

Interview with Rumiana Dimova

Rumiana Dimova (RD) is winner of the Spring 2014 EPS Emmy Noether distinction for Women in Physics. This interview was taken in June 2014 by Ana Proykova (AP), member of the Equal Opportunity Committee of the EPS.

AP: How did you learn that you have been awarded and what was your first reaction? Where were you at the time of learning that you've been awarded?

RD: The answer to this question is boring. I was sitting at my desk and answering work emails. Of course, I was excited and instantly forwarded the message to my husband, and since he was also sitting behind his desk answering emails, he instantly answered with "Bravo! Shall we celebrate? Tonight? Champagne, may be?" We didn't. We got trapped in our daily routine of playing with and finally putting the kids to bed.

AP: What were your main motivations to choose a career in Physics?

RD: Actually, at the university I opted for theoretical and physical chemistry but then slowly and steadily I was converted to biophysics during my PhD. Understanding how things work was always the main driving question. And all the laws in nature, and also the answers to these questions, are provided by Physics.

AP: Were you influenced by some outstanding teacher or researcher?

RD: Yes. Looking back, I realize that I was lucky with all the supervisors I had. They were not only great physicists, but also men with character and an excellent example to follow. I learned a lot from Prof. P. Kralchevsky at Sophia University who introduced me to the world of chemical physics and ignited the academic spark. Prof. B. Pouligny at the Research Center Paul Pascal in Bordeaux with his enlightening table-corner experiments formed me as an experimentalist but also as a person setting an excellent example of being above everyday clutter and of being honest in science. Finally, Prof. R. Lipowsky from the Max Planck Institute of Colloids and Interfaces in Potsdam, my current mentor, is an inspiring and great theoretical physicist who in my eyes still seems to have almost all the answers to the questions I address in my research.

AP: During your studies, did you feel that there were equal opportunities for boys and girls?

RD: Yes. Both in Bulgaria and in France.

AP: Competition for a tenure-track position: any comment on fair/unfair selection criteria like gender-biased requirements?

RD: I have not experienced an incidence where gender had played a role.



AP: Did your colleagues appreciate the results of your scientific research? Did they neglect your achievements in comparison with your male peers?

RD: I hope that my colleagues appreciate the results of my research. With respect to the second part of the question, honestly, I was never concerned about this and haven't given it a serious thought. I assume that every scientist reads and cites the papers of others as long as their work is relevant and interesting, irrespective of the gender of the authors.

AP: Salaries: are they gender dependent in your view at universities and research institutes?

RD: I am not aware of such differences and have not tried to find out whether they exist in my institute, and simply assumed that they don't.

AP: Is there any positive correlation between achievements in science and salaries or number of grants?

RD: Yes, I believe most of the time.

AP: You have worked in different countries. Have you found differences about the role of women physicists in these countries?

RD: The first time I was faced with this question was when I came to work in Germany and saw that only some 10 % of the members of my department were female. This was in sharp contrast to the environment to which I was exposed both in Bulgaria and in France. The situation now, 10 years later, is much better and realistic – around 30 % of the researchers in our department are women. Curiously and also unfortunately, in my group the number is currently much lower because of some unusual drop down in the number of applications from women.

It is true that for women, family and career are more difficult to synchronize, but I became aware of the issue of women in science only in Germany. I also think that the current national programs attempting to support women in Physics have a dual effect. On the one hand, they do support women, but on the other, they may damage the image of a woman who has achieved a position via such support in the sense that she might not be considered as an equally well performing counterpart of her male peers.

AP: Do you have some advice for young women starting Physics careers?

RD: Do not be scared of possible conflicts between career and family. Combining the two is possible, even though sometimes tough.

AP: I want to congratulate you on this award and also to thank you for letting us know your personal views in this interview. ■