Hundred percent are the other part of the other hundred percent which belong to my children.

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My name is Alessio Figalli, and I'm a professor of mathematics at ETH Zürich. I'm married and the father of a boy who is now 10 months old.

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Who brought your son to day-care today?

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This morning, I brought my son to day-care.

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And do you work full time or part time?

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I work full time.

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The first birthday of your child is coming up. Are you going to bake the cake?

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So I'm not a good baker, and I have my mother-in-law who is a professional baker, so she is already in charge of baking the cake for her grandson. And we are looking forward to that.

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And did becoming a parent challenge your career path in any way?

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I think that becoming a parent can be a big challenge for career. I was, I would say, lucky that I already had the rather established career at the moment when I became a father, so I didn't suffer that. But for sure, it's a big challenge.

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Would you have had the same career had you been a woman?

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I don't know. That's a very good question. I think the good aspect of being men is that I never had to doubt myself. I never felt that perhaps I had to be accepted and to be considered as a scientist. It just felt normal. I was going around to conferences, and I saw men around me. I had role models. So, we'll have the same career for sure. I would not have lived it in the same way for sure. Things would have been different now. Achieving it the same is difficult to say how our life would have been, but I think it's much tougher for a woman, unfortunately.

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Rachael is sensitised by her experience and also notices how her colleagues at ETH deal with balancing work and family life.

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What I've noticed is maybe senior men, very senior men who are already full professors will say things like I need to leave because I have to pick up my child or take my child to this or whatever. But I haven't seen it among the non-tenured faculty of either gender. And I just say it. I mean, I just say I'm not tenured. First of all, I do need to worry about what people think of me. On the other hand, if they think less of me because of my obligations with my family don't want to be, and I don't care, which isn't to say I don't want to be tenured, but I refuse to let that be something that guides my behaviour. And so I will just say, I'm, you know, it's five o'clock or it's five 30. I need to leave this faculty meeting. I have to go get my kids. That's it. So I think we just need to keep saying it and showing it. But but people need to step up. And even if they are maybe somebody that's a little shy, it would be greatly appreciated if they step up and are more vocal about their family obligations.

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If everyone speaks up about balancing parenthood and work, things might shift quicker. The reactions to Rachael's shitstorm fuelled this opinion.

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I think it's really going to take some time, but I think that people need to just keep talking about it. This wasn't something that popped up, for example, on the Women's Professor Forum prior to this article and tweet storm and then everybody came forward with a story. Why did it take so long for us to connect over our shared situation? You know that kind of coming together and speaking out and organising and celebrating needs to be happening now so that 10 years from now, people don't have to do that.

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And she sees the big picture from the students at the beginning of their academic career all the way up to professorships.

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We need to be supporting the graduate level and undergraduate level student groups in a much bigger way. They're doing amazing things with book clubs and, you know, meetings about intersectionality, not just gender. They're the next level. They're really talking about diversity. We're just talking about gender most of the time, and we need to be supporting them better. And this hiring initiative, well, has been excellent, and I applaud the president for prioritising it.

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The hiring initiative by the president of ETH Zurich is about increasing the number of female professors, Julia, the vice president of ETH, points out.

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Last year, the number of new hirings of overall professors were forty four percent female. So, this is definitely a great number. But in the end, of course, to change a ratio that is 80:20 male one year with 44 percent female professor hirings does not change the world. So, this is in the end we are not there where we want to be. So, when you have a look at the last seven years, the percentage of female professors raised from 21 to 28, so these are only seven percent, meaning one percent per year. So this is not enough. Definitely not. You can look at the numbers from different perspectives, but last year was a good year for us and 44 percent female hirings are great.

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Rachael agrees to Julia concerning speed in this topic.

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It needs to be kicked up a notch. It really does, because if we're not showing that women can be professors, then we're not setting a good message to all of the other amazing scientists that are in the pipeline. And ultimately, we're going to be losing out. We're gonna be missing out on the very best scientists in the world. They're either not going to think ETH is a good place for women or they're going to drop out of the workforce altogether. So, I think we need to intensify and focus more on opportunity hires and creating new roles and new positions, not just focusing on filling the existing professorships.

