



# Leading the Future: Women at the Helm of Mediterranean Science and Higher Education

## WEBINAR

23.4.2026

Despite significant progress in the Euro-Mediterranean region, a glass ceiling persists in both academic governance and scientific management. While the region has seen a rise in female graduates (exceeding 50% in STEM fields in Syria and Tunisia compared to a global share of 35%) and a slight progress in the global participation of women in the research profession (from 36% to 41%)<sup>1</sup>, this talent pool is not yet sufficiently reflected in decision-making positions.

The transition from the laboratories and lecture halls to the (di)rector office remains slow and marred by structural barriers. At EU level, women are underrepresented among heads of institutions, making up just 26% (She Figures 2024). Overcoming such structural inequalities to unlock full potential is also a central priority outlined in the European Commission's Gender Equality Strategy 2026-2030.<sup>2</sup> This gender gap brings a net loss in terms of scientific and innovation potential for the Euro-Mediterranean region.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) not only shape knowledge and the labor markets of tomorrow – they also influence social norms and perceptions. Gender-sensitive leadership in universities and research institutes has a ripple effect beyond academia: it shifts societal attitudes, opens space for women's leadership in other sectors, and accelerates broader social change.

The Union for the Mediterranean, in partnership with the Catalan Development Cooperation Agency, sees this as a priority, and it is mobilizing a capacity building programme for university leadership.

On the **International Day of Women and Girls in Science** (11 February), the Union for the Mediterranean announced a high-level webinar to be held on **23 April 2026**. Building on the 2025 UfM Webinar on the international day of women and girls in science ([available here](#)), this upcoming session shifts the conversation from participation to leadership in academia.

This webinar will address these two interconnected pillars of leadership:

1. **Academic Leadership:** Managing the higher education institutions (Universities, Networks) and driving institutional reform.
2. **Scientific Leadership:** Leading research agendas, innovation, and science diplomacy.

### The objectives of this webinar are to:

- Present data to address why women remain underrepresented in managerial positions in higher education, research and innovation (Rectors, Deans, Directors, CEOs of startups).
- Present policy initiatives advancing in the region, particularly on science and education governance. Highlight best practices.
- Present the new UfM regional project "**Women Leading Change**" (supported by the Catalan Agency for Development Cooperation) as a model for training future academic leaders.

<sup>1</sup> <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000393768>

<sup>2</sup> [https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/1f5fa936-9fba-4435-93f5-32fa220bac82\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/1f5fa936-9fba-4435-93f5-32fa220bac82_en)



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| 10h00 | <p><b>Opening remarks</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Petra Kežman</b>, Deputy Secretary General for Human Development, <i>Union for the Mediterranean</i></li> <li>- <b>Andrea Costafreda</b>, Director General for Development Cooperation, <i>Government of Catalonia</i></li> </ul>   |
| 10h10 | <p><b>Keynote speech: Leading Change in the Institutions.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Maria Cristina Russo</b>, Deputy Director General, DG Research and Innovation, <i>European Commission</i></li> </ul>  |
| 10h20 | <p><b>WOMEN IN ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP</b></p> <p><i>This session will present the barriers women face in reaching the highest levels of university governance (Rectors/Presidents) and how universities can become engines of gender equality through their management structures</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Isabelle Régner</b>, Vice President for Gender Equality and the Fight Against Discrimination, <i>Aix-Marseille University</i></li> <li>- <b>Selim Mekdessi</b>, Dean of the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, <i>Lebanese University</i></li> <li>- <b>Olfa Bouallègue</b>, Vice-President, <i>University of Sousse</i></li> </ul> <p>Moderator: <b>Anna Dorangricchia</b>, Project Manager, Gender Equality, <i>Union for the Mediterranean</i></p>   |
| 11h20 | <p><b>Brief Presentation “Women Leading Change: Gender-Responsive Leadership in Mediterranean Universities and Municipalities”</b></p> <p>Moderator: <b>João Lobo</b>, Project Analyst, Higher Education, <i>Union for the Mediterranean</i></p>  |
| 11h30 | <b>BREAK</b>  |
| 11h45 | <p><b>Keynote speech: Leading Change in Science</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Prof. Rajaâ Cherkaoui El Moursli</b>, Mohammad V University of Rabat, <i>L'Oréal-UNESCO Awards for Women in Science</i>.</li> </ul>   |
| 12h00 | <p><b>WOMEN IN SCIENTIFIC LEADERSHIP</b></p> <p><i>This session will address the structural hurdles preventing female researchers from leading major international consortia and innovation ecosystems. It will explore how to transition from participation in research teams to the strategic management of scientific agendas, ensuring women are at the forefront of designing solutions for regional challenges, from climate resilience to deep-tech innovation.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Gihan Kamel</b>, Principal Scientist and Team Supervisor, <i>SESAME</i></li> <li>- <b>Kateřina Svíčková</b>, Head of Sector – Gender, <i>European Commission</i></li> <li>- <b>Ruba Al Zubi</b>, Levant Region Climate Energy and Environment Lead, <i>UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office</i></li> <li>- <b>Antonella Autino</b>, Programme Coordinator, <i>PRIMA</i></li> </ul> <p>Moderator: <b>Giuseppe Provenzano</b>, Project Manager, Research and Innovation, <i>Union for the Mediterranean</i></p> |
| 12h55 | <i>Recommendations, next steps and institutional closing</i>  |