

The “Défi Genre” (Gender Challenge Programme) at CNRS

Anne Pépin^a, Sandra Laugier^b

^aMission pour la place des femmes au CNRS, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), France, ^b Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne and Institut des sciences humaines et sociales, CNRS, France ¹

ABSTRACT

In 2012, the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) created a Mission for Interdisciplinarity (MI) to steer a comprehensive strategy for the promotion of interdisciplinary research at CNRS, which would foster cooperation between its ten disciplinary divisions and other institutional partners, support interdisciplinary research teams and laboratories, and address key interdisciplinary research challenges both at the national and local levels. The development of gender analysis – first introduced in social science and humanities (SSH) – in fields outside SSH was identified as one of the ten key interdisciplinary challenges (“Défis”) CNRS should be tackling in the coming years.

The CNRS Gender Challenge Programme (“Défi Genre”) aims to develop a gender perspective in different scientific fields by funding targeted and innovative research projects proposed by interdisciplinary teams, involving researchers from both inside and outside SSH. The first national call for proposals was launched in 2012 and successfully renewed in 2013 and 2014, supporting a total of fourteen projects until now. In 2014, the integration of the gender dimension started extending as a cross-cutting issue in other MI-supported actions. The paper will be presenting the institutional context for this innovative CNRS programme, its central features and some of the key research topics it helped develop, as well as its main impacts and perspectives. Through this example, the paper also aims to present some methodological points regarding the extension of gender studies from SSH to other sciences and to analyse the various resistances a successful program on gender can encounter in a polemical political context.

1. BACKGROUND AND OVERALL CNRS STRATEGY FOR GENDER RESEARCH

The French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) is France’s largest public research institution and also the largest public basic research organisation in Europe. CNRS's annual budget represents a quarter of French public spending on civilian research, and while a large part of the CNRS governmental funding is dedicated to salaries and direct support to laboratories, a significant budget is also redistributed to research teams via various programmes and project-based funding schemes.

CNRS covers all fields of knowledge and has been supporting gender studies for over forty years, through dedicated programmes, structures and targeted permanent researcher positions, and remains France’s most prominent player in the institutionalisation of gender research.

More recently, CNRS has set as a strategic priority to promote interdisciplinary gender research and the integration of a gender perspective including in fields outside social science and humanities.

In 2008, in reply to a concern expressed by the French Ministry for Higher Education and Research, the Mission for the Place of Women at CNRS (MPDF) – CNRS’s Office for

Gender Equality² – with strong support from the CNRS Division for Humanities and Social Sciences (INSHS) launched a national inventory of researchers working on gender and/or women’s studies in France, which revealed a national community of over 2000, working in a variety of disciplines, including some outside SSH³.

In the wake of this inventory work, and at the initiative of the INSHS, CNRS decided in 2010 to launch a pluridisciplinary thematic network (“Réseau thématique pluridisciplinaire”) on gender studies (“RTP Etudes Genre”) exploring the integration of the gender dimension in fields beyond social science and humanities – including biology and medical research, environmental studies, engineering and technology – through a series of workshops involving international experts. Four workshops were held in Paris in between 2011 and 2013, which helped develop a better understanding of the issues at stake and start to build a network. The RTP “Etudes Genre” co-Programme director, CNRS senior researcher Françoise Moos was invited by the US-EU Gendered Innovations project⁴ to become one of the national expert contributors.

This RTP helped spark the interest of the CNRS communities to matters concerning sex and gender, and contributed to making CNRS research leaders more aware of the international development of this field of research. Findings of the CNRS RTP “Etudes Genre” will soon be made available to the public in an upcoming publication.

In 2012, CNRS created a Mission for Interdisciplinarity (MI) to steer a concerted and cross-cutting strategy for the promotion of interdisciplinary research at CNRS, with the aims to foster cooperation between its ten disciplinary divisions and other institutional partners, support interdisciplinary research teams, laboratories and networks, and address key interdisciplinary research challenges both at the national and local levels.