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Obviously, we're in a process. Alessio tells me about where his department is regarding progress in this field.

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When I teach my classes at the master level, I had 110 students in my class. I had maybe 15 female students, so it was more like less than 20 percent attendance. I think in math, probably when you are the bachelor level, you have a more balance. But we start to lose female students already at the master level and then goes on. So that's also, I think, a big problem. We need to maintain a good balance all across the career. We cannot just say: Oh, we lose female students on the way and then suddenly we try to rebalance later, I mean, that's not the right way to do. There are many excellent female students that we get at ETH, also many that could have come to ETH, but perhaps they feel scared by it from high school. And we should not lose these ones and keep their motivation and show that they have the right to be here, and they are good. They should just do what they like. That's important.

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So it's also a societal, let's call it problem that we should actually begin in kindergarten?

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Absolutely. Yes, I think it starts with kindergarten, maybe even before sometimes. I mean, I think we have biases when kids are born, it is propagated all along. So, you know, we as a university, we can try to do our best starting from first year university students. But there is something that has to be done definitely already much before.

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Kindergarten is where we should begin. All of us. And not only with the children, but also with the teachers. In that sense, this conversation we are having should become unnecessary for the generations to come.

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I think shift is happening. The problem is that it takes time because what, for instance, female miss is already role models because there are very few established female professors in proportion to the male ones. But this takes almost a generation to change so you can change things by step. But anyhow, if you really want to change the mentality in the way academic life is perceived, we need, first of all, more balance also in the higher-level positions, not only at the junior level. And also, I think the system still is not very family friendly and then most of the cases this means not very friendly for female researchers. And that's a pity.

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How can ETH actively push gender equality forward? Ueli has a fundamental idea.

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Personally, I think the strongest sign are people doing it, acting it like this and talking about that, but especially acting. For example, this topic of when stops the last meeting, no meetings after six o'clock and so on. These are strong signs. And when there are, let's say, highly recognised male professors supporting this, this helps a lot.

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Julia, who is in charge of implementing more equality, diversity and inclusion at ETH, says:

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For me, I think two things are central for now. So firstly, I think we need to take a clear and honest look at the situation of women at ETH so that less is done with assumptions or biases or false figures. You know, again and again in discussions, I notice that tendentious arguments are used and that we do not argue on the basis of real facts. And so in order to create a clear data basis, we have launched a project in VPPL that is called "Report on the status of female faculty". And within this framework of the project, we will compile all facts about the situation of women at ETH objectively, and I hope kind of as it benefits for ETH best. So, what we try to do is we want to find out whether we have and where we have issues when it comes to inequality and discrimination, where it still exists, and then we want to introduce measures to stop this right now. Secondly, and this is in particular a concern of me, is we will continue to work on establishing a culture of mutual respect. In the end, gender equality is not a result of successful implementation of measures. It is rather an attitude and does reflect our society.

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And Rachael's perspective in a nutshell, why it makes sense to combine family and an academic career:

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To be honest, we can all be more efficient at our job, and that's why you can still be awesome while being a parent, because you just keep learning how to be more and more efficient - and who wouldn't want to do that? Everybody benefits.

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Some change is happening, and I hope this episode on gender equality won't be necessary in the future. As Rachael pointed out, the hot stuff in discussion among the younger students isn't equality only, it's intersectionality, which is about the intersection and interaction of different forms of discrimination, including race, class, gender, disability and age. Check out the show notes for links to events and lectures on diversity and equality at ETH. My name is Jennifer Khakshouri, I produced this episode of the ETH podcast with the Audiobande, the joint venture for sound adventures. If you like our podcast, rate us on Apple podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts that will make us more visible to new listeners.

END OF TRANSCRIPT



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