

Adoption of the Gender Equality Plan as a Model for Institutional Transformation

Roman Kuhar , Milica Antić Gaber , and Jasna Podreka 

Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

Correspondence: Roman Kuhar (roman.kuhar@ff.uni-lj.si)

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Abstract

This article examines the development and implementation of the Gender Equality Plan (GEP) at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana—the first faculty in Slovenia to adopt such a framework. Using the feminist institutionalist perspective, the study explores the interaction between external top-down pressures, such as the European Commission’s Horizon Europe mandate, and internal bottom-up initiatives driven by long-standing debates on gender-sensitive language and the Slovenian #MeToo movement. Through a qualitative analysis of institutional documents, personal reflections, and project reports, this article highlights the role of critical actors in promoting institutional change. By illustrating the interplay between external mandates and grassroots advocacy, the article argues that meaningful institutional transformation requires both structural change and internal commitment. The findings offer a model for implementing GEPs in academic institutions, emphasizing the importance of aligning policy requirements with institutional practices to ensure sustainable and effective gender equality initiatives.

Keywords

#MeToo movement; critical actors; feminist institutionalism; Gender Equality Plans; gender-sensitive language; institutional reform; sexual harassment

1. Introduction

The Faculty of Arts at the University of Ljubljana is the oldest and largest faculty in Slovenia, serving as the central institution for higher education in the humanities and social sciences. Established in 1919 as one of

the five founding faculties of the University of Ljubljana, it was created to provide opportunities for higher education in the Slovenian language. Prior to its foundation, Slovenian intellectuals were compelled to pursue their studies abroad, predominantly at universities in Austria, Germany, and Italy.

From the feminist institutionalist perspective (Chappell & Waylen, 2013; Krook & Mackay, 2011; Waylen, 2014a), the historical evolution of the Faculty of Arts has been deeply marked by entrenched gendered power relations. The university's early leadership was exclusively male, with the first rector and all founding deans being men. Over more than a century, the university has had only one female rector. The Faculty of Arts, for instance, has seen 62 deans, of whom only four have been women. This underrepresentation persists despite the fact that, in recent decades, the faculty has employed significantly more women than men. For example, in 2020, 62% of the pedagogical staff at the faculty were women, increasing to 65% by 2023 (Filozofska fakulteta, 2020, 2023). However, women employed at the faculty are on average classified nearly five pay grades lower than the men, largely due to their concentration in administrative roles or non-professorial positions like lecturers or teaching assistants (Kos et al., 2022). This gendered imbalance reflects structural inequalities at the Faculty of Arts, despite the presence of many qualified women who could hold senior research, professorial, or leadership positions. It demonstrates the so-called "path dependence" (Mackay, 2014; Waylen, 2014b), where established norms and practices continue to privilege male leadership despite broader demographic shifts.

At the EU level, however, Slovenia performs relatively well in terms of gender equality in academia. In 2016, 19.3% of female academic staff in Slovenia held grade A positions (i.e., full professorship), placing the country among the EU nations with the highest proportions of women in senior academic roles, although still reflecting a notable gender gap. Furthermore, 32.4% of higher education institutions in Slovenia were headed by women in 2017, significantly above the EU average of 21.7%, showcasing a relatively strong representation of women in academic leadership compared to many other European nations (European Commission, 2019).

Despite these achievements, women remain underrepresented in top managerial positions in academic institutions in Slovenia. The situation at the Faculty of Arts reflects broader systemic barriers, such as the "glass ceiling" and "sticky floors," which illustrate entrenched power dynamics preventing women from attaining leadership roles (Etzkowitz et al., 2000; Morley, 2007; Roberto et al., 2020), and the broader academic field and universities globally, which have historically been spaces deeply marked by patriarchal structures and systemic gender imbalances (Drew & Canavan, 2021; Kuhlmann et al., 2017). This issue has been recognized as a broader societal and legislative concern in Slovenia since the 1980s but has only recently begun to be addressed at the institutional level (Antić Gaber, 2018; Jogan, 1992, 1998; Luthar & Šadl, 2002; Ule, 2012, 2013; Ule et al., 2015).

The EU has long emphasized gender equality, beginning with the Lisbon Treaty and the introduction of gender mainstreaming in 1998. More recently, the European Commission's Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 underscores the need for renewed efforts, noting that progress toward gender equality is "neither inevitable nor irreversible" (European Commission, 2020, p. 2). To further institutionalize gender equality, the European Commission introduced a partially binding strategy requiring organizations applying for Horizon Europe funding to have a Gender Equality Plan (GEP) in place by 2021 (European Commission, 2021). This mandate has emerged as a critical external driver and a pivotal strategy to promote institutional change (Linková & Mergaert, 2021).