The MI’s efforts to open new themes of research at the frontiers between various sciences, and its ambition to develop and mainstream human and social concerns within the whole of science, have not only been recognised – including by the European Commission⁵ – but have also directly played an instrumental role in the recent development of gender studies at CNRS.

Both the success of the RTP “Etudes Genre” and a strong will of the MI’s Director and Steering Committee – which includes the top leadership of CNRS as well as representatives of all Divisions and fields – led the MI to select the integration of the gender dimension in research fields beyond the social sciences and humanities as one of its “Défis”, i.e. as one of CNRS’s great interdisciplinary research challenges for the coming years. The “Défi Genre” was launched in 2012⁶.

In parallel, the CNRS INSHS led a pioneering effort in launching a national inter-institution initiative, the “Groupement d’Intérêt Scientifique” (GIS) “Institut du Genre” (Institute for Gender)⁷ in 2012 to foster interdisciplinary research on gender, which now counts over 35 laboratories and 30 academic institutions as partners. Focusing on SSH first, it has started opening up its themes to fields outside SSH. The GIS “Institut du Genre” recently played a key role in the public defense of gender studies when a national debate, pushed by a conservative political fraction in France, sprawled in 2013-2014 against the supposed “gender theory”, and threatened to undermine the research field itself.

The CNRS strategy is therefore developed through several programmes and structures which collaborate together, namely: the MI, through the “Défi Genre” and other actions; the MPDF, through training, colloquia, targeted support, and several projects; the INSHS, through programmes, researcher positions, and structures such as the GIS Institute for Gender; other CNRS Divisions, through specific supports to projects and structures developing research on

gender; internal and external communication through e.g. online and paper CNRS Journal⁸, scientific forums⁹, wikiradio, national media, with strong support from the CNRS Communications Office; and participation to European-level initiative, such as the GENDER-NET ERA-NET, coordinated by CNRS-MPDF (see poster at this conference) and the recently-launched Working Group on Gender and Diversity at Science Europe.

The end goal of CNRS through this strategy is to foster the development of new knowledge and innovation of the highest standards of quality, thanks to the development of gender studies beyond social science and humanities and the integration of sex and gender analyses in its research programmes and initiatives.

As a public research organisation deeply aware of its societal responsibilities, CNRS is also highly committed towards the promotion of gender equality, and has taken action to fight inequalities in its own workforce. The CNRS Gender Action Plan recently adopted by CNRS¹⁰ has been a key initiative in this direction. A feature of the CNRS is the connection made between equality, social issues in general, and research stakes – a trademark of the CNRS Division for SSH, whose implication in most major research programmes at CNRS is one of the main strengths of our organisation. The CNRS top leadership is largely convinced that SSH are an essential part of any research that involves humans, and the public. Such a belief is at the root of the understanding of a majority of the MI's "Défis": the social dimension is at the core – or the starting point – of knowledge, and not only about "impact" or consequences.

The reasons for this principle stem from epistemology, not only politics. We at CNRS believe that no strong equality policy can be developed without also developing strong gender research. Support to gender research, including in fields beyond SSH, is a key action featured in the newly adopted CNRS Gender Action Plan recently.

Very much in line with European priorities set for the ERA construction¹¹ and for Horizon 2020¹², there is a joint agenda at CNRS for promoting gender equality within CNRS and promoting gender research and the integration of the gender dimension in research contents in fields beyond SSH (e.g. biology and health research, environmental research, engineering). Such a connection may seem quite obvious, since research, by analysing and explaining, appears to be helping fight inequities and injustices, but the connection needs to be strengthened and argued. CNRS has great assets in that regard, in its capacity to bring together different approaches, develop interdisciplinarity and consider SSH analyses as an actual contribution to science.

To support research alone, or to promote gender equality in the workplace and in research professions as separate matters, is not enough. Equality in the workplace, or in society, can only develop, or matter, in a context where knowledge and science value the subject of these studies, hence women. The discoveries and methodologies of social science in the last century have shown that the importance and support we give to a research field is correlated to the actual social importance we give to the subject of this research (e.g. poverty, disability, care studies, gender research).

