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Navigating Resistance: Analysing the Complex Dynamics of Resistance in Gender Equality Policy Implementation in Universities

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Abstract

While resistance to gender equality policies across institutions has received considerable scholarly attention, the study of resistance to specific themes of gender equality, such as gender-based violence (GBV), has gained significant momentum only over the last decade, especially in Central and Eastern European countries. This article analyses the development and implementation of gender equality plans (GEPs) with measures against GBV in higher education institutions (HEIs). It examines the strategies applied by institutions to develop or modify institutional policies and procedures to monitor, prevent, and address GBV, and the resistances encountered during these processes in the socio-political context of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Empirically, the article is based on an analysis of institutional policies and the process of developing roadmaps for devising and implementing GEPs in eight sport HEIs in CEE. Theoretically, it situates resistance as acts of opposition and the implementation of gender equality policies as a result of power struggles between status quo and gender equality actors. Moreover, the article identifies forms of resistance and counteractions that hinder and drive gender equality reform in HEIs and proposes key initiatives and strategic priorities to support institutional change.

Keywords

Central and Eastern Europe; gender equality plans; gender mainstreaming; gender-based violence; higher education institutions; implementation; institutional change; intersectionality; resistance; roadmaps

1. Introduction

Sport has a longstanding record of promoting ethical values, fair play, and integrity (Opstoel et al., 2020); however, violence also occurs within sport and sport higher education (Alsarve & Strand, 2023). In sport higher education institutions (HEIs), the culture of sport, which is associated with heteronormativity, traditional forms of masculinity, sexism, and "lad culture" (Denison et al., 2021; Phipps, 2018), enhances academic hierarchies and inequalities (Melton & Cunningham, 2014; Welch et al., 2021). Furthermore, institutional and cultural backlashes against feminism combined with gender expectations about "appropriate activities and behaviours based on notions of acceptable femininity relating to physical ability and capacity" are still highly evident in the organisational culture of sport (Scraton, 2018, p. 639). Hence, existing gender stereotypes and inequalities stand in the way of a gender-equal sport higher education.

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a widespread and systemic problem in HEIs with severe consequences for individuals and organisations. It encompasses physical, sexual, economic, and psychological forms of violence and is defined by the European Commission (2022) as acts that "result in, or are likely to result in physical harm, sexual harm, psychological, or economic harm or suffering." Recent data from the European Commission-funded UniSAFE project show that 62% of the 42,000 survey respondents had experienced at least one form of GBV since they started working or studying at their institution (Humbert et al., 2022; Lipinsky et al., 2022). An increasing number of students, academic leaders, policymakers, and civil society actors in the European Research Area (ERA) acknowledge the severity of the problem, calling for efficient and effective measures: Preventing GBV is one of six priorities in the strongly endorsed Ljubljana Declaration (Council of the European Union, 2021); the European Commission (2024) recently published a zero-tolerance code of conduct to counteract GBV in the European research and innovation system; and counteracting GBV is one of five recommended elements of a GEP, which is, in turn, an eligibility requirement for EU funding.

Despite increased awareness, documented prevalence and consequences, and numerous national and EU policy initiatives, GBV remains insufficiently addressed in HEI due to multiple interconnected challenges. Cultural barriers—such as the normalisation of GBV, patriarchal norms, and entrenched gender biases—are compounded by institutional resistance to developing and implementing comprehensive GBV policies (O'Connor et al., 2021). Many HEIs lack robust, clear, and enforceable GBV policies (Huck et al., 2022), and existing policies often focus narrowly on sexual harassment, neglecting intersecting inequalities (Huck et al., 2022). Implementation is further hindered by insufficient training, resources, leadership commitment, and a lack of monitoring and evaluation (Ranea-Triviño et al., 2022). Underfunding also limits GBV prevention and response efforts (Anitha & Lewis, 2018). Power dynamics, including hierarchical structures, deter reporting—especially when perpetrators are in positions of authority—and survivors may fear academic or professional repercussions (Bull, 2024; Humbert & Strid, 2024; Lipinsky et al., 2022; Pilinkaite Sotirovic & Blazyte, 2022). These challenges reflect various forms of resistance. While institutional resistance to gender equality policies has been well studied (e.g., Benschop & Verloo, 2006; Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013; Ranea-Triviño et al., 2022; Roos et al., 2020; Verloo, 2018), resistance to GBV-specific measures is only recently gaining traction, particularly in north-western Europe (Anitha & Lewis, 2018; Crimmins, 2019), highlighting the need for further research in countries in and from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

Although gender equality in Europe has advanced, significant regional differences remain. Western and Nordic countries generally score higher on indices like EIGE's Index and the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index, reflecting stronger institutional support, greater female participation in public life, and better work-life policies. In contrast, countries in CEE typically score lower due to post-socialist transitions, weaker institutions, and more conservative socio-political climates influenced by religion and nationalism—despite women's relatively high employment and education rates. In many Central and Eastern European countries, gender equality is framed in traditional or family-centric terms, with limited political support and frequent backlash. Within the ERA, gender equality is a key priority, supported by requirements such as Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) in Horizon Europe and tools like the She Figures reports. However, implementation and impact vary, with CEE countries often facing more resistance and limited institutional capacity. These contextual differences are essential for understanding how gender equality is approached across Europe, particularly in CEE, and are this article's focus.

The article analyses the process of developing and implementing institutional GEPs with measures against GBV in eight sports HEIs. It identifies the strategies applied by institutions to develop or modify institutional policies and procedures to monitor, prevent, and address GBV, and the resistances encountered during these processes, in the socio-political context of CEE. The article aims to contribute to the wider implementation research field by identifying sites and forms of resistance and counteractions that hinder and drive gender equality reform in HEIs. While institutions can be challenged and changed by gender equality actors, change efforts often meet with resistance (Verloo, 2018), requiring further examination and analysis of such resistance and measures encountered during the design and implementation phases (Engeli & Mazur, 2018; Mergaert & Lombardo, 2014).

1.1. Resistances to Gender Equality and GBV Measures in Higher Education Institutions

Challenges to implementing gender equality and GBV measures in higher education can be understood as sites of resistance. While resistance to gender equality is well documented (Tildesley et al., 2022), the term is used in varied and often imprecise ways (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). Despite this, scholars agree that resistance involves agency and opposition to power (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2016; Verloo, 2018). Research identifies institutional resistance to GBV as rooted in organisational factors aimed at protecting reputation (O'Connor, 2023; O'Connor et al., 2021), leading to denial or minimisation of incidents (Hodgins et al., 2022; Puigvert et al., 2016; Romito, 2021), cover-ups (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020), and suppression of reports, resulting in underreporting and negative outcomes for survivors (Humbert et al., 2022; Humbert & Strid, 2024). Tokenistic compliance is another form, where GBV policies or campaigns lack meaningful enforcement (Ahmed, 2012; Hodgins et al., 2022). Bureaucratic resistance includes delays through complex procedures and excessive red tape (Meyerson & Tompkins, 2007).