In response to this policy, the Faculty of Arts became the first faculty in Slovenia to adopt a GEP in 2020. While the EU's top-down approach effectively triggered institutional action, it also risked reducing GEPs to mere formalities rather than fostering meaningful, integrated policies. The effectiveness of the GEP depends not only on institutional commitment but also on the synergy between external requirements and internal grassroots efforts (Mihajlović Trbovc, 2022; Mihajlović Trbovc et al., 2022; O'Connor & Irvine, 2020).

This article draws upon feminist institutionalism to examine how these external and internal forces have combined to drive meaningful change at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. The article highlights how the GEP has challenged long-standing gendered norms and created new opportunities for equitable organizational practices. Five years after its adoption, the GEP has led to changes in institutional culture, policies, and practices at the faculty, demonstrating the importance of grassroots engagement in the success of such initiatives (Antić Gaber, 2022).

The authors of this article were among the key actors in the adoption of the GEP at the Faculty of Arts. Using an autoethnographic approach, this article offers a first-hand account of the intersection between formal policies and informal practices. The dual role of the authors as both researchers and institutional actors provides a unique perspective on how critical actors operate within gendered institutions to advance meaningful and sustainable institutional transformation. Data for this study are sourced from institutional documents, personal reflections, meeting notes, and internal reports associated with the GEARING Roles project (<https://gearingroles.eu>).

The article starts by introducing the theoretical framework of feminist institutionalism, followed by an examination of the broader external factors contributing to the adoption of the GEP at the Faculty of Arts. It details the drafting process of the plan and the challenges encountered along the way. Subsequently, it focuses on one of the key issues addressed by the GEP—gender-based violence—illustrating how a bottom-up approach during the GEP's development resulted in far-reaching multiplier effects, ensuring the sustainability of the measures beyond the faculty at the university and national levels.

We argue that the European Commission's top-down mandate for GEP adoption was particularly successful in this case because it coincided with existing bottom-up initiatives advocating for gender equality policies. This synergy between external requirements and internal grassroots efforts was instrumental in driving sustainable and meaningful change.

2. Navigating External Pressures and Internal Dynamics in Gendered Institutions

Institutions are not neutral entities; rather, they are shaped by historically embedded gendered power relations that often privilege masculine identities while marginalizing others (Acker, 1992). Despite this, as Thomson (2018, p. 179) notes, "the majority of the work falling under the umbrella of new institutionalism has largely been gender-blind." Feminist institutionalism, which serves as the theoretical framework for this analysis, seeks to address this gender blindness by emphasizing that both formal structures (e.g., policies, regulations, organizational hierarchies) and informal mechanisms (e.g., unwritten rules, cultural norms, everyday practices) are deeply gendered (Krook & Mackay, 2011; Mackay, 2014). The informal mechanisms often reinforce formal structures, thereby contributing to the persistence of gender inequalities even within seemingly neutral frameworks. Rather than being objective and neutral, institutions reflect, structure, and

reinforce gendered patterns of power (Kenny & Mackay, 2009). These power relations are maintained through institutional continuity and are often resistant to change due to established norms and practices, which feminist institutionalism conceptualizes as “path dependency” (Mackay, 2014; Waylen, 2014b). For example, while formal policies may advocate for gender equality, informal norms and unwritten rules may continue to privilege male leadership. This dynamic interplay between formal and informal mechanisms highlights the importance of understanding institutional reproduction and transformation as a complex process involving both agency and structure (Kenny & Mackay, 2009).

Crucially linked to the perspective of feminist institutionalism is the concept of “critical actors” (Childs & Krook, 2006, 2009; see also Thomson, 2018), which diverges from the notion of critical mass by emphasizing the actions of particular individuals rather than a numerical threshold of women necessary to achieve change. Critical actors are those who actively work to promote or resist change within institutions, regardless of their numbers. The focus on critical actors reflects an agent-centered approach that recognizes the capacity of individual actors to challenge and transform gendered institutional norms through strategic action.

In the context of our analysis, we argue that critical actors—specifically, a group of researchers at the Faculty of Arts—played a pivotal role in the adoption of the GEP. Their advocacy was instrumental in driving institutional reforms and advancing gender equality. It shows how institutional change is often initiated by dedicated individuals who operate within and against established structures to create new pathways for transformative and meaningful institutional change.

Institutional reforms aimed at challenging and transforming gendered power relations within institutions require a combination of top-down pressures and bottom-up initiatives (Chappell, 2006; Krook & Mackay, 2011). In the context of the Faculty of Arts, a key top-down pressure emerged from the European Commission’s mandate stipulating that organizations seeking Horizon Europe funding must have a GEP in place. This external requirement served as a critical catalyst for institutional change. However, additional external and internal factors, discussed below, also played a significant role in creating a unique environment conducive to institutional transformation. This process illustrates a key insight from feminist institutionalism: institutions are not merely structures of power but also sites of contestation where actors can exploit institutional gaps, inconsistencies, or moments of crisis to advance reforms (Chappell, 2006; Krook & Mackay, 2011).