Conversely, the progress and excellence of research and education in a given field can help acknowledge its importance, and its place in society. Good research on e.g. capabilities and development has led to a closer public attention to global inequalities. Similarly, excellence in gender research, and not only in SSH, should help acknowledge women, and gender, as an important subject for science.

It is indeed a strong belief of the President of CNRS, as he has recently stated in his foreword to the report on the national inventory of gender researchers in France that was carried out by

CNRS³, that developing research on gender means fighting for the recognition of existing gender inequalities and against their causes, as well as against the prejudices that undermine science itself.

2. DESCRIPTION AND PRINCIPLES OF THE “DEFI GENRE” PROGRAMME

The “Défi Genre” (Gender Challenge) Programme at the MI could be defined as the following: “How taking into account gender can transform research activity and interdisciplinarity itself”.

The aims of the “Défi Genre” are thus to develop a gender perspective in different scientific fields by funding targeted and innovative research projects proposed by interdisciplinary teams involving researchers from both inside and outside the social sciences and humanities.

The programme’s focus until now has been on gender, and the “Défi Genre” has not been supporting projects which proposed to examine sex differences only, such as cell biology research projects – although we do recognize the need for the development of such studies – or research involving humans and/or animals which did not plan to investigate possible gendered aspects, i.e. related to social, cultural, and environmental issues.

Like for all other “Défis” at the MI, longer term objectives of the “Défi Genre” Programme also include fostering subsequent applications to other national funding schemes (e.g. Agence Nationale de la Recherche) and to European funding (e.g. HORIZON 2020 Excellent Science ERC and FET, Societal Challenges), as well as increasing the number of joint publications, the number of CNRS laboratories developing gendered research, the number of Ph.D. theses and post-docs undertaken on these subjects.

The “Défi Genre” awards one-year project funding via an annual call for proposals. Three national calls have been opened since the launch of the Programme, in 2012, 2013 and 2014.

The “Défi Genre” homepage¹³ and the calls themselves contain detailed information on the requirements and objectives, to better assist applicants. Proposals are peer-reviewed by a reviewing committee and several rapporteurs per proposal. Evaluators for the “Défi Genre” are French gender experts in their fields, for most of them, or members of the Mission for Interdisciplinary’s Steering Committee, or in charge of other “Défis”, and therefore already sensitized to gender issues.

In 2012 and 2013, the scope of the “Défi Genre” call for proposals remained very open. While it did mention biology, ecology-environment, engineering, information and communication technologies and computer science as fields that were of concern, it did not target specific topics, nor specific scientific and technological issues to be solved. Five projects were supported each year.

For the new “Défi Genre” call launched in January 2014, a special focus was put on scientific topics covered by some other “Défis” supported by the Mission for Interdisciplinarity, e.g. innovative therapies for mental illness (“Défi ITMM”); perceptive deficiencies and personalised assistive technologies (“Défi SENS”); energy transition: resources, society, environment (“Défi ENRS”); nuclear energy, environment, waste and society (“Défi NEEDS”). The 2014 call informed applicants that projects addressing challenges targeted in some of the other “Défis” supported by the MI would be most welcome, and gave some examples of potentially relevant topics¹⁴. Four projects are supported this year.

Dedicated workshops are also organised each year for principal investigators to share their results, meet with other laureates and foster collaborations and community building.

In addition, integration of the gender dimension as a cross-cutting issue in other research "Défis" funded by the MI has started as well in 2013-2014. For instance, PIs from projects funded through the "Défi Genre" (on gendered psychiatry and on the effects of stereotype threat on driving patterns) were invited to present their work at the annual PI workshop organised by the "Défi ITMM" on Innovative Therapies for Mental Illnesses, and have raised awareness, interest and fostered collaborations. Gender was also introduced as a cross-cutting theme to be discussed at a workshop organised by the "Défi SENS" on perceptive deficiencies and personalised assistive technologies, which hold great opportunities for future gendered innovations. Such initiatives will be further developed this year and in 2015, including in the "Défis" on Nuclear energy, environment, waste and society; Energy transition: resources, society, environment; Nanotechnology and nanomedicine.