A second site is cultural and normative resistance, such as normalising GBV as part of campus life—for example, treating sexual harassment at social events as a rite of passage (Phipps, 2018). Patriarchal norms reinforce this, where traditional gender norms and biases that perpetuate GBV are upheld and defended, such as when inappropriate behaviour is downplayed as "boys will be boys" (Dlamini & Adams, 2014) and practices of blaming the victim, where responsibility for GBV is shifted onto survivors rather than perpetrators), or indeed, leadership (Sims, 2019).

Third, leadership and faculty resistance include denial or "epistemological resistance," where GBV is framed as isolated rather than systemic and addressing the broader patterns of violations and abuse (Pilinkaite Sotirovic & Blazyte, 2022). Fear of lawsuits or damage to professional reputation may drive avoidance (Krebs et al., 2016), while entrenched hierarchies and loyalties often result in the protection of colleagues accused of misconduct and perpetrators (Whitley & Page, 2015).

A fourth site of resistance is resource-based resistance, which arises from financial neglect, such as underfunded counselling, lack of GBV education, or inadequate support for awareness programmes (O'Connor, 2023).

Fifth is systemic resistance, including intersectional blindness—the failure to address how race, disability, or sexuality increase vulnerability to GBV—due to limited knowledge or training (Crenshaw, 2017; Humbert & Strid, 2024). Systemic resistance can also take the form of legal resistance, with institutions avoiding disciplinary action out of fear of being sued by the accused (Cantalupo & Kidder, 2018; Hollander & Einwohner, 2004).

Finally, a sixth site of resistance is cognitive and psychological. This can take the form of change fatigue resistance, with weariness and frustration experienced by change agents within an institution who continually work to drive change but encounter persistent obstacles, resistance, or lack of meaningful progress (Küçükatalay et al., 2023). An example of this is when staff gradually disengage from institutional change initiatives after years of seeing their proposals ignored or watered down by leadership (Ahmed, 2017). Cognitive dissonance resistance manifests when individuals resist change because it conflicts with their personal beliefs or self-perception, exemplified by faculty members downplaying GBV to maintain their belief that their institution is progressive and equitable.

In sum, resistance to gender equality and GBV measures occurs across multiple sites—systemic, institutional, cultural, leadership, resource-based, and psychological. This article explores how these forms are experienced and addressed in HEIs in CEE. The next sections outline the methods and materials, followed by findings from eight HEIs, where six key forms of resistance are identified and analysed. The final section discusses these findings in light of existing research and proposes a typology of resistance for future use.

2. Methods and Materials

This article is based on three sets of primary qualitative and quantitative empirical data collected from eight sports HEIs (four sports universities and four faculties of sports) in eight CEE countries, which pursue institutional changes to promote gender equality and address GBV over 30 months (2023–2025). Within this 30-month process, the participating institutions aim to develop a new GEP for their university or faculty that is inclusive, innovative, intersectional, and impactful, specifically tailored to the sports field and with dedicated actions to address GBV (4I-GEP). The results reported in the present article focus on the first 22 months of the process, providing insights into the initial stages and key developments of the institutional change efforts, including the resistances encountered and, where applicable, the strategies employed to navigate them.

2.1. Recruitment of Participating Institutions

Initially, an online mapping of sports faculties and universities across CEE countries was conducted to identify potential participating institutions. Invitations were sent sequentially to 15 institutions, with the aim of engaging up to eight institutions. The invitation included details about the requested involvement in the institutional change process that would lead to the development of a new inclusive GEP, and those that expressed interest were then invited to an online meeting to further discuss their motivations and provide them with more details about their engagement. Out of the 15 institutions contacted, three declined, citing a lack of staff capacity, four did not respond, and eight accepted the invitation. As such, the sample may reflect a selection bias towards institutions with greater initial interest or capacity to engage with gender equality initiatives.

2.2. Study Framework and Main Actors

Methodologically, the article is based on interactive action research, a participatory and iterative research methodology that integrates action and reflection to address practical issues within specific contexts (Baum et al., 2006; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). It involves a cyclical process in which researchers ("experts") and practitioners ("implementing teams") collaboratively identify problems, design and implement interventions, and assess outcomes to inform subsequent actions. With this approach, the study not only seeks to solve immediate problems but also supports knowledge co-creation and strengthens participant agency through active engagement and continuous reflection throughout the research process (Kemmis et al., 2014). More specifically, the study involved the participatory design and implementation of institutional roadmaps, through collaboration between experts and implementing teams via self-assessment reports, trainings, mutual learning workshops, mentoring meetings, and learning diaries (Vilarchao et al., 2024). Additional data was gathered via a questionnaire.

The process is as follows. As a first step, the participating institutions initiated a process of pursuing institutional changes to lay the groundwork for the development of the 4I-GEP. To achieve this, roadmaps for institutional change were designed and implemented by teams generally composed of three to five individuals (implementing teams; see Ververidou et al., 2024). The composition of these teams varied across the participating institutions, including academic staff (researchers, professors), administrative staff (members of international/EU offices, gender equality and diversity units), and leadership figures (vice dean, vice rector). During this process, the participating institutions were supported by an expert team comprising nine researchers from three institutions, all distinct from the participating institutions, located in Northern, Western, and South-East Europe, with research, training, and mentoring expertise in institutional change, gender equality, and GBV. The expert team oversaw the design and implementation of the roadmaps, facilitated a training scheme to equip the participating institutions with the necessary concepts and tools, organised mutual learning activities among the participating institutions, and mentored the institutions through periodical meetings in three cycles, in which progress and challenges were discussed—and lessons learnt from the previous cycle were incorporated in the subsequent cycle of trainings, mutual learning, and mentoring activities. Prior to these meetings, the participating institutions submitted brief reports to the expert team. The experiences of resistance to institutional change in these interactions and materials were noted and addressed in the subsequent cycles and assessed through a resistance questionnaire.

2.3. Data Collection and Methods of Analysis

Three sets of empirical data were gathered during the first 22 months of the institutional change process, through three methods (see Table 1): (a) self-assessment reports prepared by the implementing teams of the participating institutions, documenting their contexts, strategies, and reflections on the change process; (b) semi-structured questionnaires completed by members of the participating institutions (primarily members of the implementing teams), assessing the resistances encountered; and (c) observations from the expert team that oversaw and supported the participating institutions throughout the process of institutional change. All participants provided informed consent for the analysis and publication of anonymised and aggregated data derived from the reports and questionnaires. Participation was entirely voluntary, and all procedures complied with applicable ethical standards, including the General Data Protection Regulation where relevant.

