Elevating women
When Professor Letizia Jaccheri discovered she was the only woman in the management team at both the Department of Computer Science and the Faculty of Information Technology and Electrical Engineering, idea became action. IDUN was born.

“This was in 2013. It suddenly became very clear that I was surrounded by only men in two different arenas, both of which had power. Until then, I believed it was more important to work on equality at the student level, and I supported the Ada project at NTNU, which aims to educate more women at the Faculty of Information Technology and Electrical Engineering. But suddenly, I realized that we have to work at the higher levels as well, all the way from PhD to professor.”

Letizia Jaccheri is already fired up. This is one of her passions, and when she is passionate, she makes things happen — often quickly. She calls it flashover.

“In the beginning, I did what women often do. I developed a little project, and we got some funding. But I had bigger plans, and I applied for more funding. In the end, we had 10 million NOK in the pot and a three-year project. Among other things, we used these funds to recruit 10 female academics from European countries to mentor a group of PhD students, postdocs, and young researchers here at NTNU. The corona virus pandemic has brought this project to a crawl — but we hope to speed things up this winter (talk in 2021).”

From PhD to professor
IDUN is a unique project in terms of motivating more women to pursue professorships. IDUN has become a development project, but at the same time, it is a research project, looking into how to get women to pursue an academic career when they have completed their PhD.

Letizia Jaccheri believes women (and men) should not wait so long before they become leaders. She was 47 years old when she became head of department.

“We want IDUN to lead the way. We hope that the mentors we have recruited can provide insights and feedback and serve as role-models for participants. In time, we hope the women's share in academia will increase. Because this change won't happen overnight.”

Letizia herself felt she had no other choice than to continue in academia when she came to Norway from Italy as a mother of young children in 1997.

“Academia was no fun back then, really. I have a husband, too, of course, but that time with young children is always exhausting. But for me, there was no way back.”

And so, she started the tough process of self-motivation. This entailed making her job feel both significant and fun. The idea of becoming head of department or a professor did not even cross her mind. “And I had definitely no idea I would be chosen for an equality award down the line!”
Serendipity
She ended up in the informatics programme by chance because she thought it was going to be about journalism and information.

“And then it was computers! That was disappointing, but also, it was an exciting time at the University of Pisa. Computer technology and informatics were relatively new fields in the 1980s. There were 1200 of us in the programme, from all over Europe, and we had lectures in abandoned churches and cultural halls to fit all the students in. We worked at the intersection of computers and the humanities, computers and art. And there was actually quite a few girls in the computer programmes back then. Several of them have gone on to have amazing careers. It was a lovely time.”

Her brown eyes sparkle
She may not have said so, but Professor Jaccheri does not think computers are particularly interesting. “I need more. Software engineering and society, or software engineering and gender. Computer technology on its own is simply too boring. There has to be some purpose to developing new software beyond making someone rich. Computer technology must be used to make society better,” she says, emphasizing every syllable.

Good role-models
As a child, she dreamed of becoming a teacher or an author, but she didn’t have the confidence to pursue writing. Her father was a lawyer, and he wanted her to follow in his footsteps.

“But I didn’t want to. My maternal grandmother was a teacher, born in 1909. She wanted to work, even if she did not need to. She wanted to be independent, and I thought that was cool. She was a tough lady and definitely a role-model for me. Other female role-models largely come from literature.”

She wants the IDUN project to encourage women to shed some perfectionism and assume leadership roles to a much greater degree than they do today. And to do that, you need good role-models. She had a male professor who was passionate about promoting a better gender balance in computer technology. “I gained a lot from him, but I also listened to him.”

Being elevated
“At NTNU, Kari Hag, professor of mathematics and equality champion, is my female role-model. When you speak to her, you feel great. She is able to elevate you in a conversation. It’s important, but it is not easy. She has taught me so much, and she is humble.”

What motivates you to keep going?

“Right now, being able to work internationally and with equality is what motivates me. I’m working with a Chinese researcher, who recently said: ‘Sustainability is not a problem for Norway or China — it is a global problem.’ And being able to grapple with these types of problems is something I enjoy. It means something in the world. So does equality.”

Your efforts over the past 30 years are now bearing fruit. What are your thoughts on that?

“I think that the world has opened its eyes more to gender equality and equality in general. I’ve read a lot about gender equality lately. More women are stepping into the light now, I think. More than before. Or perhaps that is because I follow them?”

At a student level, NTNU has achieved great results, much to the credit of the Ada project, among other things. The share of female students has increased from 6 % to 25 % in 20 years. Fewer women drop out, and they get better grades. At the level above this, from PhD to professor, we still have a way to go, but NTNU and Norway are not doing too badly.

Jaccheri is the chair of a similar project to IDUN at a European level.

“That’s when I learned how far we have actually come at NTNU in terms of getting girls into universities and women into leadership positions. But there is still work to be done, things will not happen on their own. We have a responsibility to elevate girls and women through mentoring schemes, such as IDUN. At the same time, you also need a personal drive.”

Letizia Jaccheri will continue to motivate and lead the way for women in academia. Her achievements were recognized when she won the “ODA Awards Woman” in the spring of 2021 and NTNU Gender Equality and Diversity Award in June 2021 for her efforts in getting more women to pursue an education in technology.

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Credits for photos to photographer: Kai T. Dragland/NTNU.