

## HANNEKE TAKKENBERG

### How to Navigate the System?

Thank you for inviting me to deliver a lecture at the Tilburg University Network for Women. As I will speak without slides, it is a bit challenging how the story will unfold. It will be about navigating the system in academia, about what we all experience, and about what I did.

First, a bit more about myself. Ilja, your diversity policymaker, and I were having a phone conversation about this network meetings and she asked me, “Why did you put in your resume that you’re a mother of four children? That is quite a personal note in a biography.” I put it in there for a reason, even though I never do this for meeting with scientists. I think it is important that you are acknowledged not only as a scientist, but also as this other person, a parent. Most of us are, and I am very proud of my four daughters. They are the reason that I am doing diversity. It is important that they have role models, and that they know that they themselves have an important role to play in society. They have a lot to give and they should always try to make the best of it. So, that is my motivation for including my marriage and children in the resume.

I am a professor at the Erasmus Medical Center. That is where I started a long time ago, after having spent some years in the United States on an adventure. This trip made me realize that I did not want to become a surgeon or cardiologist. I wanted to be a scientist. On a more personal level, it was in Los Angeles where I got married and had my first baby. And when I came home, back to Rotterdam, I made another decision: I want a career in science and I want a career inside a clinic, close to patients, because that is where my central point of focus lies.

After having set my goals, I entered a system that was 99% male. At the time, I didn’t even realize that most people in my work environment were male. For one thing, I don’t mind being alone, and I don’t mind working independently. Actually, I like that. And I think that is why I thrived in that system. I did not face issues until I got beyond my PhD. The responses were along the lines of, “Oh, okay, we thought you were going to leave. What are you planning to do here?”

Well, I stayed and found a couple of female medical doctors with whom I started a little club. We were closely linked to the Dutch Society for Female Doctors, the VNVA. This network provided me with a lot of support. Above all, the network made me realize that you have several options when you want to make a career in a particular field and if you want to live your dream. My dream was to have better options for patients who are facing truly awful decisions in the field of cardiovascular surgery.

So, we as female doctors got together and said, “What are the opportunities that we have right now? We have a lot of ambition, but somehow it seems that we are not part of the system. We are outside the system.” For example at conferences, my team or panel would be introduced as, “This is Professor Smit, this is Doctor Rosenberg, and here we have Hanneke.” It sounds a bit like downplaying. But I am sure that it was not done on purpose, not at all. The people I worked with were always positive about me. But they failed to see me as an ambitious scientist because they did not recognize that trait in me. And perhaps that is something we all to some extent suffer from.

Do you already know the riddle of the neurosurgeon? Let me share it with you. A father and his young son are driving in the middle of the night when they have a terrible accident. The father is killed on the spot. The little boy is rushed to the hospital in an ambulance, to the Emergency Room. He has severe neural damage and needs an operation right away. He is wheeled into the operating room, and the neurosurgeon steps in and immediately says, “I cannot operate on this boy, he’s my son.” So, some of you may know how it is possible that the father is dead and yet there is still a parent who is a neurosurgeon. But most of the responses I get—even from cardiothoracic surgeons I work with—are, “How can that be? They must be a gay couple!” We can laugh about the obvious blind spot, but at the same time it is saddening that, apparently, women are not being acknowledged as neurosurgeons. That is what this story is about.

Failing to recognize women’s capacities happens to all of us, including myself. Perhaps you have taken the online Harvard Implicit Association Test. I filled out the test and it shows that I have a moderate association between males and careers, and the way that my brain is wired causes me to think that women are more associated with caring and with family than with making a career and making a lot of money. So these stereotypical ideas are in our heads; they are in everybody’s head, even though we mean well. The point is that we need to realize that implicit bias is always present, influencing the way we think about people. It even influences how we perceive ourselves. Our mind is programmed to associate men with a career and women with caring activities. But, when you realize how this system works, when you become aware of attributing stereotypical roles to people, then you can start making a change.

