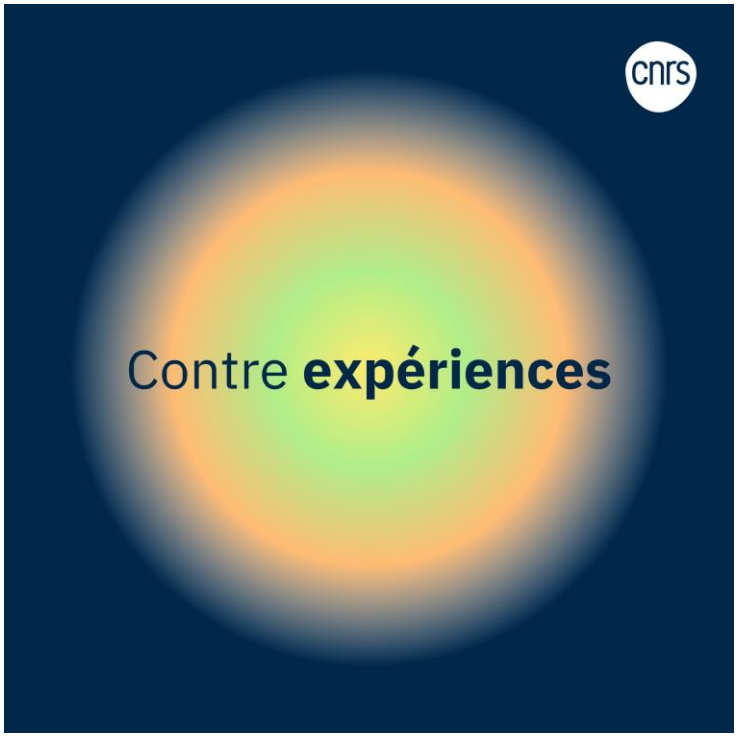


Podcast
Contre expériences
[Full transcript of the episodes]

2026 | 4 épisodes de 20 min. environ | En FR | Sous-titres EN

[Podcast à retrouver sur Ausha, Youtube, Deezer, Spotify]

UN PROJET DU CNRS RHÔNE AUVERGNE SOUTENU PAR LE FONDS À L'ÉGALITÉ PROFESSIONNELLE

dr07.contact.egalite@cnrs.fr

cnrs

Fonds Égalité Professionnelle

COOP EGAL
COOPÉRONS POUR L'ÉGALITÉ

SOMMAIRE

WHY TRANSCRIPTS?

- To make the content easier to access and understand
- To facilitate discussions by allowing participants to refer precisely to specific excerpts or passages

TRANSCRIPT EPISODE 1 - SANDRINE

Welcome to Contre expériences, the podcast that highlights non-stereotypical career paths in research. Each episode gives you an insight into the daily lives, challenges and successes of women and men with unconventional career journeys.
My name is Lucie, I'm an equality officer at the CNRS Rhône-Auvergne, and today we're joined by Sandrine, who has had a unique career path: whilst balancing the demands of family life, financial constraints and a few unexpected health issues, she has gradually built a solid career within the CNRS.
Let's be inspired by these voices which, far from stereotypes, are paving the way for a more inclusive science.

Lucie: Hello Sandrine, thank you for agreeing to take part in this podcast!

Sandrine: Hello, thank you for the invitation!

Q1 - To start with, could you tell us what your day-to-day work actually involves? What do you enjoy about your job?

I'm a research engineer at the chemistry laboratory and have been a member of the CNRS staff since 2008, working as the technical manager for the instruments used by the lab's chemists. What I like most about my job is the diversity of interactions and the lack of routine. Working in academic research means things are constantly on the move; we regularly have PhD students coming in from all over the world. You never get bored; it's a very stimulating working environment.

I've been in this lab for 17 years now. My role has evolved significantly; my responsibilities are different, and I've been able to join the lab council. I was a health and safety officer for 10 years and also a training liaison. I have a great deal of autonomy and trust to manage my department. Although I'm not a researcher myself, I'm part of the research support staff. And I really enjoy it because there's a technical and logistical side to my job, as well as a training aspect. I'm happy to get up in the morning, even though of course there are days when I don't feel like going to work, but given my background, it's really important to me that I have a job I enjoy and in which I can flourish.

Q2 - Could you tell us a bit about your background, which is a bit unusual?

I got my high school diploma in 1993; I found school quite easy and I liked pretty much everything. I did a year of biology at university. Then I dropped out. I got married at 19 and switched to arts. In my second year at uni, I got pregnant and had my daughter. And at 22, I thought I could manage everything: being a mum and going to uni, but no, it was tough. My priorities changed and I ended up dropping out of uni and went to work as a sales assistant at the McDonald's of clothes – Jennyfer. That lasted three years, then I realised that yes, it paid the bills, but I wasn't fulfilled. And then it was a year full of change: I got divorced and went back to university to do my first year of biochemistry.

I had a six-month equivalency, so the transition went smoothly; I only had one semester to complete. The following year things started to get tricky because I no longer had any financial support. As I was on a continuing education course, I wasn't eligible for a Student Financial Aid Office (CROUS) grant. The Family Allowance Fund (CAF) helped me for a year during the transition, but after that I received no further support. So after a year, I found myself without

financial support and moved back in with my parents and my daughter. I did a series of odd jobs (at the local swimming pool, temporary stock-taking work, etc.). That went on for four years.

I did an optional internship in my first year of my Master's. I was 28, working part-time at the swimming pool, and I secured an internship with a lab director who, taking my family situation into account, gave me free rein over my schedule. It was that internship that sparked my interest in research!
In my second year of my Master's, I had a compulsory six-month internship; it wasn't easy to manage because I had to stay in Toulouse, as my daughter was at school here. I had to find an internship in the same city. My Master's supervisor helped me secure a well-paid internship at Sanofi. I then got a two-year fixed-term contract there. I learnt a great deal during that contract. I was then hired by a laboratory in a newly created research engineer role, and that's where I am today. I was responsible for managing two technical magnetic resonance instruments, a bit like MRI scanners, but instead of imaging human bodies, we observe molecules so that chemists can check whether the desired reaction has taken place. In the early years, I put processes in place and encouraged user autonomy; things were running very smoothly. So smoothly, in fact, that I started to feel stuck in a rut; I wanted to progress. That's when I began to explore the possibility of a PhD.

When I went back to university, I really wanted to find a job where I could thrive, develop, feel at home, and look forward to going to work. And I found that in my lab. And even now, I know that if one day I no longer feel fulfilled in my work, I'll move on, and that's the advantage of the CNRS: I have a job for life, but I can transfer internally and I can change and progress, so that's great.

Q3 - Right, so you were already in post when you decided to start a PhD. How did that go? What steps did you take to make it happen ?

I started by asking my supervisor at the time, then I contacted HR at the CNRS regional office to check if it was possible. They put me in touch with the right people. The CNRS and the lab management were fine with me doing a PhD part-time, with 40% of my time dedicated to the thesis, which was funded by the CNRS alongside my salary. I did a trial for a year to see if I could manage my time, and it worked. So I started this thesis in 2015, and I defended it in 2021.

And now I've just turned 50, and I've been working in this laboratory for 17 years; my role has evolved a lot since then. That's also why I'm pleased to be taking part in this podcast; I want to show that not all career paths are linear, that life isn't a long, quiet river, and that sometimes you might want to work in science and believe in it without following the traditional route of preparatory classes, engineering school and a PhD.

Q4 - Indeed, your career path doesn't follow the 'linear' pattern we often imagine for an academic career. And on top of that, you've combined long studies with the responsibility of a young child; you've had to juggle lots of different demands. What were the main obstacles or challenges you faced?

My main obstacles were time and money. Finding the time to do everything – managing my studies, my daughter, my family – whilst still keeping some time for myself.

And then there was the money – as a student with a child to support, finding a flat was impossible. I was lucky that my mum was available and able to house me for the whole duration of my studies; without her, I wouldn't have been able to go back to university. My parents were entrepreneurs; I never thought I'd end up as a civil servant.

Then, even later on, in my first year working in Lyon with a child to support and a net monthly salary of €1,350, finding a flat was really tough that first year on the job; you have to hang in there and have support. My lab colleagues would tell me, 'Don't worry, you'll see your salary go up, things will get better quickly,' and so on.

Q5 - It's great that your colleagues supported you right from the start. After that, did you receive any other forms of support in your career? Did you feel you had the space in your lab to talk about the difficulties you encountered?