Moreover, the MPDF has developed a basic online training¹⁵ and has started organising targeted training workshops¹⁶ to help CNRS researchers from different disciplines develop sex and gender analysis, and foster future applications. CNRS has also organised national colloquia in 2013 and 2014 on this subject involving international experts, such as the event held on March 10th 2014 entitled "Nouvelles sciences du genre" ("New Gender Science")¹⁷. These events have also very clearly put forward the major funding opportunities offered by H2020 for projects integrating the gender dimension in their designs, as well as the European Commission's mandatory requirements to do so in a large number of topics already.

Once a year, the "Défis" are evaluated by the MI's Steering Committee, which is chaired by the CNRS President, and includes the CNRS Chief Officer for Research, the Chair of the CNRS Scientific Council, and representatives of each of the ten CNRS scientific Divisions, the CNRS HR Department, Communications Department, European Research and Internal Cooperation Department, Innovation and Industrial Relations Department, as well of course as the Director of the MI. Several indicators are monitored, including the number of received applications, interdisciplinary publications, new young researchers (PhDs and postdocs), follow-up applications to national or EU funding, etc.

Since its launch, the "Défi Genre" Programme has supported fourteen interdisciplinary research projects in various fields. Main themes covered have been: gender and environment (ecology, sustainable agriculture, waste), gender and health (Reinke oedema and voice trouble, comorbidity obesity-depression in prison, gender in psychiatry), gender and cognition (stereotype threat in driving behaviors, artificial intelligence, child socio-cognitive development) and gender and new technologies (care and assistive technologies).

One project funded in 2012, entitled "Voice Trouble" in reference to Judith Butler's key 1990 publication "Gender Trouble", was proposed by an interdisciplinary and international team led by Cristel Portes, a linguist from the CNRS/Aix-Marseille University joint laboratory on speech and language ("Laboratoire Parole et Langage", UMR 7309) in collaboration with medical doctors from the Faculty of Medicine of the Saint Joseph University in Lebanon. They investigated the effects of a voice pathology, the Reinke oedema, which can modify certain acoustic characteristics to the point that it affects gender identity. This innovative study helped make progress both in linguistics and in the development of clinical approaches which better take into account complaints expressed by women whose voices were perceived as masculine.

Another project supported in 2012, and again in 2013 with a different focus, was led by Marie-Pierre Moisan, a biologist from the INRA/University of Bordeaux joint laboratory on nutrition and integrated neurobiology ("Laboratoire NutrINeurO", UMR INRA 1286), in collaboration with sociologists and physicians. It explored the occurrence of depression-obesity co-morbidity in a French prison where a large number of men and about thirty women

were being incarcerated, and showed that weight gain and severe anxio-depressive symptoms was much more prevalent among women prisoners than among male prisoners, and could be related to the fact that women did not have priority to access fitness and sports facilities and were given the same menus and meal portions as men.

The project led by Cécile Martha, a psycho-sociologist from the Institute for the science of motion in Marseille (“Institut des Sciences du Mouvement-Etienne Jules Marey”, UMR 7287) working in collaboration with engineers and virtual reality specialists, studied the differential effects of stereotype threat on driving patterns and performances, and related affordances, and showed evidence of a stereotype threat activation among female participants by specific instructions and visual environment, which varied according to their level of identification to a specific gender. This project opened the program to new fields of research such as engineering and behavioural studies.

Another project supported in 2013 was led by Gloria Origgi, a philosopher and CNRS researcher at the “Institut Nicod” cognitive science laboratory (UMR 8129 CNRS/Ecole Normale Supérieure/ Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales), in collaboration with the Computer Science Laboratory in Paris (UMR 7606 CNRS/ Université Pierre et Marie Curie), has started an in-depth investigation on whether the intelligence model underlying artificial intelligence was in fact gendered, which led to a more general investigation on the implementation and assumption of male or female behaviors in human artefacts. The team’s work is now developing into an international network involving key players in the USA.

These four projects illustrate the variety of research areas covered by the “Défi Genre” and the key catalyst role that this programme is playing for the emergence of new knowledge, new applications and new national and international research collaborations.