Let me offer an example. When looking at academia, we still see few women in top positions, both at the level of decision-makers and at the level of full professors. Especially economics is as sparsely populated as Sub-Saharan Africa when it comes to diversity. There are still a lot of things that need to change in order to make a difference and thus embrace diversity.

Let me tell you a little story. About 10 years ago, I founded a women’s network in my hospital called VENA. It is still around and very active: it manages to influence our Executive Board and the diversity policy. The network was actually founded because our Executive Board said, “We need to help women, ”which of course totally misses the point. We are excellent, whatever excellence may mean in a man’s or in a woman’s world. We don’t need help; we want equal opportunities.

Nevertheless, we said, “Okay, let’s start a network for women and see how we can make a difference.” And what we learned to realize was that women are actually outside the system. Therefore, by meeting each other, as you are doing here for the second time, you start your own network, you start interacting, you start your own system.

The goal of course is to interconnect with the system that has been around for hundreds of years and that is primarily male dominated. I have experienced how important it is to have a network, a place where you can support each other. Creating your own system is important to initiate change. The primary function of having a network is helping you to navigate the system here at Tilburg University.

I always refer to the system as water: you don't see it, but it is there, happening, floating. In the same way, the effects of informal networks, usually mainly used by males, are there, and they are as difficult to grasp as water. What I felt at the beginning of my career was that I was part of a team and at the same time I was not. How come? They would go out to a bar after work and have fun, and I had four little kids at home and didn't know what to do. Another telling example is grant proposals: they simply forgot to include me, although they certainly did not mean to look me over. I just wasn't part of their system.

One of the things that we can do, and I am getting to the solutions now, is to create a system that helps us influence the system that is currently in place, also at this university.

Another thing that I have learned is that gender equality is no longer a women's problem. In the 10 years since the women's network at the Erasmus MC was started, not a lot has changed when it comes to promotions. My institution is nearly at the bottom in the diversity league. This means it is not sufficient to let women help each other. That is not the way to go. What is needed is a culture change and the core conditions for change are sufficient volume and a clear business case. Diversity is of utmost added value to 21<sup>st</sup> century organizations. We need both men and women—and in a broader sense I think we need the diversity of perspectives—to remain innovative and successful as organizations. Obviously, this is not just about women; this is about everybody.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we had some great scientists. You have them at this university; in fact, my dad was an economics professor here. I have learned a lot from him. These scientists were individuals, usually older white Dutch men. They would build their empires with great success. It was all about personal success. But when someone so unique and special retired, the whole group around this person ran the risk of vaporizing. Gone! Certainly, we do not want that, for it is not sustainable. What we see now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is a different type of leadership. Individual excellence is no longer encouraged. Instead, there is emphasis on collective intelligence and what I call networked science. That means that you get people together who complement each other. By combining this diversity of perspectives, you are able to build teams that are much more sustainable, also after someone retires. And that is of course what you want.

Currently, we see these new systems arising, slowly but surely. Of course, there is some resistance from the old systems. They still want to promote that one great guy. But it is no longer about just one great person who deserves to be promoted. It is about the group of scientists that this person works in and whether he or she is of added value to the team. A positive shift is absolutely being made.

Funding instruments, like Horizon 2020, stir the movement towards validating diversity, in both the content of research and the way research is organized. These are important developments that I see coming at us at a fast pace. And we, together, can play an important role. When we learn to navigate the present system, we can make a positive change and move on to the next system that is going to be about networking, connecting, and working in large groups.

So how do you do that? When I was at the beginning of my career, having just finished my PhD, I thought I would just work very hard. It did not get me very far, I can tell you! In combination with having a couple of kids, it was almost deadly. So, when I realized I was not getting anywhere, I was happy to start this network, for it gave me the opportunity to push the organization into developing opportunities, such as career development programs, for women. It is good to hear that Tilburg University offers a Career Strategy Program too. It really changed my life! Initially, I didn't want to join because I thought it to be nonsensical to do this solely with women. I expected them to sit women down in a group and tell us how to behave. However, after half a day, the training opened my eyes. It showed me that I was doing things right by working very hard and by striving for excellence, but I wasn't doing the right things. For instance, I figured that my Head of Department would offer me a promotion because my productivity was high and my h-index was going up, but this was not the case, no way! Doing things right is about being part of the system and, at the same time, about standing out. It takes a strategy to stand out and it takes connections to make progress.