Yes, I'm lucky to work in a lab with a really caring culture; we support one another. For example, I had a cycling accident and injured my hand quite badly. I had to go to the physical therapist several times a week and couldn't use my right hand, even though I'm right-handed. It had a huge impact on my mental health. And at that time, I received a lot of support from my lab director, my direct supervisor. She was very attentive during that period; she allowed me to adapt my role, particularly when it came to carrying heavy loads when I could no longer do so with my hand.

And it's true that the issue of mental health at work is a real thing. After my PhD, I finally had some mental space to think about other things; that's when I started to unravel a bit and began to think about myself. Before that, I didn't have the luxury of breaking down. I was alone with my daughter; it was my responsibility. I also started to question the saying 'what doesn't kill me makes me stronger'. At that time, I was able to share my personal struggles with my manager – that my priority was to get better, that I'd be smiling less at work… And I received collective support for that, with adjustments made; I knew my manager's door was always open to me, and I really felt no judgement, never a "you're always sulking".

I also went to see the CNRS occupational health service to arrange a therapeutic part-time role after my second hand operation. The first time, I hadn't managed to accept my disability; I'd refused to apply for RQTH status. It's true that, in this instance, the laboratory and the CNRS were real sources of support for me during and after my PhD.

And when I started feeling better, I also received support from my manager: "Oh, you're feeling better, and it's lovely to see you back, to see you in better shape." So really, the message I want to get across is: don't stay alone; you can get help; there is support available.

Q6 - Your story perfectly illustrates the impact that mental health can have on professional life, a subject that remains all too often taboo. Today, only 56% of employees report having good mental health[1], whilst mental health conditions are the leading cause of long-term sick leave. Globally, one in three people will experience an anxiety or depressive disorder during their lifetime. Stigma and the fear of being judged often prevent people from addressing the issue, especially at work.

It takes courage to raise these issues with your manager, and your experience shows just how much having open and supportive leadership can create the necessary environment for this kind of dialogue. In your view, what factors made this possible? What steps did your management take to make you feel confident enough to talk about it?

The first time I spoke to my manager about my mental health, I had a female manager. The fact that she was a woman made it easier for me to open up. She often asked how I was getting on after my cycling accident, during the period when I was spending all my time at the physiotherapist's. She was genuinely interested, didn't judge me, and didn't downplay what was happening to me. She took the time to listen to me; she supported me. I'm lucky to have had a succession of managers with the right priorities: people come before work. Now there's even a

section on 'sexual and gender-based violence and harassment' in the induction document for new lab staff, right after the section on chemical hazards. Posters on mental health near the coffee machines. And the door is always open; even when my new director is swamped, she'll always take the time to listen and look for solutions.

Q7 - And beyond mental health, it's also important to look at how family responsibilities intersect with work. Parenting responsibilities, for example, can greatly influence a career and often in different ways depending on gender. Can you tell us how, in your experience, the division of childcare time and the expectations linked to your role as a mother have influenced your career?

I think it's still a path that would have been more feasible if I'd been a man. For a start, my family constraints would have been different. My ex-husband only had his daughter every other weekend; the division of parenting responsibilities was very uneven. For example, my current partner, who also had children before me, had 50/50 shared custody. If I'd had that, I could have worked late into the evening every other week, and so on, and organised my life better to earn a living. Looking back now, I regret not having pressed the father harder, not having told him, "Look after your daughter."

Q8 - And beyond gendered roles in parenting, have you faced gender stereotypes or expectations as a woman, independently of your role as a mother?

I think for a long time, I was a bit blind to all that. I put on blinders; I had my head down and was just ploughing on. I knew my own path, so I didn't listen to people who wanted to tell me how to live my life. It was just noise. I didn't hear it. I remember people encouraging me.

But of course, I still heard comments like "ah, it's nice to be well supported", remarks about the way I dressed, which were meant to be positive but weren't—but I didn't let it get to me and I stood my ground. It was just my nature. Even though most of the sexist behaviour I experienced back then was a bit 'under the radar' in the sense that I accepted a lot of things as 'normal', which is also why I didn't even hear them. Now that I've grown older, been in therapy, and learnt things: I realise. I realise that as women, we're conditioned to accept a lot of things, to say nothing, and if we speak up a bit too strongly in a meeting, people say, "She's hysterical, she's on her period." No, we're angry, and that's normal.

Q9 - You say it was in your nature, that you wouldn't let people walk all over you – can you tell us more about that?

I think I adopted male behaviours, male stereotypes in a way, like: "I'll do the job. I won't count my hours. A bit of a superhero syndrome." I was really driven. But I also felt guilty about not being able to have after-school snacks with my daughter, …

Still, it wasn't perfect. For example, one of my internship supervisors was a bit 'unconventional' when I asked for a part-time placement because I had a job that summer; he said to me: 'Oh, right, you can do a 12-hour day.' I replied like a bloke, I laughed, I responded to his joke whilst leaving at 5pm to pick up my daughter. And as a result, he respected me. Once, he spoke to me rudely. I was still a student, even though I was older. I stood up to him and set a clear boundary straight away, and that was enough. But conversely, a student friend of mine who didn't have that kind of character got completely walked all over by that supervisor.

I think we're clearly not given the tools as women to successfully overcome sexism in the workplace. I was lucky enough to have a personality that allowed me to get out of those situations, but I know full well that's not the case for everyone.

Q10 - Yes, absolutely. We know that sexist and sexual violence is still a major barrier to women's careers, particularly in science. Having a well-defined working environment, a genuine policy to combat such violence, and people who support you is essential. Apart from the support you've already mentioned, did you have any role models or allies who really helped you, whether at the CNRS or elsewhere?

When I was working at Sanofi, there were only women in my team apart from the manager. It was brilliant. Danielle and Martine, two of my colleagues, had spent their entire careers there. They taught me a lot; I trusted them. They let me get my hands on the machines. There was a real sense of sisterhood. I owe it to them that I got my job at the CNRS.

Then there was my lab director, whom I've already told you plenty about. Those working relationships inspired me, and I've just mentored a Master's student. I loved passing on my knowledge and supporting her. I wanted to keep my door open in turn, to be a resource. It seems to have worked well; she thanked me profusely. I enjoyed this experience and I want to continue in this mentoring role. There really is a passing of the baton: when you've been well supported, when you've had role models who passed on their knowledge and offered guidance, you want to give back in turn.

Q11 - What would you say to the young Sandrine you once were – or to a young person today who's intrigued by science?

In the context of women and science, the advice I gave was: don't hold yourselves back; if you feel like it, give it a go before saying you can't do it; don't listen to those who put obstacles in your way or want to make decisions for you; and above all, don't hesitate to ask for help if you encounter difficulties— asking for help and not going it alone takes nothing away from our achievements.

Thank you very much, Sandrine, for taking the time to come and share your experience and your inspiring journey with us.

Thank you all for following us!

To those of you listening, we've seen with Sandrine that life isn't always plain sailing; can you share with us a support mechanism from your employer that helped you overcome your difficulties?

Contre-expérience is a podcast made possible thanks to the Fund for Gender Equality in the Workplace, led by the Directorate-General for Administration and the Civil Service. It was developed in partnership between Coop-Egal, the Equality Unit of the CNRS Rhône-Auvergne, and Studio Plus Huit, with, of course, the invaluable support of the CNRS Rhône-Alpes-Auvergne Regional Directorate and the CNRS Women's Role Initiative.

See you very soon for more explorations!

TRANSCRIPT EPISODE 2 - JEAN-MARIE

Welcome to Contre expériences, the podcast that highlights unconventional career paths in research. Each episode will give you an insight into the daily lives, challenges and successes of men and women with unusual career trajectories.

I'm Romain Sabathier, associate director of Coop-Egal, and I'm supporting the CNRS with this podcast project. Today we're joined by Jean-Marie, who holds a PhD in computer science and algorithmic geometry. He became a young father in 2010 whilst still a student. Once he'd completed his thesis, his career as a lecturer and researcher took off. Then the discovery of his daughter's illness would change Jean-Marie and alter his professional path.

How, then, could he find meaning in his research and balance his professional obligations with his other roles as a single father and carer?

In France, as elsewhere, it is still most often women who are on the front line of providing unpaid care for dependent people.
This is a key factor in professional inequalities between women and men. For example, women are eight times more likely than men to be unemployed for family reasons, according to INSEE (Source: INSEE, Employment Survey, 2019). 80% of part-time roles are held by women. And six out of ten carers are women.

Jean-Marie, through his choices and his journey, offers us a counter-narrative.

Let us be inspired by these voices which, far from stereotypes, pave the way for a more inclusive science and society.