Table 1. Overview of data sources, respondents, and analytical methods used in the study.

Data source	Reported by	Method of analysis
Self-assessment reports	Implementing teams	Qualitative and quantitative
Semi-structured questionnaires	Some members of the implementing teams and other members of the participating institutions	Qualitative and quantitative
Collection of observations from the expert team	Expert team	Qualitative

2.3.1. Self-Assessment Reports

Prior to designing and implementing their roadmaps for institutional change, the implementing teams of the eight participating institutions completed self-assessment reports to evaluate their existing GEP and document their institutional context regarding gender equality and measures to address GBV. The self-assessment reports were based on semi-structured questionnaires, which included 50 core questions in English, combining both closed- and open-ended questions. These questions were organised into two main sections: GEP analysis and institutional mapping. The reports aimed to assess the existing GEPs in relation to the European Commission requirements and recommendations, as well as the 4I dimensions (inclusive, innovative, intersectional, and impactful). They also served to evaluate the institutional context across four key areas of intervention: policies, documents, and procedures; education and awareness; infrastructure and resources; and governance (Strid et al., 2023). The self-assessment reports were analysed using a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative analysis was conducted in Excel to document the presence or absence of institutional policies, protocols, and specific GEP sections, providing a structured baseline for comparison. Qualitative analysis was employed to capture the nuances of implementing teams' perspectives, incorporating insights from open-ended responses and semi-structured interviews conducted with each implementing team.

2.3.2. Semi-Structured Questionnaires

A semi-structured questionnaire was designed to explore the resistances encountered during the process of pursuing institutional changes aimed at mainstreaming gender equality and addressing GBV.

The questionnaire served to collect quantitative and qualitative insights from the implementing teams actively engaged in the institutional change process. It consisted of 28 questions in English, structured across five thematic sections: (a) context and background, (b) institutional changes to mainstream gender equality, (c) GBV, (d) resistances, and (e) strategies. The questionnaire combined closed-ended questions, such as Likert scales and multiple-choice items, with open-ended prompts to capture both standardised data and detailed personal reflections. Responses were collected individually and anonymously via an online platform to encourage open feedback and ensure confidentiality. The name of the respondents' institution was only disclosed to the expert team leading the collection and analysis of data, and only to ensure the better contextualisation of the responses.

In total, 18 members from the eight participating institutions responded to the questionnaire, with at least one member from each institution and an average of two per institution (ranging from one to four). The participants included activity leads, leadership figures, and team members responsible for implementing or supporting some of the gender equality initiatives. The collected data were analysed using Excel, employing a combination of quantitative methods to document trends and frequencies, and qualitative methods to identify recurring themes and insights from open-ended responses. This approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of resistances, strategies, and contextual influences across institutions.

2.3.3. Collection of Observations From the Expert Team

The expert team's observations derive from the analysis of two datasets: the materials developed by the implementing teams of the eight participating institutions for the study and the expert team's internal report. More specifically, the documentation developed by the implementing teams includes an institutional roadmap for institutional change (Ververidou et al., 2024) and four periodical progress reports. The roadmaps can be defined as plans delineating specific actions and subsequent activities leading to the development of intersectional, innovative, inclusive, and impactful GEPs, while the periodical progress reports include the implementing team's reflections on the training sessions and roadmap implementation process. The expert team's internal report draws on discussions which were held with the implementing team during the study. The entire dataset has been analysed manually using content analysis, which constitutes "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). The coding scheme used for the classification of the data has been based on the review of the literature of resistances (see Section 1.1). Based on this, several observations have been made regarding the prevalence of specific types of resistance within the participating institutions, which are presented in the following section. Table 2 summarises the data sources analysed during the study.

To synthesise the findings presented in the next section, a triangulation of the three methods described above was employed. The analysis of the self-assessment reports provided a solid understanding of the institutional contexts and a clear baseline of existing policies and practices. The questionnaire results captured the implementing teams' perceptions of resistances encountered throughout the institutional change process, offering both quantitative trends and qualitative insights. Lastly, the expert team's observations complemented these findings by providing a holistic perspective, interpreting the resistances reported by the implementing teams whilst contextualising their decisions and actions. This triangulated approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of the resistances, their underlying dynamics, and the strategies employed to address them.

Table 2. Overview of data sources analysed by the expert team.

Data sources	Data type	
	Report/questionnaire	Meeting
Institutional roadmaps	Roadmap template filled in by the implementing team	Two online meetings between each implementing team and the expert team
Mentoring and monitoring activities	Four periodical progress reports by the implementing team	Four online meetings between each implementing team and the expert team
Mutual learning activities	No	Twelve online/in-person activities between all the implementing teams and the experts
Training activities	No	Nine online/in-person training activities organised by the expert team for all the implementing teams
Expert team internal report	Report by the expert team	No

3. Results

3.1. Context and Background

3.1.1. Institutional Settings Regarding Gender Equality and GBV

The self-assessment reports completed by the implementing teams of the eight participating institutions during the first phase of the study, prior to the start of the institutional change process, revealed significant differences within the institutional landscapes. While some institutions had already established gender equality policies, others were in the early stages of incorporating gender discussions into their institutional agendas. This was also evident in the analysis of their existing institutional GEP: Some institutions had tailored GEPs addressing the five areas recommended by the European Commission, while others had very basic GEPs designed solely to meet the European Commission requirements to ensure funding eligibility within Horizon Europe. However, several common observations were applicable for all the participating institutions: awareness-raising and training activities rarely focused on sports or effectively included all stakeholders; the existence of an institutional GEP and its measures were often described as poorly known or understood across the organisations; gender-related data collection was predominantly binary (women/men), with a notable absence of robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms; and financial and human resources allocated to gender equality were minimal or, in some cases, entirely lacking. Furthermore, in terms of measures to address GBV, five out of the eight participating institutions had such actions included in their existing GEPs, and these measures were often basic and tokenistic, such as hosting a single awareness-raising seminar on GBV for staff or students, without integrating the topic into broader training, curriculum, or institutional practices. As for the existing institutional policies explicitly addressing GBV, only three out of the eight institutions had policies in place at the beginning of this study.