I went to the Head of Department and asked him for what I wanted. It took a lot of courage to do so, because he did not recognize that I was working really hard. I actually slammed my fist on the table and I said: "I want a promotion, I want to be an associate professor." And he answered, "Well maybe you should be a professor!" He had no clue how it worked, though. He is a cardiac surgeon, and therefore not too much into academia. But still, that was the point in time when he acknowledged me. I had stood up, made myself visible, and said that I was ambitious. Also, I had made sure that colleagues in my Department supported my ideas.

That was when my Head of Department started lobbying with the Dean. I had to help him there as well, because he was not very good at it. He's a great guy, but the university politics are really strange. You could draft a report and a vision document, and then your Head of Department goes to the Dean and has a "secret" conversation. And then the Dean puts the report in a drawer. And you wait. And then you realize that you have to keep on being proactive.

At first, I hated networking. When I needed to finish a paper or make an analysis, I was tempted to skip drinks with the Department. In one of the career programs, I made myself a promise to attend one social activity each month, one that I liked. This strategy paid off. Just go, do not bail out. There is always work but you can make a deliberate choice to postpone work and attend these meetings to get to know and understand each other and understand the system better. It is of tremendous value. I still do it. Once a month, I step over my barrier and go to a social meeting.

Culture is another thing I would like to talk about. I talked about personal development; how you can work to do things right and do the right things at the same time. We can talk about the fact that the system is not transparent and how the network of women can play a role there. I have been the Chief Diversity Officer for Erasmus University for the past three years, which relates to diversity in the broadest sense of the word. My goal has always been to create an academic culture where everybody can be him- or herself, feel at home and experience equal opportunities to achieve goals. We cannot all reach the top, but we should all get equal opportunities.

You should be able to be yourself and not transform yourself into an older, white European male. Sometimes I felt I should look like them to fit in. It is so important to remain yourself and focus on your own unique qualities and values. That is something that the culture of the system at the university needs to facilitate.

The second point is the importance of feeling at home. This of course has nothing to do with sitting on the couch in the evening and wearing sweatpants and eating popcorn et cetera. No, you should be able to feel like you're in an environment where you can thrive and where you need not be afraid of getting intimidated. The LNVH has received signals that universities are not always a safe place. This is something we can improve ourselves, partially, but we can only make it safe if changes are made in the way the university deals with for example scientific harassment and unacceptable behavior that leads to exclusion. This is directly related to culture.

Besides being yourself and feeling at home there is the third factor to address: experience equal opportunities. And that is a tough one. It makes me come back full circle to implicit bias and sometimes even explicit bias, which is a serious issue that needs to be solved. I just had a conversation with one of your professors at TiSEM. We discussed the fact that we as scientists always rely on evidence except when it comes to diversity: except when it is about differences between men and women. There are hundreds of studies by now that show that female scientists do not get equal opportunities compared to male scientists. We try to be impartial and neutral, but this clearly is complicated. Unconsciously, the idea comes up that women are less capable compared to men. This applies to research, but also to education. It is a fact that female lecturers receive lower ratings than male lecturers in the academic system, even when their students perform as well during exams. This is a clear example that relates to implicit bias and unequal opportunities.

I would like to ask you to think about all this. See how at your university a change towards equal opportunities can be made. This is not confined to women versus men; it also applies to people with different nationalities and cultural backgrounds, and people in the LGBT community. It is so important that we, in women's networks, address obstacles and opportunities. During a recent talk, Ingrid van Engelshoven, the Minister of Education, Culture and Science, confirmed the importance of an inclusive academic community. As a network, we can start having discussions and make a stand. I hope I gave you a clear overview of what I think is important in navigating the system and if you haven't done so yet, do enroll in a career development program.

Thank you.

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