3. OUTCOMES AND PERSPECTIVES

The “Défi Genre”, by including gender issues on the list of the great research challenges to be addressed by such a major institution as CNRS, which stands as a reference for cutting-edge programmes and for autonomy of research, has been a crucial step for the recognition of gender and sex analysis as a serious research matter, beyond political stakes. Once admitted on this list (albeit with a lesser funding than other more technological “Défis”), gender becomes a scientific priority. As a research-performing and funding organisation, CNRS became a pioneer not only in the recognition and development of gender in SSH, but also in the recognition of gender in other sciences, hence in full-fledged science.

However, developing the “Défi Genre” Programme at CNRS has been a challenge in itself and has encountered obstacles. Like most initiatives to develop gender studies, it first attracted interest and curiosity, and got initial support, but the main difficulties appeared in the consolidation of the Programme once launched, in a context of pressure on financial resources and of polemics on gender. Even in an open and enlightened environment like CNRS, research on gender is under threat as soon as resources are low. The deeply ingrained undervaluation of gender studies also appeared in plain view, for instance, in the construction of the new National Strategy for Research (SNR) to be launched in 2014. For many leaders in research and innovation policy, gender is a low priority research field, its connection to SSH becoming a downside instead of an advantage.

Here we would like to briefly highlight the specific difficulty of the French situation, where gender studies are often considered by French scholars as “differentialist”, and therefore anti-republican. In France, feminism suffered a delayed development, mainly due to prejudices in the academic world, and even though some key thinkers of the field have emerged in France.

The state of relative underdevelopment of French gender studies can be seen as the form taken by male domination, and stereotypes, in the academic world. Mocking feminist theories for their “excesses” is frequent, and even standard, among French academics from all disciplines, often opposing gender analyses, or promotion of women, with such national principles as fraternity and universality without any critical reflection referring to their “male” origins.

The specific French problem is an intellectualised prejudice grounded on French “universalism” and an alleged equality by Law between French citizens, not acknowledging that is in fact a “malestream” universalism. This serves as an argument against the development of gender studies, and actually works against progress in actual universality. This argument underlies all sorts of stands (against quotas, against positive action, etc.) often taken by scientists... and women scientists themselves.

This has been obvious in the recent and heated debates on “THE gender theory” which took place in France in 2013-2014, and which have clearly shown the huge prejudices, within the academic and scientific world, as much as in the media and in the general public, against gender studies, still considered by many as non-scientific. The debate has even been an opportunity for some political activists to criticize all publicly-funded programs (hence the CNRS policy) on gender. Hence the importance of the challenge within science, and the necessity to prove the scientific relevance and epistemological stake of gender studies and gendered approaches to research.

Here the principles of the “Défi Genre” Programme, affirmed and defended at its launch in 2012, which are also those put forward by the European Union, through the ERA priorities¹¹ and through Horizon 2020 especially¹², can be of importance. Not including the sex/gender dimension into the methodology, content, and impact assessment of research (e.g. in biological and health-related research) can lead to poor research and missed opportunities, and not “only” to inequalities and under-valuing women. This means again articulating research stakes and social/political matters – and SSH research is still the methodological starting point here: a reflective and critical take on the way science works, and on the risk in not taking sex differences into account in research and experiment. The first steps of research on gender in the 1970s were actually to show the necessity of including the sex variable in data in, e.g. history, law, linguistics, anthropology, to analyse the reasons and effects of this exclusion, and to target epistemological malestream by including women in the data¹⁸.

It was a natural next step to propose to use the same methods in other fields and the presence of SSH at CNRS is a specificity that can help other sciences to take gender into account. Health science, as shown in our Programme, as well as in many initiatives abroad¹⁹, has offered key examples of gendered issues that can be understood as urgent by a wide audience. Including women in research has led to a better understanding of disease in both women and men, thus, to more universality, and accuracy.

This is what is a stake in our “Défi Genre”: introducing gender in the data (experimental, conceptual...) makes better science. And an interdisciplinary institution like the CNRS, and its MI, can strongly contribute to the subject by further exploring the relation of gender to sex.