3.1.2. Institutional Attitudes Towards Change and Innovation

Under the hypothesis that institutions open to accommodating institutional changes and testing innovative solutions, as the eight participating institutions, would exhibit less resistance to institutional changes fostering gender equality and combating GBV, participants of the eight participating institutions were asked

to evaluate their institution's openness to change and innovation in the semi-structured questionnaire. The findings reveal a mixed but generally positive outlook regarding the openness of institutions' administrative processes to revising established practices. A significant proportion of respondents ($n = 8$, out of 18) described their institutions as "somewhat open" to change, while an equal number expressed a more neutral stance. A minority of respondents positioned their institutions at the extremes, with one respondent viewing their processes as "completely open" and another respondent considering them "somewhat resistant." None of the respondents identified their institutions as "completely resistant" to change.

Similarly, the results indicate that institutional decision-making processes within the participating institutions are evaluated as a balance between tradition and innovation, or lean slightly towards innovation. Specifically, half of the respondents characterised their institutions as balanced in this regard, while the remaining reported a slight shift towards innovation. Notably, no respondents identified their institutions as being strongly aligned with either tradition or innovation. These findings suggest that while the institutions are internally perceived as generally open to change, there is still room to enhance their willingness to change established practices and adopt innovative approaches to foster gender equality and address GBV.

3.1.3. First Institutional Reactions and Support for Institutional Change

The implementing teams employed various strategies to prepare colleagues for the reception of the planned institutional changes. Most of them focused on presenting the context, goals, and expected outcomes of the proposed actions, and/or emphasised the importance of the topic, tailoring discussions to the specific institutional and national context in terms of gender equality and GBV. A smaller subset actively engaged stakeholders, such as faculty members and top management, in the preparatory process.

Reactions to these efforts were mixed, as reported by the 18 respondents to the questionnaire. While a third of the respondents reported mostly enthusiastic support from their colleagues, the vast majority noted mixed reactions, indicating varied levels of receptivity. No one reported predominantly non-welcoming reactions. Significant support or involvement came from a range of institutional roles and functions. Leadership was frequently highlighted, alongside support from staff members, while involvement from the HR department, the ombud's office, students, and other offices and departments were mentioned by only a few institutions. These results could be interpreted in several ways. While for some institutions, they may suggest a successful framing of the actions, for others, given the lack of awareness and, at times, limited knowledge on the subject, the absence of non-welcoming reactions could be attributed to a lack of understanding of the implications these actions might have in terms of the required changes and resources. Additionally, the expert team's observations point to another possible interpretation of these findings. Through continuous engagement with the implementing teams, the expert team observed the reluctance of some members to oppose or contradict the decisions and views of leadership figures within their institutions due to perceived hierarchical pressures. This dynamic may have contributed to their hesitance to report or express non-welcoming reactions. Taken together, these findings suggest that the prevalence of non-welcoming reactions may have been underestimated.

3.2. Forms and Experiences of Resistance

Institutional change often encounters resistance, as it disrupts established norms, roles, and processes within an organisation. Recognising resistance as an inherent part of the change process is essential for developing strategies to address and overcome it, particularly in initiatives aimed at fostering gender equality and addressing issues like GBV, which the participating institutions committed to undertaking.

Strikingly, only a minority of respondents ($n = 5$; representing five different institutions) reported encountering resistance during their institutional change process. These resistances typically emerged during the development or initial implementation of the roadmap for change. According to the respondents, the main actors behind these resistances include institutional management, who either interpret the expression of the need for change as a criticism of the present governance and/or are reluctant to allocate resources or duties; academic staff, who either show lack of interest or fear the allocation of extra tasks; administrative staff, who fear the allocation of new tasks on top of their existing duties; and students, who, while generally very supportive, sometimes lack proper awareness of the topic or the institutional change initiative itself. On the other hand, the majority of the respondents ($n = 13$; representing seven institutions) reported not encountering any resistance. This was attributed to the effective communication of the initiative's goals and benefits, clarity around the process and its relevance to institutional needs, a generally high level of awareness within the institution, prior involvement in similar initiatives, and the fact that the institution already had a GEP.

Notably, the perception of resistance varied between individuals from the same institution; while some participants declared that they had not faced any resistance, others reported its presence, detailing when it was first encountered and identifying the groups of origin. This variation could be explained by several factors, including the different roles individuals play in the institution and the institutional change process itself, their diverse levels of awareness of the topic, and their own unconscious resistance to change.

In order to assess whether explicitly asking about resistances could hinder access to reliable responses, participants were asked to report on the frequency of some common responses to institutional changes. The analysis of the responses indicates varying degrees of resistance framed as logistical or prioritisation challenges (resource-based resistance and leadership and faculty resistance) during the implementation of institutional changes (Figure 1). The most frequent response was "there are other priorities now," with over half of the respondents indicating that this occurred "sometimes," reflecting a recurring perception of competing institutional demands. Statements such as "I/we do not have the time for this" were also notable, with the majority reporting this as an occasional or frequent barrier, suggesting that time constraints were a widespread concern. Financial limitations produced more mixed responses, with equal numbers indicating they experienced them rarely and frequently, showing mixed experiences with resource allocation. Finally, while only a few respondents ($n = 3$) reported never hearing the statement "We do not have those problems at our institution," around half acknowledged encountering it at least "sometimes," "often," or "very often," suggesting a need to challenge perceptions of gender inequalities and GBV. These findings highlight a blend of structural and cultural resistance within institutions.

Overall, the findings reveal an interesting dichotomy in the experiencing and reporting of resistance. While a minority of respondents acknowledged encountering resistance, the majority reported experiencing none.
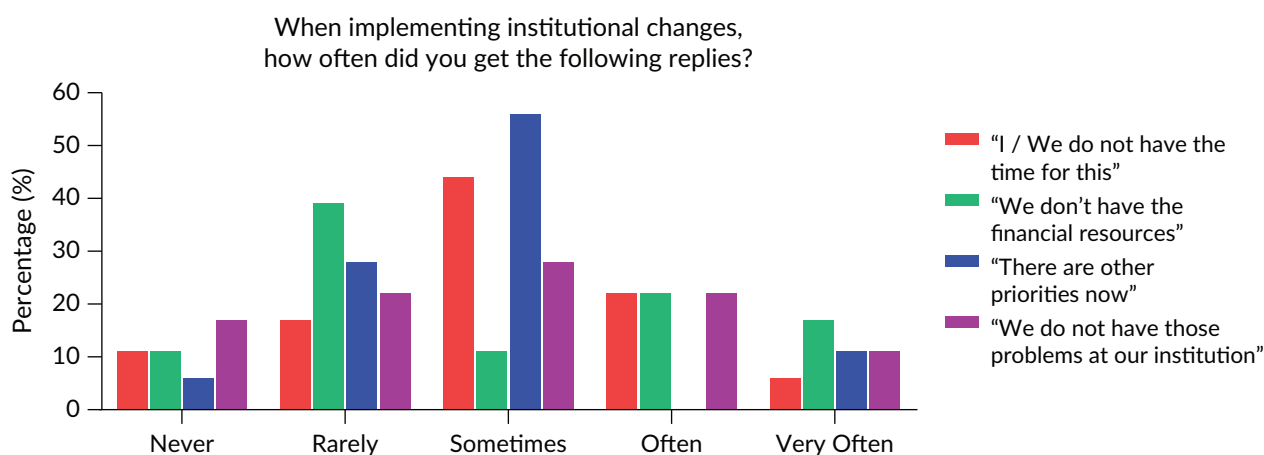
Figure 1. Frequency of common responses encountered during the implementation of institutional changes (*n* = 18 respondents).