Romain: Hello Jean-Marie, and thank you for joining us today.

Jean-Marie: Hello, thank you for inviting me.

Q1 - You grew up in western France, in the Nantes area. Your mother was a housewife and your father a salesman. Neither of them went on to further education after their high school diploma. So, initially, university wasn't really part of your family background. I'd like to start by talking about your first experience of university. What memories do you have of that transition from secondary school to university?

First of all, I must say that I was lucky to be in a family where, even though they hadn't experienced higher education themselves, all my siblings – my sisters and I – were fully supported and encouraged to pursue our studies without restriction. That was a real stroke of luck, and for that I'm grateful to them. Thanks to a scholarship based on financial need and summer jobs, I was able to fund those years of study. And what I really felt when I arrived at university was a vast space for cultural, scientific and social development, in every respect. And what struck me most was the idea that, unlike at secondary school where there was a certain degree of judgement among pupils, arriving at university meant, for me, a complete absence of judgement regarding, for example, the passion one might have for scientific culture, which was certainly the case for me.

Q2 - Jean-Marie, how did you balance your university studies with the experience of fatherhood?

I became a father at the age of 23. My university studies were still ongoing at that time. I had just completed a double degree in mathematics and computer science, followed by a master's degree, and I had sat the entrance exam for the École Normale Supérieure de Cachan, the ENS.

And at that point I had the choice between the ENS campus in Rennes or Paris. No doubt out of provincial timidity, I opted for Rennes. My daughter's mother and I had already separated by the time we found out she was pregnant. So for me, it was quite a shock at the time. I was finishing my master's degree in Rennes. And I thought to myself that since my daughter's mother was going to settle in Clermont-Ferrand, naturally I would move there too. So I decided to take a leave of absence. At the time I was at the ENS and I applied for a temporary leave of absence from the university. It was unpaid, so I had to find a job once I arrived in Clermont-Ferrand.

Eventually, I was lucky enough to meet a neurosurgeon who was leading a research project on something I found fascinating from a scientific point of view. He needed a cartographic representation of the surface of the brain. After a year working as a research engineer in his team, this enabled us to map out the threads that became the subject of the thesis I worked on for three years, which could be summarised as 'planar representation of 3D surfaces'. The idea was that, since we'd been interested in this for the brain, we could apply it to other things and develop computational and mathematical techniques to be able to produce this representation.

Obviously, at the same time, I also had the role of a father to fulfil; that seemed obvious to me. In the early days of my daughter's life, the three of us spent a lot of time together with my daughter's mother, even though we were separated. There was a shared bond around the child. And then, as time went on, I had more opportunities to spend time with her, at the weekend for example. Little by little, we built our own relationship together.

Q3 - So you spoke of 'normal' and 'obvious'. You also told me, 'I couldn't imagine living far from my daughter'. How do you explain this discrepancy between what was normal for you and, conversely, what might sometimes be stereotypically perceived as a domain reserved for women, for mothers – namely the care and upbringing of children?

I think I grew up in a family where there was a culture of looking out for everyone, especially the youngest. For example, when I was a child, I spent a lot of time with younger people, with my sisters and cousins. And then one of the first jobs I took on was as a babysitter. I benefited from my mother's local reputation, as she was already working as a childcare assistant. So the families she knew naturally asked me to help out, without, I think, questioning the fact that I was a boy. At least, I didn't perceive it to be an issue.

And it's true that when I became a father, there was this role to take on, and it's not at all the same as looking after cousins or babysitting. And I went through a process where I felt I had to negotiate my place. My daughter's mother had formed a very close bond with her, and I had to build that role as the other parental figure at that time. It was a long journey that involved making choices, as I mentioned earlier, such as moving to Clermont-Ferrand.

After my PhD, I moved to Italy and managed to negotiate with the team I was joining to spend one week a month in Clermont-Ferrand, far from Genoa, so I could spend time with my daughter. So it was commitments like that which I managed to build into my personal and professional life so that I could fully commit to my role as a father.

And then I was recruited as a senior lecturer. Out of the ten or so posts available, I applied for one in Clermont-Ferrand and got it! Fortunately, because otherwise I think I would undoubtedly have stopped my academic career. I would have stopped doing research in the public sector because I couldn't imagine living far from my daughter. And I feel that today, what I went through would be more difficult for several reasons:
mainly because there are far fewer posts, so the chances of getting a post in the city of your choice have become virtually impossible, I think and furthermore, in the specific case of Clermont-Ferrand, I was recruited by the other university; there were two of them. Today, the two universities have merged, and as there is a policy of not recruiting local staff, if this were to happen today, I wouldn't have had the chance to join the University of Clermont-Ferrand and would have had to leave the city.

Q4 - Yes, I hadn't necessarily thought about that issue of university merging. We know that the pressure to be mobile can get in the way of balancing work and family life, especially when you're a separated parent and it's unthinkable that the child and the ex-partner would follow. Fortunately for you, you managed to secure that post as a senior lecturer in Clermont-Ferrand, where your daughter was. Would you mind going back with us to the time of the diagnosis?

Until she was 6 (in 2011), there were no apparent symptoms suggesting she had an illness. During her first year of primary school (at the age of 6), the National Education Department's health services carried out a routine check-up on all the children, as is customary, and they found that she needed to wear glasses. So we got her some glasses and she wore them throughout the summer. When the new school year began, we realised that this hadn't really improved her eyesight. So we contacted the hospital services. And that's when a long process began – what could be described as a two- to three-year medical odyssey – before we identified the condition that was causing the problem.

During that long wait, we learnt to adapt to her visual impairment. We explored tactile adaptation techniques, then became fascinated by radio production. It became a passion for both my daughter and me. We created audio stories. We had a brilliant time with a microphone and a recorder.

And then, professionally, this was the time when I had joined a young medical imaging laboratory that was in the process of being set up. It was a rather dynamic time from a research perspective, but the working environment wasn't very supportive. In particular, there was a team leader whose behaviour was clearly toxic. I see him as someone who crushes PhD students to bolster his own scientific reputation. It really wasn't a satisfying situation. We were a group of young lecturers recruited to help set up this laboratory and this team. And he tried to drag us into his way of doing things. It took us a long time to distance ourselves because the team was just getting started. We probably lacked the clarity to realise that his presence was undermining the collective energy.
And I remember very clearly one day, in that context (in 2013), I was in the staff room at the IUT, and then my daughter's mother called me to confirm that it was indeed Batten disease. It's called Batten disease, which my daughter had.

By then we'd already realised that this was likely the condition in question – a neurodegenerative disease with far-reaching consequences and a fairly short life expectancy. All of this was quite a shock. At the time, it really knocked the wind out of us. And it happened at a time when things were already tense at work, as I mentioned earlier. So I went to see the team leader anyway to tell him that I'd be less able to commit in the coming weeks because I was going to be preoccupied and focused on supporting my daughter's health needs. And I sensed he wasn't able

to take that on board, and he ended the conversation by saying: "Well, it's not as if your daughter's dead."
I have to admit that really hurt me. That brutal remark hit me like a bombshell, really, and it all came at a difficult time, with a colleague who'd just had a burnout and, at the same time, the desire to get a young laboratory up and running. We didn't necessarily see eye to eye with our colleagues, particularly regarding professional practices but also on the research topic. We eventually moved to a different lab with the agreement of the lab directors and the university president.

Q5 - Thank you for sharing that with us. A major career shift for you to get round an obstacle that could have put you in serious danger. So well done on your collective decision to leave! It's never easy to say NO, to say STOP.
And in your new research lab, how did you manage to balance your roles as a lecturer-researcher, a single dad, and a carer for a daughter with a condition that will gradually become increasingly disabling?

Well, I have to say that in this new lab, the working environment was quite supportive, with plenty of scope to carry out research projects and create new things. So I felt really at home there, even though, at the same time, the demands of her condition were indeed increasing. I still found myself managing both commitments.

It's worth noting that the way a senior lecturer's working hours are organised is quite unique in that, whilst there are fixed-time lectures, there's a great deal of flexibility in how the research side of things is scheduled. And so that allowed me to adjust my timetable slightly to juggle both roles, working extra hard in the evenings and at weekends to meet my professional commitments.