But gender studies, as we have observed, are always a powerful political subject even when the topic is extended to non-SSH science. Resistances are very strong and come from unexpected sources. We should not forget that gender knowledge is always connected, especially by its critics and enemies, but also by its provocative nature, to social criticism and feminism. It is the only clear case where a political movement and a social transformation have turned into actual knowledge, science, contributing to more objectivity and generality. Claiming gender as *science* remains a political challenge in many ways and this should be

acknowledged in order to fight more efficiently for what we may now call (as coined by the CNRS) “gender science”.

The Gender Challenge Programme at CNRS has been until now a small scale dedicated funding programme to support emerging and exploratory research on the integration of a gender perspective in fields outside the SSH. While it is now expanding through mainstreaming in other interdisciplinary Challenges supported by the MI, there is no such thing, yet, as a requirement for all applicants to the MI’s funding programmes, or to other CNRS research-funding schemes, seeking funding to consider sex and/or gender analysis in their research designs.

The “Défi Genre” Programme has hence been a breakthrough in this difficult context, and considerably increased the level of awareness and integration of gender aspects in research contents at CNRS. Fourteen exploratory interdisciplinary projects on emerging research have been supported, which have attracted national attention (via the CNRS Journal²⁰ as well as in the national media²¹). Projects are expanding, gender is being integrated into the other “Défis” as key criterion, and a network of laureates has developed. The “Défi Genre” has also gained international recognition in various conferences²².

The overall strategy developed by CNRS has led to increased recognition of gender as a legitimate and necessary object of research within our organisation, but in the larger research community as well. It has created a progress in science, and in justice and equity as well, connecting again and more tightly the two elements of the aforementioned joint agenda at the CNRS.

Within CNRS, beyond the “Défi Genre”, a growing number of projects integrating sex/gender analysis are being developed and funded. The report on strategic orientations for gender studies published by the French Ministry in charge of research at the end of 2012²³ was also largely based on the research and initiatives developed by CNRS. Among other things, a large international conference on gender studies – the first of its kind in France – will be organised by the GIS “Institut du Genre” in Lyon, France, in September 2014.

The Programmes and different events showcasing gender science recently organised by CNRS have received national and international attention, and recognition from the Minister for Women's Rights, as well as from MENESR. The institutional commitment to support gender science at CNRS has been a great step in the acknowledgement of gender as a scientific priority. It seems important to keep in mind that this recognition as a scientific matter is always threatened by social and political conservatisms, and that such resistances very often find their way into our institutions’s priority choices. SSH provide a key methodological elements of gender studies, and also indispensable resources to understand these resistances and prejudices, and to contribute to overcome them.

Various proposals are being examined by CNRS for the evolution of the “Défi Genre”. The main tendency is a mainstreaming of gender issues in the other “Défis” of the CNRS, as has already started in 2014. While important and useful, especially in order to involve seasoned scientists and top programmes in “gender science”, this proposal is obviously not enough in order to really increase the status and develop gender, and sex, as a research topic in its own right, which needs dedicated programmes, and funding, and public acknowledgement. Another way suggested by the steering committee would be, instead of a call for applications, to have a direct funding policy, on visible emerging actions. However, such a strategy would not be apt to encourage newcomers to disseminate the methods. The question therefore remains open on the best way to continue to encourage and support gender studies in fields where their development is not yet strong enough to be actually competitive, hence to fight the resistances to a further and stronger development of the program.

In any case, the program will be pursued in the coming years and its evolution will be obviously dependent on the general and political context of support to gender. We strongly believe, and hope to have shown in this paper presenting the CNRS “Défi Genre”, that artificially separating social issues of gender equality, and “purely” scientific issues, while comfortable and reassuring for some institutions and Programmes, is not the best choice in a consistent and lucid scientific policy. Still, research on gender and sex, even in non-SSH fields, is undervalued in France. So the evolution of the “Défi Genre” programme and of the support, and forms of support, given by the CNRS to gender studies in all fields of research shall be very instructive on how to articulate and mutually reinforce the elements of our agenda, equality and research: including more data and studies about gender/sex is still a political fight... for better science.

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