However, the variation in perceptions within the same institutions and the presence of subtle yet pervasive challenges, such as logistical constraints and prioritisation issues, suggest that resistance may often go un- or under-recognised and/or un- or underreported. These could be due to multiple factors, including cultural barriers, such as fear of facing problems if openly dissenting with leadership figures, differing levels of awareness and engagement among internal stakeholders, and the unconscious resistance of the implementing team members.

The observations from the expert team also point to an underreporting of the perception of resistance by the respondents. Throughout the process of developing and implementing the roadmaps for change, the expert team experienced both direct resistance from some members of the implementing teams and indirect resistance reported by the implementing team's members when describing the challenges they faced. In the expert team's views, resistance is often not acknowledged as resistance to change but explained differently. These results emphasise the need for more nuanced approaches to identify and address resistance, particularly by recognising it as a critical component of the institutional change process and by gaining a deeper understanding of its typologies and mechanisms.

## 3.3. Patterns of Resistance Across the Institutions

Following the sites and forms of resistance to institutional change outlined in Section 1.1, the prevalence of each type of resistance was assessed through the semi-structured questionnaire completed by members of the implementing teams of the participating institutions, as well as through the observations of the expert team overseeing the development and implementation of the institutional change roadmaps.

The results from the 18 respondents reveal a diverse range of prevalence across the six identified categories of resistance (Figure 2). Generally, most types of resistance are considered "slightly present," with fewer respondents identifying them as "very prevalent." Consistently, when assigning scores to the answers on a scale from 1 (*not present at all*) to 5 (*very prevalent*), the weighted average score for each category of resistance ranged from 1.7 to 2.7 (Figure 3). This indicates a prevalence level closer to "slightly present" or, in some cases, approaching "moderately present." According to the respondents' perception, the most

prevalent type of resistance is institutional resistance, including its three subtypes: reputation management resistance, tokenistic compliance, and bureaucratic resistance. Financial resistance, legal resistance, and cognitive dissonance resistance are also identified among the most prevalent subtypes. Interestingly, as previously discussed in Section 3.2, the responses from participants within the same institutions showed considerable variation, highlighting differences in individual perceptions and/or the interpretation and experiences of resistance. Additionally, no respondents reported experiencing types of resistance outside those outlined in the typology, further affirming its comprehensiveness in capturing the resistances encountered during the institutional change process.

The perception of the expert team differed on the prevalence of the resistances in the participating institutions (Figure 2, colour coded). According to the expert team, the most pervasive subtypes of resistances are tokenistic compliance, patriarchal resistance, denial/epistemological resistance, power dynamics resistance, financial resistance and training resistance, followed by intersectional blindness, reputation management resistance, cognitive dissonance resistance, and change fatigue resistance. Due to insufficient data, no conclusions can be drawn about the remaining types of resistance, namely bureaucratic resistance, normalisation resistance, blaming the victim, fear-based resistance, and legal resistance. The results are described in more detail under the following subsections.
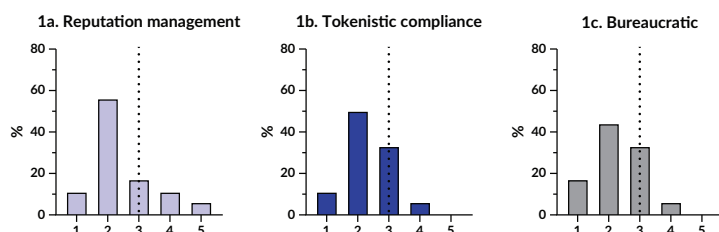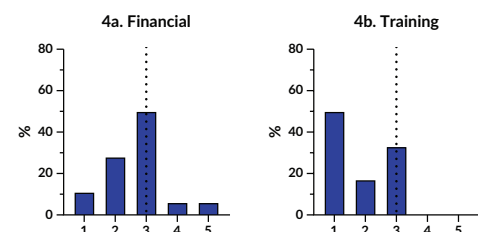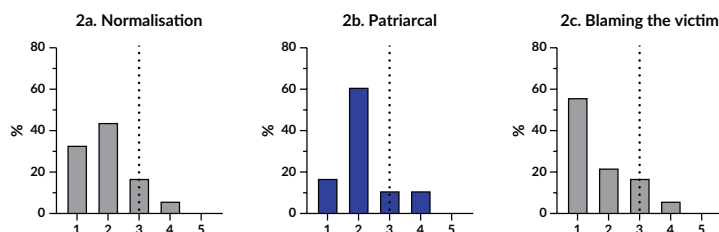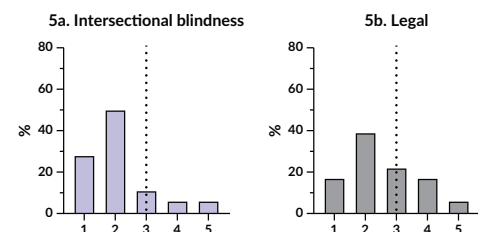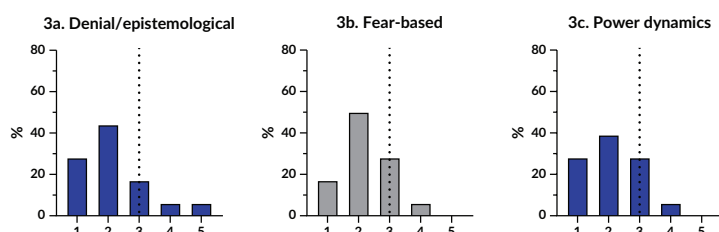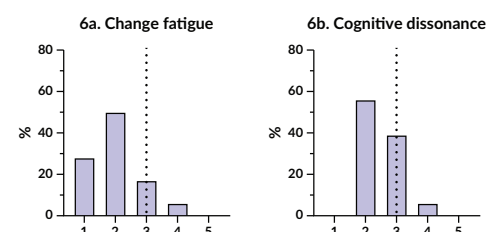