Also, over time, what helped me move forward was that, as my pleasure and interests lie in solving problems, I very quickly realised that the issue of visual impairment could be a field for scientific exploration. I met healthcare professionals at the facility where my daughter was being cared for who needed tools, and there was a sense of frustration that nothing existed. For example, representing the city was one area where there weren't many tools available. Cartography is a related subject that fascinates me. So I contacted the IGN to set up a research project. Over the course of a few years, we established a partnership that we maintained. And this led to an ANR project whose aim was to produce maps accessible to the visually impaired. We brought in another research team in Toulouse – the "Cherchons pour voir" team (based at the IRIT in Toulouse). So, from both a personal and professional perspective, the two aspects fitted together well. I found there the passion that drives my day-to-day work.

At the same time, it's worth noting that the workload of a senior lecturer has intensified, with ever more tasks to complete. You really feel the constant commitment to administrative tasks at the IUT, for example. In terms of responsibilities: putting together funding applications, securing them, reporting, and then supporting recruitment needs within Human Resources. Supporting young researchers too. Developing new areas of research.

And this mirrored the situation in my personal life, where medical appointments were becoming increasingly important. New needs arose in terms of mobility, nutrition, speech therapy, and later, incontinence. We found ourselves making the home increasingly medicalised. Consequently, from a logistical point of view, we had to equip it to accommodate more and more medical devices, coordinate care teams, organise medical deliveries, and compile files for applications to the MDPH (Departmental Centre for People with Disabilities). Ultimately, the range of activities was quite similar in my private and professional lives. And as a lecturer and researcher, I must

admit that I felt well prepared for the role of family carer, and that makes me wonder how people without that background manage. I was also lucky enough to have colleagues in my professional environment who were supportive, who understood the situation and who were willing to adjust the way we worked together as much as possible so that I wasn't put under pressure and could fulfil my roles.

But after a while, I have to admit things got stuck; it was too complicated, especially when my daughter was no longer being looked after by the centre. So we ended up at home full-time. I had to completely overhaul my personal organisation. It was precisely at that moment, incidentally, that the director of the IUT changed the teaching commitments of the various lecturers and researchers, and he took away the Master's-level teaching I enjoyed to assign me a first-year course on teaching Excel, which isn't exactly one of my favourite subjects… And during the rather heated discussion we had, where I told him that I wasn't getting anything out of it professionally, at the end I said to him, "But if this carries on like this, with too much tension and too many demands on my personal life, well, I'll just move into the private sector." And then, as I left his office and walked towards the tram, I thought to myself, "Actually, that's exactly what I'm going to do; I'm going to try and find something in the private sector" (that was in 2021, eight years after the diagnosis).

Q6 - So, another major turning point for you. Listening to you, we can clearly sense this clash between, on the one hand, your reality of life—the energy and flexibility you put into keeping everything together—your daughter's needs and your great passion for research; and, on the other hand, the rigidity and coldness of a professional system governed by its own constraints, which leaves little room for a human approach to situations.
Why did moving into the private sector seem like a way out for you at one point?

My aim was to switch to part-time work. So when I went to see the university's HR department to ask for a flexible arrangement, they offered me part-time work, but I know that maintaining that level of research energy isn't feasible on a part-time basis. As I mentioned, you just can't stop; it's not possible. So I asked to take a leave of absence from the university to regain some peace of mind and be able to limit my working hours within a fixed timetable.

There were no difficulties. The university's HR department supported me well in this, and indeed, after a few months, I was able to find a part-time role in a private company working on a subject I find interesting, where I thrive technically and scientifically, but where I know that when I leave the office, I can fully devote myself to my commitment to my daughter.

Q7 - Jean-Marie, your experience is a counter-example in the sense that it runs counter to several gender stereotypes and remains a minority experience.
According to figures from the Ministry of Justice, only 1 in 5 separated fathers requests joint custody. There is a lack of data regarding separated families with a disabled child. It is also worth noting that 4 out of 5 part-time roles are held by women and that, even today, the majority of carers are women. Why? Because in a sexist system, caring for others – and in particular for children, most often without pay – is a role traditionally associated with women, whilst pursuing a professional career and earning a good living is associated with men.
Your daughter is now 20 years old. Looking back, Jean-Marie, how do you analyse her journey from a gender perspective?

I think I was lucky enough to be part of a community and social circle where there was a strong activist commitment to issues of feminism and gender norms, and where people were reflecting

on gender fluidity. This helped me become more aware of these issues and enabled me to be an ally, even though I'm not personally affected by this kind of discrimination.

I did, however, feel that as a man committed to his role as a father and carer for a disabled daughter, two things were happening:

on the one hand, it was a commitment that was overvalued, a bit like the 'superhero syndrome' that anti-ableism advocates talk about,

and on the other hand, I felt there were more institutional barriers. Typically, institutions primarily address the child's mother. All administrative procedures are directed at the mother. And I found that this was made even more complicated in the case of a separated family because sometimes I miss information.

There are a few examples I can mention off the top of my head: when there's a hospital appointment, a text message is sent, and it's sent to the child's mother. So if I'm the one accompanying the child, I have to find a way to find out about it. Also, when we had medical appointments with the paediatric neurologist, the report wasn't sent to me. It took me seven years to get a copy of the reports from those appointments.

So you can draw a parallel with the expectation placed on women to take on this role, to put their professional and social lives on hold, and, conversely, there's a bit of an expectation on men to engage in social life without restricting their involvement for personal reasons. I didn't feel affected by that because it wasn't part of my culture.

Q8 - You weren't offered fewer projects, less work or fewer responsibilities because there's also this persistent stereotype of the 'breadwinner' who's offered overtime when a child arrives, whereas, conversely, the wife is offered part-time work.

Exactly, yes, that's really what happens. And today, what needs to be said is that our daily lives have sort of reversed in the sense that I live in the city centre, I'm close to public services, whereas my daughter's mother lives in the countryside and is further away from them; and perhaps one could also say she's less sociable. So there has been a reversal of roles, and I am now the main point of contact for the medical and social services teams, so in that context, it is ultimately me who plays that role more than she does.

I have also become involved in charities such as the 'VAINCRE LES MALADIES LYSOSOMALES' association. I've become involved in the running of the organisation over time, and what I've noticed is that there are far more women involved in these organisations. And, in fact, people regularly point out to me that it's quite rare to be a man in this field.

Q9 - Let's now turn to the question "I have a dream". If you had the power right now to implement a measure to promote equality and better working conditions, which one would you choose?

I think it would be to do everything possible to enforce the right to disconnect in the evenings and at weekends in a professional context, and to encourage voluntary part-time work even for researchers, even though we know very few are in that situation today.

But what I find difficult is that the pace of university life is so relentless, so overwhelming, that it's a trap; we work without stopping. And it's hard to break out of that rhythm. Without strong, collective regulation, I can't imagine we could break out of that rhythm.

I think it's our role as senior staff at the university to convey to the younger generations that, ultimately, if they start their PhD, they'll set off at breakneck speed, but in reality their professional career will span 40 years, and you can't ask someone to run a marathon at sprinting speed for their entire career. It's unreasonable. What's hard is that we impose this on ourselves. I don't know how we could make this environment less toxic.

Q10 - Perhaps that will be the subject of a future episode on solutions. We're coming to the end of this interview. If you could go back in time, what message would you have liked to hear when you were the young Jean-Marie just finishing your PhD?

I think that, looking back, one of the things I wish I'd paid more attention to is the recruitment of the young researchers we work with: being mindful of diversity in terms of gender and background. Because I've noticed over time that building a diverse team creates a more pleasant and harmonious environment.

Thank you very much, Jean-Marie. I have no doubt that your story and your words will strike a chord with many people.

And to those of you listening, we have two favours to ask. First of all, please share, share, share this episode – we need your help!
Secondly, if you had to choose just one action or tool that could make the daily life of a carer at work easier, what would it be and why? Please share your thoughts in the comments!

Contre expériences is a podcast made possible by the Fund for Gender Equality in the Workplace, led by the Directorate-General for Administration and
the Civil Service. It was developed in partnership between Coop-Egal and the Equality Mission of the
CNRS Rhône-Auvergne, with the assistance of Studio Plus Huit, and the invaluable support of the CNRS Rhône-Auvergne Regional Directorate and the Mission for the Role of
Women at the CNRS.

See you soon for more explorations!

TRANSCRIPT EPISODE 3 - ISABEL

Welcome to *Contre expériences*, the podcast that highlights unconventional career paths in research. Each episode will introduce you to the daily lives, challenges, and successes of women and men with unique career trajectories.

My name is Lucie Marchal, I'm the Equality Officer at CNRS Rhône-Auvergne, and today we're joined by Isabel, director of the ICAR laboratory and associate professor of language sciences. She'll share her journey from the high school computer lab to leading a research lab, while also discussing her experience with dyslexia in the scientific community.

