



“The WOMEN’S BRAIN PROJECT”
Project launch, St. Gallen, April 7th 2017

Opening remarks by **Tania Dussey-Cavassini**,
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Ambassador for Global Health

« **Why are we gathered here today?** »

Check against delivery

“No woman is only just a woman”

“Maybe women have in the course of this century gotten too much used to their passive attitude, and have entrusted it to only exceptional women to confirm that the exceptional remains the norm when it comes to women. No, the 20th century demands much more”.

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear experts, Dear organizers,

These two quotes are by Edith Stein, a philosopher, theologian, teacher, Carmelite, passionate student of Phenomenology – the philosophical study of the structures of experience and consciousness. Edith Stein was – yes, indeed – an exceptional woman. What made her so unique were her drive, search for the truth and for the study of the mind. This year, we are reminded of the 75th anniversary of her death.

A Jew who converted to Catholicism in her youth, Edith Stein sought refuge in Switzerland during the Second World War, whilst she was still living in The Netherlands. She had hoped to pursue her calling in one of the Convent in this country, in the canton of Fribourg. Despite letters of support addressed by Swiss people, the Swiss authorities denied her request for asylum. The outcome was fatal. She was soon deported from The Netherlands, and died in the camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau in August 1942. She was my age, fifty.

“No woman is only just a woman” was the credo of Edith Stein. She was convinced of the brain potential of women, of the many diverse resources women bring to the table. Edith Stein’s studies, her numerous writings, her endless thirst for knowledge and understanding have been a source of inspiration for many, and for me.

We are here today because we are all convinced of the need for gender-based research. In the area of Alzheimer and other related diseases, the needs are staggering: The Alzheimer association just published the latest figures a week ago: in Switzerland, 144'000 people live now with dementia. There are 27'000 new cases every year in my country. 11 million new cases in the world. 2/3 are women, and 70% of the caregivers are women too.

I will leave it to the experts and scientists Antonella and Maria Teresa to talk about the medical issues of women's mental health. Allow me to offer some preliminary questions & remarks:

- The facts : The disease affects more women as patients, why?
- The presentation / trajectory of symptoms in women are different from men. Why? Could new discoveries help us better treat men and women? Are there gender-specific treatments?
- More women are impacted as caregivers: neighbours, sisters, daughters, daughters in law ... Countless are the women who attend to people living with Alzheimer's. One of the consequences is that this will set back our diversity accomplishments for the next decades as the population ages, and women will step away from careers to be the carers. I count myself among these carers, when I quit my work at the Ministry for foreign affairs in 2006 to care for my Mother who suffered from Alzheimer.

How will societies evolve and respond to this challenge?

- The good news is: more women are seeking careers in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM). However the only place with a "thicker glass ceiling" than in corporations is in academia. Are we not depriving ourselves of valuable contributions by hindering women's careers? How do we keep women in scientific research and get them interested in working in this field?

So, what frameworks do we have in order to advance gender-based research and launch our Women's Brain Project today?

As you may know, Gender studies only started some thirty years ago, and were first subject to international discussions at the Beijing Conference of 1995. Back then, it was Madame Ruth Dreifuss, former Federal Councilor, in charge of health and other issues, who led the Swiss delegation. Ruth Dreifuss, another exceptional woman who continues to push many boundaries, relentlessly.

Today, many still consider Gender specificities as another annoying invention of feminism. Yet, it has allowed for the voices and rights of many diverse groups to be recognized and to flourish (i.e. LGBTs). Paradoxically, before women had ever been attributed any civil rights, one of the very few places where they were able to find an occupation other than motherhood was in the Church; although they were only entrusted with a series of unpaid vocations such as nursing, teaching, caring for the poor and the needy. I had to mention this Maria Teresa, since of all places, you chose this to launch the Women's Brain Project: St. Gallen, a city filled with Church history.

So, here are some new **frameworks** we have in order to advance gender-based research:

- The ICH (International Conference on Harmonisation of technical requirements for registration of Pharmaceuticals for human use) issued guidelines on “*sex-related considerations in the conduct of clinical trials*”. First published in 2004, revised in 2009, these aimed at encouraging the inclusion of diverse population in clinical trials. Swissmedic who is an active member of the ICH complies with these guidelines. A good start.
- In 2010, these guidelines were followed by a new strategic plan issued by the National Institutes of Health in the US called: “***Moving into the future with new dimensions and strategies, a vision for 2020 for women’s health research***”. I discovered that the “Office of Research on Women’s Health” had already been established in 1990 in response to congressional, scientific and advocacy concerns at a lack of systemic and consistent inclusion of women in clinical trials. Another good trend.
- Other papers have been published since 2010 emphasizing the need for diversifying clinical trials. I was pleased to discover that the University Hospital CHUV in Lausanne organised together with the Swiss Laboratory animal science association, an exclusive workshop in 2015 on “***Why sex is important in research***”, exploring sex bias in animal studies, and the underrepresentation of female mice in neuroscience. Yes, this is no April fool’s joke: female mice also behave differently.
- On a broader political note: Thanks to Switzerland who pushed this agenda at the World Health Organisation governing bodies, the World Health Assembly will adopt a **Global Action Plan on dementia** next month in Geneva. The plan calls for all Member States to take measures for the care and cure of people living with dementia. The importance of sharing data, collaborating internationally, and gender-based research is included in this plan.
- Finally, **Goals 3 and 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** adopted by all 194 Member States of the UN in September 2015 give us ground to act: to ensure healthy lives and promote the well-being for all at all ages, and to achieve gender equality and empower women and girls. This includes also mental health and the importance of gender-based research.

This week, we celebrated World autism awareness day on 2 April, and today, on April 7th, it is World Health Day. The World Health Organisation is leading a one-year global campaign on depression. Depression and Autism are two conditions affecting the brain, two areas that are under-researched and under-funded. How timely it was for you to choose this day to launch the Women’s Brain Project.

It is because Edith Stein so often speaks of the woman's brain that I thought she could be an inspiration for you too.

Edith Stein excelled

- in asking questions,
- in her empathy and care,
- in pushing the boundaries,
- in her relentless research,
- and, she did not care who got the credit.

So is my wish for the Women's Brain Project.

And this is why we are gathered here today: **to push the boundaries of brain research for women.**

Thank you for your attention.