Figure 2. Experiences of the subtypes of resistance. The graphs show percentages, with 100% representing 18 responses. Likert scale: 1 = *not present at all*; 2 = *slightly present*; 3 = *moderately present*; 4 = *significantly present*; 5 = *very prevalent*.
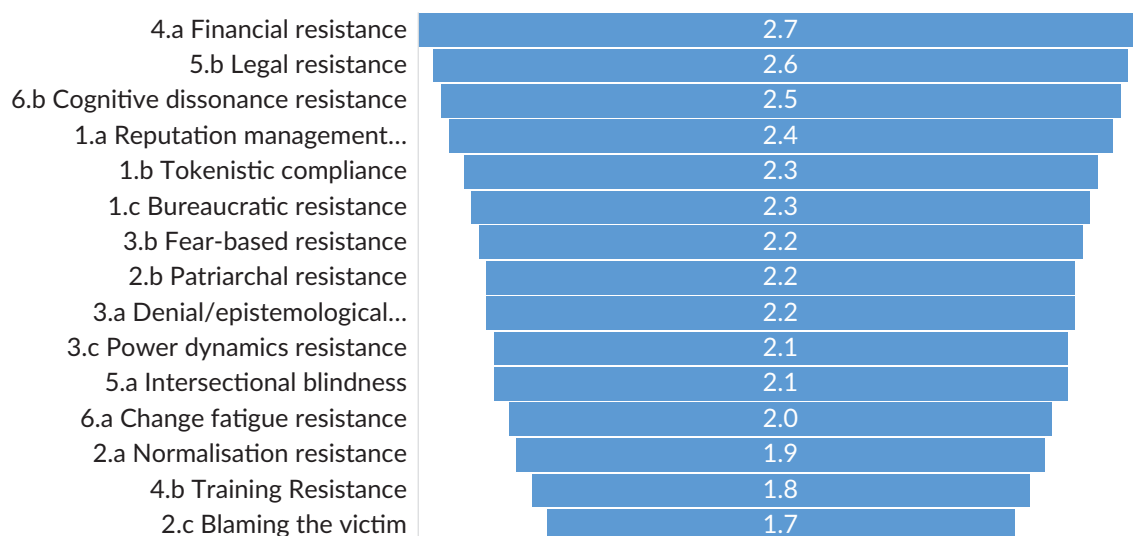
Figure 3. Prevalence of resistance. Weighted averages (*n* = 18) of the perceived frequency of the different subtypes of resistance.

3.3.1. Institutional Resistance

Among the subcategories of institutional resistance, reputation management resistance was the most commonly reported as "slightly present," noted by over half of the respondents. This was followed by tokenistic compliance and bureaucratic resistance, each mentioned by nearly half.

The institutional approach to prioritising reputation over addressing GBV was further evaluated. Most respondents reported that prioritisation of reputation over addressing GBV occurred rarely, while a third noted that it happened sometimes. A smaller proportion of respondents observed this issue more frequently, with one respondent indicating "often" and two respondents reporting "very often." Only one respondent stated they had never observed their institution prioritising its reputation over addressing GBV. These results suggest that while reputation concerns are present, they are not universally pervasive across the institutions and may often go unrecognised or unacknowledged.

The views on whether common narratives or behaviours that may normalise or minimise GBV exist within institutions were almost equally split. While several respondents identified the presence of such narratives or behaviours, a slight majority disagreed. Among the identified narratives that downplay GBV are perceptions of it as a private issue unrelated to institutional administration, or as being less serious compared to other concerns.

Although these observations were not explicitly mentioned to the expert team or presented in the institutional reports reviewed by them, the team noted that a small number of participating institutions appeared reluctant to acknowledge the existence of GBV incidents among their staff and students. This reluctance can be perceived as an effort to protect the organisation's reputation and is closely linked to cognitive dissonance resistance, as discussed in Section 3.3.6.

Tokenistic compliance emerged as the most predominant subtype according to the expert team. In particular, the examination of the existing institutional GEPs shows that although some of the participating institutions had developed gender-related policies prior to their participation in the study, these were often superficial, lacking actual protocols and mechanisms for reporting sexual harassment cases. Moreover, while many institutions' roadmaps for change address these omissions, tick-box attitudes are still evident.

Lastly, bureaucratic resistance has not been mentioned by the institutions and, therefore, cannot be assessed by the expert team.

3.3.2. Cultural and Normative Resistance

Cultural and normative resistance was notably recognised by several respondents. Patriarchal resistance was the most commonly noted, with over half describing it as "slightly present," followed by normalisation resistance, which was also frequently identified. In contrast, blaming the victim was reported as significantly less prevalent, with a majority of respondents indicating that it was "not present at all" within their institutions.

Observations from the expert team align with these findings, particularly in identifying patriarchal resistance as the most prevalent subtype within this category. Data collected through the continuous engagement activities with the participating institutions show that gender stereotypes, traditions, and cultural norms were perceived as potential obstacles to the implementation of specific actions, such as the development of communications campaigns or awareness-raising events on gender equality in sports. The prevalence of the other two subtypes, normalisation resistance and blaming the victim, could not be assessed by the expert team due to a lack of access to this type of data.

3.3.3. Leadership and Faculty Resistance

The analysis shows that fear-based resistance was perceived by the respondents as most prevalent, with half describing it as "slightly present" and several noting it as "moderately present"; notably, no one considered it "very prevalent." Denial/epistemological resistance and power dynamics resistance share similar patterns, with over a third of respondents identifying them as "slightly present," while a smaller proportion reported no presence at all. Overall, these subcategories of resistances are present at lower levels, with fear-based resistance being slightly more common.

While the expert team did not have sufficient data to assess the prevalence of fear-based resistance, the other two subtypes (denial/epistemological resistance and power dynamics resistance) have been manifested by members of the implementing teams throughout the institutional change process. More specifically, some implementing teams reported leadership's refusal to acknowledge gender equality and GBV as a problem in actions related to the establishment of a committee for the implementation of their institutional GEP, as well as the development of procedures for GBV prevention or sexual harassment, and gender audit mechanisms. In all these cases, the implementing teams indicated that the leaders of their institutions do not deem such initiatives necessary or urgent and undervalue the importance of gender equality in HE and/or sports. This poses an important barrier to the realisation of their GBV-free vision, as support from senior leadership is key to the implementation of a successful and sustainable GEP.

3.3.4. Resource-Based Resistance

This type of resistance was more notable in the subtype of financial resistance, with half of the respondents indicating a moderate presence. In contrast, training resistance was considered largely absent, with a similar proportion identifying it as "not present at all."