Let's be inspired by these voices that, far from stereotypes, are paving the way for a more inclusive science.

Lucie: Hello Isabel, thank you for joining us!

Isabel: *Hello, thank you for having me!*

Q1 - To start, can you briefly introduce yourself and tell us a little about your daily work routine—what are your days like?

My name is Isabel, I'm 44 years old, I've been a lecturer in language science since 2012 and a lab director since January 2025. Before that, I was the assistant director for five years. I'm also in charge of the degree program at the ENS in Lyon; this is an assignment under the school's vice-presidency for academic affairs. So there's a lot of administration, but also some research and some teaching.

I don't really have typical days. My days are mostly split between the lab and the degree program I coordinate; it varies a lot.

For the lab, it's mostly meetings and answering emails. We have a lot of lab meetings at all levels. That's what takes up most of my time. I have meetings with the three sponsoring organizations—ENS, CNRS, and the University of Lyon 2—internal lab committees, lab general assemblies, those of the sponsoring organizations, and things like that. I also have meetings with other lab directors and with the doctoral schools. I try to carve out half-days here and there to write and do my research. I also meet with the doctoral student I'm co-supervising with a colleague.

For the degree program, I have weekly check-ins with the administrators and the Vice President for Academic Affairs as well. I also do a lot of communication with faculty and students. For example, this semester I have two degree committees, so I spend quite a bit of time preparing for those.

But otherwise, my main tasks are mostly answering emails, writing reviews on proposals, managing internal issues, serving on doctoral school committees, etc.—really a lot of different

things. That's ultimately what I love about this job: the diversity of tasks. Clearly, you never get bored; every day is a little different.

As the head of a research unit of about 100 people, you get to see the behind-the-scenes side of research. It allows me to better understand the challenges and complexity of the research system and to contribute to improving it on a small scale.

Q2 - Yes, indeed, you seem to be quite the multitasker! Can you tell us a little about your academic background? How did you end up where you are today?

Yes, of course. In high school, I earned a medical-social baccalaureate with a focus on office automation; that's when I realized I really liked computer science. Then, I earned a master's degree in language science at the University of Lyon 2.

At first, I studied language sciences to become a speech-language pathologist, but then I discovered the subject "computer science and linguistics." I really got into it. I told myself, "Okay, this is what I want to do: teach computer science in language sciences as an academic. And I told myself, "Okay, to do that, I need to write a thesis." I hadn't planned on writing a thesis at all. I got through all my schooling on a need-based scholarship. My mom was a single parent with three kids, so it wasn't a given that I'd be able to pursue a long course of study. I had to work alongside my studies to finance them in addition to the scholarship. I found small student jobs. For example, I was a computer lab tutor at the university.

Then I wrote a thesis in my current lab and spent two years as an ATER at the ENS in Lyon. ATER stands for "temporary teaching and research assistant." That's where I worked with the teaching team on computer science applied to the Humanities, Languages, and Social Sciences, so it was broader in scope, but I really enjoyed it. Then one of my colleagues who was on staff at the time redefined a position after a team member retired. I went through the interview process and got the job! That's how I joined my lab on a permanent basis.

Q3 - Thank you for sharing a bit about your background with us. Can you give us a concrete example of how computer science can be applied to language sciences? Do you have a project or research you've worked on in this field that you'd like to tell us about?

My research field is conversational analysis. I analyze spoken language. To do this, I film spoken interactions and transcribe them into text. In addition to speech, we have a range of tools to transcribe gestures, eye contact, and people's actions… This is part of the methodological framework I'm developing in my research and also applying in my teaching. For example, as part of a project with Le Vinatier Hospital, we developed an annotation grid within specialized software to describe various elements related to interaction during nursing handover meetings, such as shared emotions, caregivers' actions, mentions of patients' loved ones, etc. From these annotations, we can extract data and perform quantitative analyses in addition to qualitative ones. This requires skills in spreadsheets, statistics, and handling files encoded in various formats.

Q4 - That sounds really interesting. From what I understand based on your previous answer, you probably wanted to teach at first. What made you want to become a researcher later on?

I first wanted to be a speech-language pathologist! Then a professor of applied computer science in language sciences. But being a researcher wasn't my thing at all. I have to say that the five-year thesis experience wasn't easy. I'm dyslexic, so writing a thesis wasn't a given. When I reread my Master's thesis today, I understand quite a few things. For example, I understand why I didn't get my doctoral contract from the School of Letters, Languages, Linguistics & Art, given all the mistakes I'd left in there. So going all the way to a PhD, I felt like it just wasn't for me. And being a researcher—reading a lot, writing a lot—it didn't come naturally to me. But I wanted to teach at the university.

The mindset of a researcher came later, as I began to develop research projects. Setting up projects—figuring out the projected budget, establishing a realistic work schedule over three or four years, writing a state-of-the-art review on a specific issue within a limited word count, discussing and agreeing with colleagues to establish the project's scientific direction—is a different aspect of a researcher's life than writing a dissertation, and that part suits me better.

Q5 – When you say it wasn't easy with the thesis, was that mainly due to your dyslexia, or did you face other difficulties? And is that also what somewhat prevented you from envisioning yourself in the research profession?

Well, there was my dyslexia, but there was also the issue of funding.

I completed my thesis in five years, but I didn't have a traditional doctoral contract. I was funded through lab contracts. At the same time, I worked briefly in the restaurant industry to supplement my income. I was living with my mother, so I didn't have to pay rent, which was a huge relief. I also did some part-time teaching. It was a series of contracts over five years. And at the same time, that's what ultimately builds experience. I discovered different things that still help me today in my profession and that steered me toward different research topics. But yes, the main obstacle was the uncertainty I felt regarding funding during my dissertation and after I finished, while I was waiting to secure a position. But in the end, the support from my dissertation advisor was crucial; she helped me a lot and offered me several contracts to help fund my work.

And then, yes, there was also my dyslexia, which made writing the dissertation difficult. Having to read and write so much, the length of the thesis project was complicated. Everything related to proofreading, too—and I think even on a cognitive level, structuring a thesis or a chapter, knowing how to synthesize information, things like that—I think I had difficulties. Fortunately, I was well-supported by my advisor. She guided me and provided great support throughout this work.

Honestly, for me, the thesis format was pretty hard to handle, whereas the article format, for example, suits me much better as a researcher.

And what made all of this easier was my thesis advisor. She was interested in my skills in language data processing. She helped me find funding. On the other hand, it's true that I realize I never told her about my dyslexia. I think she noticed it, but it was never a topic of conversation between us. We worked well together; she was a role model for me, both as my thesis advisor and as the lab director while I was working on my thesis.

Q6 - Regarding your dyslexia, at what age were you diagnosed? Was there a reason why you didn't mention it to your thesis advisor?

I was diagnosed with dyslexia and dysorthography at school, at a very young age. I had years of speech therapy in elementary and middle school. I've always been terrible at French, so going into language sciences wasn't exactly a given! But language sciences help us see language in a different light. You really view it through a different lens, so that helped me make peace with French. I learned the International Phonetic Alphabet; it's another way of looking at spoken language, too. You approach the language through sounds; you write down how words are pronounced. The "f" sound has a single spelling in IPA—there's no longer the distinction found in writing, like "ph" or a single "f" or two "ffs " in a word. It allowed me to work on my perception of sounds in French and to think about the language differently.

And I didn't mention it to my thesis advisor because, for me, I live with it; I have my strategies for correcting myself—even more so today than before, actually. I didn't necessarily see the point in bringing it up. It wasn't really an issue. My advisor supported me, and I didn't feel the need to bring it up. Whereas today, in the lab I run, I talk about it more openly.

Q7 - What made you start talking about it in your work today? Has something changed?

There was a turning point. It was an episode where I was helping organize a conference. That involved quite a bit of email back-and-forth. In that context, I received a rather inflammatory response from a professor regarding a spelling mistake in my email, telling me it was unacceptable to make such a mistake on a particular word. That was a bit hard to swallow. So I told myself I needed to be even more vigilant, especially since I'm now the lab director. All the more so because in language sciences and in the scientific world in general, it's accepted that you have to speak and write well. I realize I can be called out by peers, which is why I brought this up. Dyslexia and dysorthography aren't disorders that are immediately apparent. People might think they're just careless mistakes. So I mentioned it in 2020, in my speech to the lab staff when I became Deputy Director of the lab. I also discussed it in my summary to obtain my accreditation to supervise research. My colleagues at the lab gave me supportive feedback. Several told me it was good that I shared this, and since then I haven't received any further critical feedback.

