

Image of the *Cosmic Microwave Background* by the Planck mission

## Excellence is gender blind

Why are then women under-represented in science?

Some people focus on the alleged differences between male and female thinking, but we prefer a more pragmatic approach. Indeed, only in the hypothetical scenario of equal upbringing and opportunities would the debate on differences make sense.

In spite of the different initial conditions and the inertia of the society, many women have now successful careers as scientists. This is only a glimpse of what can be achieved.

Rather than pursuing arithmetical equality, we intend to help changing the way in which women are perceived. This means promoting a fair gender representation at all levels and addressing groups of young women.

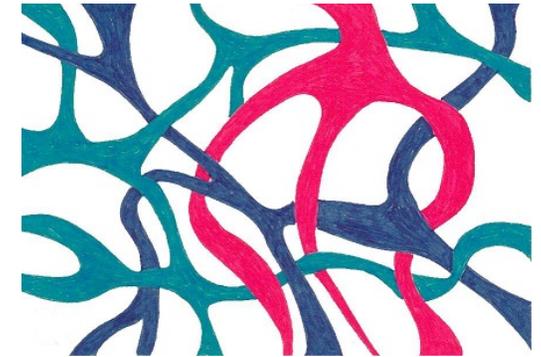
We want to involve all the women working in the field in this task, but our goal is to convey this philosophy also to our male colleagues, inviting them to join our activities. Then the change will naturally start.

## Who are we?

As LHC and other particle accelerators search for new physics and supersymmetric particles, satellite missions such as Planck explore the Cosmic Microwave Background, and gravitational waves from the Big Bang are hinted by data from the BICEP2 telescope in the South Pole, the role of String Theory as a theoretical framework of all the fundamental interactions has become more prominent. String Theory is also playing an important role in other areas of Particle Physics and Condensed Matter Physics.

This COST Action aims at coordinating the research of European experts working in diverse domains. It was an initiative of the women scientists working in this field and beyond the scientific excellence, it has the important mission of promoting their presence, visibility and collaboration, while involving all the European scientists (male and female) doing research in String Theory.

Web: [www.weizmann.ac.il/stringuniverse](http://www.weizmann.ac.il/stringuniverse)



# THE STRING THEORY UNIVERSE



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COST Action MP1210



*Image of the tunnel (sector 81) of the Large Hadron Collider at CERN.*

## How it all started

Since the percentage of women in the field is so low (about 10%) and we are geographically scattered, many of us felt it could be a good idea to build some kind of network among us. We started a period of interchange. Although there were many different ideas and viewpoints, we agreed on two main aspects: we all shared the same experiences and we wanted to do something to help young women.

When the idea of applying for COST Action took form, basically all the women with senior positions working in Europe participated in the drafting of the first proposal. Once it passed the first selection, the whole community was involved in the preparation of the final project.

So, although the project has no gender bias and it is strictly based on scientific excellence, it has a strong gender imprint because of the initial impulse and commitment of women.

## The action

The Action started in 2013, with a duration of 4 years. The Chair is Prof. Silvia Penati, from the University of Milano-Bicocca, and the countries involved are:

Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Germany, Denmark, Spain, France, United Kingdom, Greece, Hungary, Israel, Ireland, Iceland, Italy, Malta, Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, Slovenia, Turkey, Argentina, Chile, United States, South Africa.

It is organized in Working Groups, three of them devoted to scientific issues and two dedicated to broader tasks:

**WG1:** Gauge/Gravity duality

**WG2:** String Phenomenology

**WG3:** Cosmology and Quantum Gravity

**WG4:** Knowledge transfer

**WG5:** Gender issues and outreach

The financial aid from COST is dedicated to networking. We celebrate a Conference and a Training School every year. The first conference took place in September 2013 in Bern, Switzerland. The first school will be in July 2014 in Lisbon and Porto, Portugal, and in September 2014 we will have the second conference in Mainz, Germany. The action also gives support to smaller events, involving generally one of the working groups. Each of these events has a space dedicated to encourage the discussion on gender issues, as a means to heighten the awareness of the community.



*The BICEP2 telescope in the South Pole, where gravitational waves produced at the Big Bang may have been measured.*

Although there are no established quotas for the participation of women in the organization or as speakers in conferences, we attempt to achieve a reasonable balance, without compromising the quality. In other words, we try to increase the visibility of women whose work may have not been given the deserved attention.

Another distinctive trait of the Action is that we are committed to support and cultivate young talents, so special attention is paid to the participation of young researchers in our conferences and events.

We also want to have an impact outside the scientific environment, and we are programming a series of interactive talks given by our women scientists to high school female students that may be interested in pursuing a career in physics. The society cannot afford to lose their talents.

So far we have had an excellent response and the participation has been enthusiastic.