

## ***Is Gender Still Relevant? An Early Career Researcher's view***

Irene Salvo, Royal Holloway, University of London, salvoirene@gmail.com, @IreneSlv

When I read the call for papers for this conference, I got immediately enthusiastic about it. It reflected the questions that were on my mind. The issues at stake were far-reaching: not only the relevance of studying gender in the historical sciences, but also the impact of Humanities research on our contemporary society and on the political agenda of HE institutions. The conference was offering me the opportunity to think about why I am doing what I am doing, and to discuss with like-minded researchers. And the experience went beyond my expectations.

In the morning before the conference officially started, I attended the *Imposter Syndrome Workshop*, led by Caron King. We explored the feeling of not being good enough, and the fear of being 'found out' one day. This provokes paralysing anxiety, which is frequent especially among female young academics, sometimes too overwhelmed by departmental male-dominated hierarchy. Even when we receive a positive feedback, we think that they did not mean it. Caron King provided us with a range of tools for acknowledging the syndrome and overcoming its negative effects: we are good scholars and we should exploit our skills, thinking that any doubt might be only our mind. It was an injection of self-confidence, the right energising start for the conference ahead.

The conference papers spanned from antiquity to contemporary history, and explored also gender practices in academia, addressing various points, such as research, teaching, administrative duties, and career progression. It strongly emerged how feminism is still a 'dirty word', and how young students are sometimes reluctant in embracing it. Activism in and outside the classroom cannot be more appropriate than today, especially when social media and the secrecy of Internet often make space for sexist comments against women, a topic touched by Josiane Boutonnet (University of Wolverhampton), in her talk *What Does Humour Have to Tell us About Gender Today?* [panel: "Contemporary Practice, Identity and Performance"]. This consideration should urge scholars on gender to participate in the public debate and to speak out through social media. Particularly for young scholars, social media offers a platform from which they can make their voice heard, as the impact of the conference on social networks demonstrated.

PhD students and Early Career researchers greatly contributed to the conference, presenting original papers and organising panels. To mention just a few contributions, Polly Lohmann (LMU, München) examined Pompeii's graffiti in her talk *Gender as an Analytical Tool: Approaching Roman 'Daily Life'* [workshop: "Gender, Space, and Architecture"]. She showed the interactions between space, gender, and the daily practice of Roman families. While a graffito could inform us about the gender of the writer, it will hardly reveal any information on age and social status. Women are particularly present in erotic texts, greetings, and *tituli memoriales*. Holly Ranger (University of Birmingham) in *What Does it Mean for a Woman to Translate Latin?* [panel: "Gender and Representation"] challenged the ivory tower of white-male translating practices of Greek and Latin literature, highlighting the work of women in the field of translation: the act of translating classics might contribute in standing up against sexism and racism. Francesca Romana Ammaturo (Goldsmiths, University of London) presented a Butlerian analysis of the performativity of gender played by Concita Wurst at the Eurovision contest last year [*A Contentious Beard: Conchita Wurst and the Performance of Gender at the 2014 Eurovision Song Contest*, panel: "Contemporary Practice, Identity and Performance"]. Exploring the symbolic power of Concita's beard, she has

analysed the fluidity of gender in the TV performance, in the European newspapers and politics, and in LGBTQI activism. In her conclusions, she rightly pointed out how “is gender still relevant?” is not a closed question that can be answered with ‘yes’ or ‘no’: gender relevance can be variously contextualised at the levels of securing an identity, of navigation of differences, or of a conservative reaffirmation of aesthetic norms and gender expectations. On a similar line, Professor Uduak Archibong (University of Bradford, GENOVATE Project) opened the discourse to other gender identities, showing how in academia there is little institutional space for sub-cultures and that discrimination of gender diversity can still be problematic [panel discussion: “Strategies for Gender Equity in Academia, from beyond the Historical Disciplines”]. In this same panel, Professor Simonetta Manfredi (Oxford Brookes) advocated a duty of the REF in eliminating discrimination. The structure of academic practice allows disadvantages, and quality instead of quantity should be taken in consideration in cases of career breaks.

The use of gender as an analytical tool in the historical sciences is indeed challenging. There is a risk of fitting (or forcing) the sources within a pre-established theoretical framework. This is why it is crucial that PhD students and Early Career researchers receive support from senior scholars, and the Bradford conference facilitated exactly this interaction and intellectual exchange. Moreover, younger scholars can greatly benefit from networking with peers working on similar topics: the conference allowed delegates at my career stage to meet new friends, to share ideas, and to identify possible collaborators. And, most importantly, it encouraged us to work further on gender in the historical and archaeological sciences, and to disseminate our research.

We need more events like this, perhaps with annual frequency, because it is crucial to monitor progress and to plan future actions. Furthermore, it is not redundant to remember that we still need more men to be involved in the debate: gender should not be a privileged research topic for female scholars, and gender equality in the HE workplace should be a campaign supported by everyone.