Q8 - It's clear from your journey that dyslexia can—and should—be taken into account at work, especially in the sciences where reading and writing play a central role. Looking back, how did your dyslexia influence your approach as an associate director? For example, did you notice an impact on the choice of your responsibilities, on how you organized your work, or on how you divided tasks with your previous director?

So, to provide some context, I applied to be the lab's deputy director in 2020; being a deputy suited me fine—I didn't want to be on the front lines. That lasted five years, until this year. The former director was very eloquent when speaking, and I thought to myself, "I'll never be as eloquent as he is." I know there are still times when I can feel uncomfortable speaking, even though I'm much more comfortable speaking in public now. But here's the thing: I know I can still blush when I speak, or that I still sometimes compare myself to others in certain ways, but very

quickly I tell myself I don't care and move on. So yes, at the beginning the question of eloquence came up.

As for the division of tasks, our organization developed naturally over time without the lab director and I, as his assistant, having to think too much about it together. For example, he had a knack for writing speeches and statements, and I would proofread them and finalize them with him. Since I had delegated signing authority, I easily handled signing documents on behalf of the administration, creating summary charts, and performing quantitative analyses of lab data for HCERES. Beyond these specific tasks, we consulted each other regularly to validate decisions together, have documents or emails to be sent proofread, and divide up meetings with regulatory bodies.

That said, quite a few colleagues would only address him—whether that was because he held the DU position or because he was a man, I don't know. Now that I'm the director, I get the impression it's more about the role; I see it happening with me today.

Q9 - Yes, it's true that it's still a question that comes up: was it because he was the DU or because he was a man? Now that we're discussing it, it reminds me of the comic book: Where's the Boss?

I don't know if you've heard of it? It's a graphic novel based on real experiences that talks about women in agriculture and livestock farming. It describes situations faced by three young female farmers, where they're often asked: "Where's the boss?" Because since they're women, people assume it isn't them. And it's true that these are experiences women in leadership roles also describe in other fields. And what's interesting is that in the comic, the author also talks about how these questions—which are part of other sexist dynamics, of course—undermine their confidence and their sense of legitimacy.

Yes, and it's true that the issue of legitimacy is also important; I know it's a question I asked myself when I started as a DUA and then a DU. But I also know that my candidacy was approved by the supervisory bodies and that they appreciate my work style. It's very important to remember this positive feedback on my work and this institutional recognition when I have doubts. It helps to get back to reality, to ground yourself in reality to combat that feeling of illegitimacy.

Q10 - Yes, it's true that grounding yourself in reality is a very good strategy to combat that feeling. And now you're the lab director. Congratulations! Can you tell us when and how you took on that role?

Thank you. When the former director left for Italy, I served as interim unit director for 8 months. And then, since September 2025, I've been the official unit director. The deputy director is a colleague I've worked with for over 10 years. I know that together we'll work differently.

Did you ever imagine, when you were younger, that you'd become a lab director? And in your opinion, why or why not?

Definitely not. I was introverted, insecure, and painfully shy; I couldn't even ask for a pitcher of water at a restaurant when I was younger. Speaking in public was unthinkable. I wanted to be as

invisible as possible, not bother anyone, and always do things perfectly so as not to draw attention to myself. I was afraid to talk to people, whether I knew them or not.

I had always seen myself in a people-oriented job—first as a childcare worker, then a medical secretary, then a nurse, then a speech therapist… a job serving others. So yes, as a lab director, I am serving people, I think, clearly, but with a certain number of responsibilities that come with it.

Being a lab director inevitably means being in the spotlight at times, speaking on behalf of the group you represent during your term, proposing strategies and actions to colleagues, debating them, making your case, and then defending them before the governing bodies.

Eventually, I gained confidence over the years, first as an associate professor, and then by working closely with the laboratory's previous directors. I learned from them; I participated in meetings for a long time without saying much, I saw how things worked, and then, over time, I came to understand the system, and I dared to speak up; I dared to adopt a certain stance and a certain vision of the system.

Q11 - We often talk about the importance of role models for women in science. Role models are recognized as an essential tool for combating the underrepresentation of women in scientific fields. There is the association Femmes et Sciences, in particular, which works in schools, middle schools, and high schools, where female researchers present their work, their career paths, and so on to inspire and encourage young girls and boys to pursue careers in science and technical fields. And we know that role models have an impact on young girls' choice of science-related fields, especially in those where they are most underrepresented[1].

I understand that your thesis advisor was a role model for you—can you tell us a little more about that?

Yes, she was indeed a role model for me. She's a hard worker, passionate about her research, who doesn't count her hours and manages to do many things at once. She was a model of work ethic, and I drew inspiration from her strength. When I look at everything I'm doing at once, I consider myself a hard worker too. Today, even though I'm doing lots of different things and I'm passionate about my work as well, I'm trying to strike a better balance with my personal life, focusing especially on my health. So, for example, I try to limit working in the evenings and on weekends. That said, I'm aware that there's a slight difference between me and my thesis advisor, namely that we didn't both have the same ambitions.

I don't aspire to international renown. I want to conduct research at my own level, publish in French and English, but I don't aim to make a name for myself in my field of research. I'm more interested in getting involved in research management and leading the team. That's what gives meaning to my work.

Q12 - Indeed, it's important to have role models, as we've said, it allows us to identify with them and envision ourselves in scientific careers, but we must keep in mind—as you've done—that these are often people with aspirations and ambitions different from our own, and that not all of us have to be heroines in our field of research, or at least not all in the same way.

And you, with your background and experiences, what message would you like to convey today to young people considering a similar path?

As a woman with dyslexia who received a scholarship, it is possible to succeed.

I don't have an agrégation, I'm not a graduate of the École Normale Supérieure, and yet I'm a researcher at the École Normale Supérieure de Lyon. So my first message is that you have to try, take risks, and not limit yourself.

And then, given the current climate—with funding cuts and reduced hiring—you need to have a Plan A, B, and C so you don't shut yourself off from opportunities. It's also through experience that we discover ourselves, so I advise not hesitating to do internships to see what we like or don't like, and to see what goes on behind the scenes.

Finally, I also think we have to accept that to work in research administration, you have to be versatile, adaptable, and that there's a certain workload. You need to be aware of this and prepare for it, accepting these constraints. Of course, you shouldn't just accept everything either, but realize that you're contributing to a system and that not everything is in your hands, that your room to maneuver is limited, and therefore you shouldn't let these constraints get you down.

Q13 - And finally, if you could speak to the Isabel who is just starting her studies, what would you say to her, what advice would you give her?

I'd first tell her "well done" for persevering despite her lack of self-confidence, well done for listening to herself and for reorienting her career goals as she gained experience and met new people between high school and college.

I would advise her to come to terms with her dyslexia sooner during her college years.

Thank you so much, Isabel, for sharing this truly insightful perspective. We'll see you very soon for a new episode of Contre-expériences!

For our listeners,

- If you had to choose a single action or tool that could make daily life easier for a person with dyslexia at work, what would it be and why?
- Imagine you had to create a "survival kit" for a student with dyslexia starting their PhD. What items would absolutely have to be included?

Contre-expériences is a podcast made possible by the Fund for Gender Equality

in the Workplace, led by the Directorate General for Administration and

the Civil Service. It was developed in partnership between Coop-Egal and the Equality Mission of the CNRS Rhône-Alpes-Auvergne, with the assistance of Studio Plus Huit, and the invaluable support of the CNRS Rhône-Alpes-Auvergne Regional Directorate and the Mission for the Role of Women at the CNRS.

See you soon for more explorations

TRANSCRIPT EPISODE 4 - NOELLIE

Welcome to Contre expérience, the podcast that highlights non-stereotypical career paths in research. Each episode gives you an insight into the daily lives, challenges and successes of women and men with unconventional career trajectories.

I'm Romain Sabathier, associate director of Coop-Egal, a consultancy specialising in supporting organisations through their transition towards equality. I am supporting the CNRS with this podcast project. Today we are joined by Noëllie. At the age of 18, she began studying plastic arts at university. She is now 42. For the past 10 years, she has been a research engineer at the CNRS. Noëllie was not destined to join the scientific community. So how did she end up in the polymer materials engineering research laboratory? How did she become head of technical facilities and reactive extrusion, creating new, more eco-friendly materials for industry and agriculture?

It is Noëllie's unconventional journey that we're going to share today.

Romain: Hello, Noëllie

Noëllie: Hello, Romain

Q1 - Let's rewind a little on your background: your parents weren't scientists, and I imagine you didn't have a particular passion for reactive extrusion from childhood… :)

Yes, that's for sure.