These results differed from the observations of the expert team, which documented the presence of both subtypes of resistance in the participating institutions. More specifically, the lack of funding has been repeatedly described as an obstacle to the successful implementation of several actions, including the development of communication campaigns and awareness-raising events about gender equality in sports, data collection on sexual harassment and GBV, the creation of a GBV database, and the establishment of a protocol for reporting sexual harassment incidents. With regard to training resistance, lack of expertise and lack of understanding of gender equality are recurring concerns raised by implementing team members to the expert team in relation to actions such as establishing a gender audit process, raising awareness about gender inequalities in sports, and collecting information on GBV and sexual harassment. Moreover, while other forms of resistance appear to have been somewhat overcome during this study, at least among the individuals involved in the implementing teams, resource-based resistance remains largely unaffected. A few implementing team members mentioned attempts to recruit internal staff as trainers in order to reduce expenses, but the lack of participation and limited funding continued to pose problems. Similarly, one of the key challenges reported to the expert team by the participating institutions regarding staff and student engagement was the lack of time and resources.

3.3.5. Systemic Resistance

The analysis of the responses reveals that intersectional blindness is perceived as significantly less prevalent, with the vast majority of respondents indicating it was either "not present at all" or "slightly present." In contrast, legal resistance showed a more balanced distribution, with a majority perceiving it as either "slightly present" or "moderately present." Considering all the types of resistance analysed, legal resistance is more likely to be considered a moderate to significant issue (as shown in Figure 2), whereas intersectional blindness is generally viewed as less of a concern. In contrast, the expert team has repeatedly observed intersectional blindness during the continuous engagement activities with the implementing teams, as well as in the analysis of the existing institutional GEPs at the beginning of the study. Though some progress was made during the study, the expert team notes that the understanding of intersectionality remains limited, focusing on a narrow set of variables (e.g., gender, age, and physical appearance), with other dimensions—such as gender identities beyond the binary and sexual orientation—being largely neglected and still perceived as "taboo" for many. This disparity can be attributed to the fact that gender has been traditionally described and narrowly defined in their local policies and legal frameworks. Members of countries that do not legally recognise gender as non-binary or whose LGBTQ+ communities do not enjoy equal rights exhibit higher levels of intersectional blindness in those aspects. As for legal resistance, it has not been recognised as an issue hindering the implementation of gender equality practices by the implementing team, although lack of understanding of EU laws has been mentioned.

3.3.6. Cognitive and Psychological Resistance

Cognitive dissonance resistance demonstrates a higher level of prevalence compared to change fatigue, as it was universally acknowledged by respondents, with no one marking it as "not present at all." In contrast, change fatigue resistance was reported as absent by less than one-third of the respondents. Furthermore, cognitive dissonance resistance was more frequently rated as "moderately present" than change fatigue resistance, suggesting that psychological tensions and conflicting beliefs about gender equality initiatives are more consistently recognised across institutions.

These results align with the observations of the expert team, where cognitive dissonance resistance has been widely noticed. More specifically, some implementing team members have appeared unwilling to investigate further GBV issues in their organisations in an attempt to maintain the image of a GBV-free institution and uphold their personal beliefs. In other words, their refusal to scrutinise such issues protects them from discovering cases of GBV, which may alter the image of their institution and challenge their own perceptions. On the other hand, change fatigue resistance has rarely been discussed due to the very small number of change agents at the institutional level. However, in a few cases, lack of participation in certain activities was attributed to fatigue resulting from prior rejections.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This article gathered the experiences of eight sports HEIs in CEE as they designed and implemented roadmaps for institutional change in gender equality and the corresponding development of 4I-GEP. These experiences were contrasted and supplemented by the views of the expert team, who guided the co-design and implementation process. While some institutions had prior experience and existing policies in place, for most participants, this study marked their first attempt at gender equality and GBV consideration and actions. Despite the varying starting points in their process, all implementing teams encountered in-house resistances, though many found it challenging to explicitly recognise them and/or articulate their related observations when directly questioned (Section 3.2). Nevertheless, when resistance was indirectly assessed, such as by asking participants to report on the prevalence of common resistant responses to institutional change, all participants acknowledged its presence (Figure 1).

The sites and forms of resistance outlined in previous sections cover the main types and subtypes of resistance encountered during the study. Although the overall prevalence of the different types of resistances was perceived as low, all the defined types and subtypes were identified by the implementing teams as present to some extent. The challenge of explicitly recognising or articulating the existence of resistance and its actual/empirical prevalence can be interpreted as a form of resistance to acknowledging resistance itself. At the same time, based on the close observations of the expert team, it is likely that this meta-level resistance stems from a general lack of understanding of the institutional change process, with resistance being viewed as a negative concept rather than a natural response to change. From this, we can conclude that it is of utmost importance for implementing team members to gain a deeper understanding of the institutional change process before initiating one. This includes understanding what resistance entails, the various forms it can take (i.e., typology), and engaging in self-reflection to pre-identify potential types and subtypes of resistance that may be encountered during the months ahead in the organisations. To address this type of resistance, the establishment of an independent gender equality body with clearly

defined responsibilities is crucial. This should encompass conducting a self-assessment or institutional mapping, developing and implementing the GEP, and coordinating with stakeholders. A comprehensive institutional mapping allows defining a realistic baseline of the institution's current state—specifically, where the institution stands in terms of existing policies, practices, culture, and resistances—and therefore the framing and ambition of GEP actions can be tailored effectively. To enhance effectiveness, tailored training for all members is essential, equipping them with expertise in institutional change processes, an understanding of potential resistance types, and knowledge of gender mainstreaming concepts.

Furthermore, it was observed that hierarchies play a significant role in shaping the participation of the implementing team members in the study. Entrenched hierarchies and power imbalances lead to increasing manifestations of the leadership and faculty resistance type (Ranea-Triviño et al., 2022) and, in particular, power-dynamics resistance subtype (Whitley & Page, 2015). Such dynamics can hinder the open expression and acknowledgment of resistance and impede the recognition of gender inequalities and cases of GBV. As noted by Krebs et al. (2016), such resistance may originate in fear of institutional backlash relating to lawsuits or damaged professional reputations. However, the analysis here also suggests that a portion of resistance is patriarchal and reflected in the gendered organisation per se (Acker, 2006), where institutions are not gender neutral: The structure and culture of organisations reflect an unequal gender regime or order. Acker (2006, p. 43) defined organisational regimes as "loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions and meanings that result in and maintain gender inequalities," with such inequality regimes involving "systematic disparities between participants in power and control over goals, resources and outcomes." In cultural contexts where hierarchies are particularly prominent, in addition to the in-built hierarchy and genderedness of HEIs (Benschop & Verloo, 2006), it is advisable to establish safe spaces for open discussions, allowing diverse stakeholders to freely share their views and perspectives. This might involve holding discussions without the presence of leadership figures. Additionally, leveraging the hierarchical structure by building alliances with supportive leadership figures can strengthen the initiative and help drive meaningful change.