So how did you end up here?

Well, that's a long story, let's say. I grew up in a small country town near Avignon. I come from a middle-class family, and it's true that my parents didn't have the chance to go to university, but they always encouraged me and pushed me to study – and, above all, to study something I love.

At high school, I went for a science A-level (baccaulérat) without really knowing what I wanted to do with it. At the same time, I was into interior design, so after my A-levels I chose to study plastic arts at the university in Nîmes, with a strong focus on contemporary art. Even back then, I enjoyed working with materials. But I soon realised that it lacked practical application for me, so I then enrolled on a DUT (University Technical Diploma) in Materials Science and Engineering, still in my region, as I didn't want to move away.

After that, I did end up moving, inevitably. I ended up going to Lyon for a bachelor's degree in polymer materials and a work-study master's in Materials. I worked at the French Institute of Textiles and Clothing in Ecully. Then, after that work-study year and graduating, I spent quite a while – about four years – going back and forth between fixed-term contracts and periods of unemployment. So it was a difficult time. I applied for dozens and dozens of job vacancies, but in those four years I never once considered the public sector! It's true that it had never crossed my mind. At no point did I look at job vacancies on the CNRS website, for example, or on university sites.

Then one day, whilst browsing the Pôle Emploi website, I came across a job vacancy at the IMP – the Polymer Materials Engineering Laboratory – where I work today. It was a fixed-term contract, but without realising it, I'd just set foot in public research.

Another stroke of luck: After three years on a fixed-term contract at the IMP, one day my colleague, the research director, Jocelyne, came to see me in my office and said: "Oh, Flavien's retiring. His post is open for the CNRS external competition." Then she added: "Honestly, your profile would be a perfect fit; you should apply!" I started looking at the job advert and then said to her, "But the deadline's tomorrow!" She replied, "No worries, go home, take the afternoon off and submit your application."

I didn't have time to overthink it and I just went for it! I didn't let myself get put off at all, neither by the fact that the job profile was a bit chemistry-heavy – even though I'm not a chemist – nor by the deadline, which was still pretty tight (sic). I managed to submit my application on time. Then, as it was an internal post at the IMP, I wrote to the person in charge of the post to let them know I was already there and that I'd applied for the role. And in the end, I passed the exam! And here I am at the IMP and the CNRS.

So, looking back, if Jocelyne hadn't told me about this post that day, I certainly wouldn't be a permanent member of staff at the CNRS today. And for the record, it was also Jocelyne who had posted the fixed-term contract vacancy on the Pôle Emploi website. That's how I first set foot in research and in the IMP laboratory.

Q2 - Well done, Noëllie, for seizing that opportunity. That hurdle was surmountable, and we've seen that it proved decisive. It was worth it for you. It also highlights the importance of diversifying the channels through which job vacancies are advertised, to attract a wider range of profiles and avoid a closed circle. A big shout-out to all the Jocelynes and Jocelins in HR who advertise vacancies not only on the mandatory platforms but also on Pôle Emploi, LinkedIn, or via equality networks! This can diversify the pool of applicants and, consequently, the recruitment process.

In the chemical sector in France, there is roughly a 50/50 split between women and men across all research and research support staff.

The research unit where you work, Noëllie, is headed by a woman – Jannick Duchet-Rumeau – and has around 200 staff members of all statuses (permanent and contract staff, including PhD students, researchers and research support staff like you, as you are a research engineer). The unit is broadly gender-balanced, with 55% men and 45% women. Conventionally, we refer to a gender-balanced workforce when a professional group comprises between 40% and 60% women and men.

To help us understand your core business, could you – if you're up for the challenge ;) – explain what 'reactive extrusion' is to the general public? I know it's not always easy to explain a complex, technical scientific field.

To put it simply, I think you can all picture what a plastic tube is. It is manufactured by extrusion, which is a plastics processing method used in the polymer materials industry to transform plastics into finished or semi-finished products. And the polymer material is what constitutes the raw material that we commonly refer to as "plastic".

So, to make it a bit simpler, we always start a study with small mixers in which we blend various raw materials, polymers and additives – such as talc or glass fibres, for example – as well as

solvents, at high temperatures. From there, we can test various formulations and parameters, and once we've found the right ones, that's when we can scale up.

This is where the extruder comes in – to put it simply, it's a heated metal barrel containing two rotating screws that melt and mix the materials. This allows us to obtain several kilos of material, the various properties of which we can then analyse.

Q3 - How does your lab's work help tackle environmental challenges?

Often, when we think of polymers, we tend to think of plastic and therefore oil. But it's important to realise that raw materials can be very diverse! In our laboratory, we're increasingly using bio-based, natural materials to replace those derived from fossil resources.

For example, we can use seaweed or even prawn shells! Of course, not prawn shells as they are, as one might imagine, but rather in powder form.

So there's also a major environmental challenge in recycling to create new materials. For instance, we're working with several regional companies on various projects to recycle car bumpers, as well as paint pots, or even textiles. What formulation or recipe can we use to decontaminate and recycle, whilst retaining good properties? That's the crux of the matter.

For example, rather than using a polluting fertiliser, the question is how to mix prawn shells and seaweed, encapsulating bacteria within them to create a biofertiliser for agriculture.

Q4 - Fascinating. I'll never look at plastic tubes or car bumpers in the same way again. And we can see how your profession is at the heart of solutions in the ecological transition. It really is fascinating. In terms of day-to-day tasks, what does your work actually look like, and what do you enjoy most, Noëllie?

It's true that my daily routine isn't perhaps easy to explain, as I have several jobs rolled into one. But I think that's actually what I enjoy!

To put some figures on it, let's say that:

- *40% of my working time is spent managing the two technical platforms I'm responsible for, which consist of around twenty machines.*
- *40% goes to my area of expertise, which is extrusion and reactive extrusion, where I support research carried out by PhD students, post-doctoral researchers and my fellow researchers.*
- *And the remaining 20% of my time is devoted to my role as a health and safety officer – which notably involves training new staff joining the laboratory on health and safety at work.*

I've also been working part-time for the last three years as a lecturer on a professional bachelor's degree in mechatronics, where I teach plastics processing.

In practical terms, I spend about seven days a month at my extruder, with my spanner and screwdriver, preparing for upcoming experiments and carrying out various extrusion runs. It's true that it's quite a physical job with a heavy mechanical component. Alongside this, I train new users on the equipment I'm responsible for, and of course I share my expertise with them. I also carry out maintenance on all this equipment when necessary, and I handle the technical and commercial aspects of this machine fleet, so to speak, to ensure our facilities are always in top

condition. And, of course, I mustn't forget the health and safety aspects that come up as we go along.

Q5 - That's part of your role as a health and safety officer too.

Yes, that's right. You have to do a bit of everything. It's true that no two days at work are the same, and that's what I love about it. And even if things get a bit hectic at times, I enjoy supporting everyone.

I have a motto that I often repeat in life, but also at work: there are no problems, only solutions.

What I also love about my job is the social aspect – always being in touch with colleagues, helping them with their research and in their day-to-day lives. And above all, what I love most of all is the autonomy I have in my work.

Thank you, Noëllie. We can hear your optimism and the sense of purpose in your work.

jingle

Q6 - In what way do you think being a woman in your role today constitutes an experience that defies stereotypes? Have you encountered any particular obstacles linked specifically to being a woman?

It's true that usually anything to do with DIY or mechanics is seen as a male-dominated field. When I tell people where I work, it's true that most people picture me as a chemist with my little test tubes in my lab, rather than with a hammer and a spanner. But for me, ultimately, that's what I enjoy – the hands-on, jack-of-all-trades side of things. Even though I'll admit it can sometimes be physically demanding, I've always loved it.

For example, when I go to the machining centre to order or collect parts we've had made, well, in the workshop there, it's all men. But despite that, I've always been made to feel welcome. And over time, they've got to know me and realise I'm not a fraud. And then there's my motto: if there's a problem, I don't give up. So it's true that I'm a persistent person, and that's appreciated. And especially in research, I'd say it's essential.

And my supervisor is a woman too! She's the specialist in reactive extrusion research. She's also paved the way to show that, ultimately, the discipline is just as much a woman's field as it is a man's.

Where it might be even more surprising is when I give instructions to these young men, in my role as head of the technical facilities. Especially, for example, if I ask them to vacuum after using the machines. Or when I give advice to young researchers—both men and women—who are starting their theses and think they have nothing to learn from a mere engineer. So, of course, this isn't a blanket statement, mind you; it depends on each person's personality, but you can tell straight away when my comments upset them.

Then, over time, I eventually learnt to adapt to everyone's personalities. I do have a character that allows me to assert myself without difficulty, and the hardest part for me was actually learning to stay calm and be more diplomatic, shall we say.

And with experience, I realised I wasn't an imposter. This helped me gain self-confidence, so that today I can deal with this sort of situation more easily.

Q7 - As for sexism, it's true I have a little anecdote. I often had to put a rather old-fashioned colleague in his place who had the unfortunate habit of making comments about the way young female PhD students dressed. He'd even tried to set me up on a 'date' with one of these colleagues. So I'd always been kind to him, trying to make him understand that his remarks were really inappropriate, as he was, after all, a decent bloke at heart. But then one day I walked into the building after lunch and there he was waiting for me with… the suitor. That day I really had to raise my voice to make him understand that it was really too much, that it wasn't funny at all anymore and that he had truly crossed the line.

Even though I'm an independent and self-reliant woman, I still know how to ask for help when it's needed. When, for example, I have to move heavy loads, it's true that I don't hesitate at all to ask my younger colleagues for a hand. And well, we're a team first and foremost.

Yes, and I suppose this is an issue that can arise for smaller colleagues – regardless of their gender – or for those facing temporary vulnerability due, for example, to illness, or who, as they get older, are unable to carry the same loads. This is called solidarity, not chivalry, as some would have us believe.

Indeed.

Speaking of these various workplace issues, how exactly did you manage to negotiate your working conditions, and what internal mechanisms within the CNRS or your other supervisory bodies – we're talking about supervisory bodies for employers other than the CNRS, sometimes in units that report to several employers – what internal mechanisms were you able to rely on?

It's true that when I joined the public sector after working for a large private industrial group, I must admit it took me a while to find my feet. Whilst there was too much management and control in the private sector, in the laboratory where I started I was initially surprised by a high degree of autonomy where everyone does pretty much what they want. And where, above all, the delays involved in every administrative procedure can be quite disorienting when you're not used to it.

But it's true that now I appreciate this great flexibility and autonomy at work.

For example, I was able to work 80% of full-time hours from the moment my son was born, and at the moment I don't work on Wednesdays, which is very welcome. My colleagues have adapted very well to my part-time schedule. If, for family reasons, I need to arrive a little later in the morning, I can do so. Conversely, if I need to stay a little later in the evening for an experiment, I can do that too without any problem.

I have joint custody of my son and I really appreciate this flexibility, which allows me to prioritise my son during the week I have him, and to devote more time to the lab during the week I don't have him.

I don't think you can have this kind of flexibility in many jobs. And what's really important to me is that on Mondays between noon and two, it's yoga! And that does me a world of good.

It's also true that I received great support from the CNRS when I was pregnant. Because, to be honest, I admit that at first I was quite anxious due to the exposure to chemical risks in the lab. We handle potentially hazardous materials; there's quite a lot of fine dust, solvents, and so on.

But so I contacted the CNRS occupational health service and was looked after and supported; we were able to adapt my workstation without any trouble. So throughout my pregnancy, I didn't do any extrusion work. And we delegated that task without any difficulty. And I was monitored regularly, which was very much appreciated.

I then ended up taking charge of the laboratory's health and safety file, becoming a health and safety officer to improve working conditions for everyone in the laboratory.

Q8 - That really shows your perseverance and ability to find solutions !

It is always necessary. It is true that management does not hesitate to invest tens of thousands of euros in health and safety, for example by installing high-performance air extraction systems to remove pollutants or by purchasing vacuum cleaners specifically designed for hazardous materials.

Just as a little anecdote, our laboratory was chosen in 2024 by the health and safety at work department at UCBL (Claude Bernard University of Lyon) as a model department for a visit by two inspectors from the Ministry. So that was quite a nice bit of recognition.

Q9 - And thank you, Noëllie, for bringing up the issues of health at work. You mentioned the possibility of doing sport between noon and two at your workplace, and you also spoke about flexible working hours, which are important to you – and it's true that when you manage to organise your working hours and personal time, you know it will contribute to better mental health and ensure those moments of respite that are good for your general health. And then you also spoke about the job-related risks to your health, how you managed to address them and negotiate them with occupational health. Thank you for sharing your story.

jingle

To wrap up our interview, Noëllie, the "I have a dream" question ;) If, like your fairy godmother Jocelyne, you too had a magic wand today, what measures would you put in place to promote equality and better working conditions?

I'm lucky; I'm quite well off in my lab. Because I manage to prioritise my private life whilst still doing my job properly. And that's what I really appreciate. I think that should be the case for everyone, women and men alike.

If I could, I'd bring in more flexibility. I'd let everyone organise their working hours as they wish to find their own balance. Because that's what well-being at work is all about.

Thank you. Indeed, this issue of organising working hours is crucial, whether it's about the flexibility offered or, for example, meetings that go on forever – regulating that can change our days and our work-life balance.

Absolutely.

Q10 - Thank you very much, Noëllie! Perhaps one last question: if you had a message for the younger generations, what would it be?

I would tell them: be bold! Have confidence in yourselves and, above all, don't close any doors; listen to your instincts.

Well, it's true that I've often imagined life as a little walk in the woods with several paths open to us. At every crossroads, you'll have to make a decision, and whatever you choose will always be

the right choice. Go for it, don't look back. The future lies ahead of you. And if an obstacle comes your way, stay strong, have confidence in yourself, and you'll see, you'll manage to overcome it.

A thousand thanks, Noëllie, for your work and your communicative generosity! You've shown us that there is no set or fixed path. Thank you again.

Thank you, Romain, and thank you to the whole team!

Listeners, if you too are having a counter-experience by working in a job that, on the face of it, wasn't meant for you if we are to believe the stereotypes, please share your experience with us in the comments in a few lines - along with a resource you've come across on your journey that has helped you follow your passions regardless of stereotypes?

Please also share this episode to inspire new colleagues.

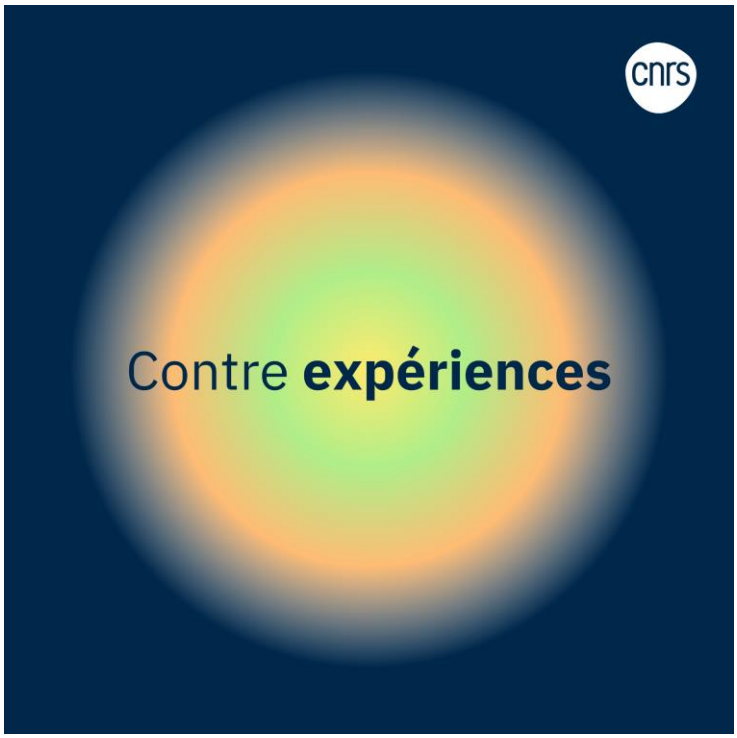
'Contre-expérience' is a podcast made possible by the Fund for Gender Equality in the Workplace, led by the Directorate-General for Administration and the Civil Service. It was developed in partnership between Coop-Egal and the Equality Mission of the CNRS Rhône-Alpes-Auvergne, with the assistance of Studio Plus Huit, and the invaluable support of the CNRS Rhône-Alpes-Auvergne Regional Directorate and the Mission for the Role of Women at the CNRS.

See you soon for more explorations!

CREDITS

Produit par le CNRS Rhône Auvergne et Coop-Egal, avec l'accompagnement du Studio Plus Huit

Produced by CNRS Rhône Auvergne and Coop-Egal, with the support of Studio Plus Huit.



This project is mainly funded by the Professional Equality Fund of the DGAFP (French Ministry of the Civil Service).