Regarding the lack of acknowledgment of gender inequalities and/or GBV cases, the expert team repeatedly observed references claiming that such issues did not exist, as they were deemed impossible under the legal systems of their countries or their institutional policies. This reasoning reflects at least three informal fallacies: (a) it assumes that the mere existence of laws or policies automatically eliminates the problem (false cause fallacy); (b) it implies that the absence of official acknowledgment or visible evidence is proof that these issues do not exist (fallacy of denial); and (c) it appeals to an irrelevant or inappropriate authority, such as legal systems or institutional policies, to assert the nonexistence of gender inequalities or violence (appeal to authority fallacy). Once more, this fallacious reasoning stems from a lack of understanding about what constitutes gender inequalities and the various forms and manifestations of GBV. Combined with resistance to training and limited resources for such programmes, this form of resistance poses major problems to the ERA's ambition of a gender equal European research and innovation system. Special attention had to be dedicated to clarifying the difference between gender balance and gender equality at the start of the study, as some teams/team members used these terms interchangeably. While this clearly highlighted the need for awareness raising at the baseline, the expert team also acknowledged that the historic socio-political background in the countries of the participating institutions may have contributed to the interchangeable use of these terms (Darbaidze & Niparishvili, 2023).

Additionally, most of the participating organisations lacked effective policies and protocols to address GBV, contributing to the underestimation of cases and their poor handling. The improvement and/or development of more effective GBV policies and protocols is necessary in these institutions, and actions towards this will be included in their new 4I-GEPs. Even though the 7P model—in which the 7Ps refer to policy, prevalence, prevention, protection, prosecution and internal disciplinary measures, provision of services, and partnerships (Mergaert, Linková, & Strid, 2023)—may seem overly complex or ambitious for these institutions, it is easily adaptable to a beginner's context through the UniSAFE toolkit (Mergaert, Polykarpou, et al., 2023) which provides the necessary practical guidance to set up such policies and protocols.

Another important observation is that, although the participating institutions are sport HEIs, the implementing teams do not readily acknowledge the particularities of the field. Despite sector-wide debates on high-profile GBV cases in sport at both European and international levels, and even though they were exposed to sport-specific topics through training and mutual learning activities, many participants struggled to recognise the interrelation between gender and sport and its relevance within their own institutional contexts. This disconnect underscores a broader resistance to gender mainstreaming and an ongoing struggle to internalise the basic principles of gender equality and to engage with well-documented, sector-specific gender challenges.

Lastly, although the general level of awareness among the staff participating in the study has tangibly increased, it is still unclear if and to what extent this has permeated the institutions. Internal discussions, dissemination efforts, and awareness-raising events have certainly contributed to a broader baseline understanding of gender equality and GBV in academia and sports environments. However, the depth and overall impact of these efforts cannot yet be fully evaluated at this point.

In conclusion, while the involvement of the participating institutions in the study advanced awareness and initiated institutional change, the journey towards achieving sustainable gender equality and effectively addressing GBV remains far from complete and is met with specific forms of resistances. The importance of adopting nuanced and context-sensitive approaches to institutional change, particularly in institutions situated in more resistant environments or within fields that traditionally do not engage in gender mainstreaming initiatives, is underscored by the findings of the study. When resistance to acknowledging resistance is prominent and fundamental gaps in understanding gender equality and GBV are present, it is challenging—and sometimes outright counterproductive—to start pursuing the more complex and/or more innovative approaches. Moreover, the observation highlights the critical need for team members to understand institutional change and its attributes in order to ensure the development of more effective and impactful GEPs. Finally, it also needs to be underlined that systemic changes require time and correspondingly, significant financial resources, which are two factors that HEIs are increasingly struggling to secure.

The overall findings demonstrate that resistance to institutional change, particularly regarding gender equality and GBV, cannot be addressed overnight, through ad-hoc events, and/or through generic approaches: A strategic roadmap is essential. Without a structured approach tailored to the institutional context or by skipping foundational steps, efforts to promote gender equality and address GBV risk remaining superficial, tokenistic, and therefore unsustainable, allowing resistance to linger (Hodgins et al., 2022). A roadmap, rather than an action plan, is well suited for beginner institutions and resistant

environments, as it provides the flexibility to adapt to what was originally unseen, unexpected, or under- or overestimated, and refine strategies during implementation as further forms of resistance are encountered.

The findings further demonstrate the potential usefulness of exploring resistance through a typology of resistance. Based on previous research and the results of the analysis of resistances via the self-assessment reports, questionnaire, and observations, it can be concluded that resistance can be typologised as seven sites of resistance, including (a) institutional resistance, which includes organisational characteristics and institutional factors; (b) cultural and normative resistance, which includes the normalisation of GBV and patriarchal norms, biases and stereotypes; (c) leadership and faculty resistance, including the denial of GBV as systemic, the fear of backlash, and the entrenched power dynamics at play; (d) resource-based resistance, where financial and training resistance is manifested as insufficient allocation of funds to GBV initiatives and training; (e) systemic resistance, including intersectional blindness and the failure to address marginalised groups' experiences; (f) cognitive and psychological resistance, taking the form of change fatigue, with weariness and frustration experienced by change agents, and of cognitive dissonance arising from conflicting institutional experiences and personal beliefs; and (g) resistance to acknowledging encountered/experienced oppositional acts as resistance in the first place—that is, resistance to acknowledging resistance itself.

5. Limitations and Future Research

Although the study is limited by a small sample of questionnaire respondents ($n = 18$) and participating institutions ($n = 8$), its qualitative approach helps mitigate this constraint. A potential selection bias must be acknowledged, as participating institutions voluntarily joined a gender equality initiative. Additionally, self-reported data may be biased due to social desirability, hierarchical dynamics, or limited awareness of resistance forms.

Future research should explore the applicability of the proposed resistance typology, especially in CEE, where studies on resistance to GEP design and implementation are limited. It is crucial to consider unconscious resistances in higher education settings. This study highlights a gap between participants' and experts' perceptions of resistance, which is often unrecognised as such. These findings underline the need for more nuanced approaches to identifying and addressing resistances—recognising it as a key part of institutional change and better understanding its forms and mechanisms.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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