Undoubtedly, the key player influencing the adoption of the GEP by the Faculty of Arts was the research project GEARING Roles. This project included the preparation of a GEP as one of its primary objectives and played an instrumental role in formalizing the plan. As a partner institution, the Faculty of Arts utilized the project’s resources and guidelines to develop a comprehensive plan tailored to its specific needs and contexts. The GEARING Roles project provided not only financial and structural support but also a collaborative framework for addressing systemic gender inequalities. Participation in the project ensured the faculty had sufficient time and resources to conduct internal research, collect data, and provide evidence-based arguments for the necessity of a GEP. These preparatory efforts were crucial in facilitating productive discussions and securing the approval of the GEP by the faculty senate.

Equally significant was the role of the faculty’s leadership at the time, which demonstrated a strong sensitivity to gender issues and a clear commitment to implementing a GEP. Studies show that institutional

leadership is a critical factor in facilitating structural change toward gender equality (Benschop & Verloo, 2011; O'Connor, 2019). According to the impact driver model (Mergaert et al., 2022), leadership commitment is essential, as it provides the authority, resources, and strategic direction necessary to drive initiatives forward. Any meaningful institutional change therefore requires more than just the mobilization of internal stakeholders; it also demands active support from its management. The dual approach of integrating bottom-up processes that harness grassroots momentum with top-down mechanisms that ensure oversight and legitimacy proved essential for effective and sustainable institutional transformation. Indeed, the leadership at the Faculty of Arts played a pivotal role in advancing the initiative and embedding it in the institution's strategic priorities, thereby ensuring its long-term impact.

At the same time—or even before—two additional factors were at work that significantly contributed to shaping the GEP and the structure of activities in it.

The first factor is related to broader societal developments and efforts to promote gender equality and raise public awareness of these issues. In the case of the Faculty of Arts, the Slovenian iteration of the #MeToo movement played a particularly significant role (Zaviršek, 2020a, 2020b). This movement exposed pervasive issues of sexual harassment and was highly active among students. It also led to two widely publicized cases of students reporting sexual harassment by university teachers, with the first one originating at the Faculty of Arts. This case underscored the urgent need for formal mechanisms to address such issues effectively (Filipčič & Skočir, 2024; Smrdelj et al., 2024).

It became evident that the existing regulations addressing sexual harassment, although formally in place, had never been practically tested and were inadequate. These policies included measures that were entirely unacceptable, such as the recommendation for the faculty leadership to resolve the issue by encouraging the victim and the perpetrator to discuss the matter and seek reconciliation. Such an approach highlighted the systemic gaps in handling cases of sexual harassment and the pressing need for change (Podreka, 2024).

This societal momentum, coupled with the active role of students, compelled the faculty to prioritize the prevention of gender-based violence as a central component of its GEP. The influence of the #MeToo movement and students' demands became particularly prominent when the media began reporting on sexual harassment cases at the University of Ljubljana. This was instrumental in driving the shift toward addressing gender-based violence as a critical institutional priority, ensuring that it was no longer overlooked but rather actively confronted.

The second factor relates to the long-standing internal debate about sexist language. The Faculty of Arts, as a central educational institution for research and teaching on the Slovenian language, has been a key arena for this discussion. This debate centers on the gendered nature of the Slovenian language, where the masculine grammatical form is used as a generic form to encompass all genders. Critics argue that this practice is inherently sexist and have called for changes to make the language more inclusive and gender-sensitive (Kozmik & Jerman, 1995; Leskošek, 2000; Žagar & Milharčič Hladnik, 1996).

One of the insufficient solutions, also adopted at the national level in the drafting of legislation, was the practice of including a footnote or a specific article stating that the masculine grammatical form used in the text includes both men and women. This practice was also in place at the Faculty of Arts until 2018 when

one of the senators reopened the issue and posed a pivotal question: Why, as a woman employed at the Faculty of Arts, was she always referred to only in a footnote? This appeal reignited a broad debate within the senate, which ultimately decided to adopt the feminine grammatical form as neutral and inclusive in internal faculty regulatory documents (Dobrovoljc & Stabej, 2019; Gorjanc et al., 2018; Kuhar & Antić Gaber, 2022; Mikić & Kalin Golob, 2019; Smolej, 2019; Šorli, 2019). Although this debate has existed in Slovenia since the 1990s (Bogovič & Skušek, 1996)—and has been on the feminist agenda since the 1970s (Cameron, 1995)—this specific decision, which gained significant public attention in Slovenia, was a crucial internal factor that contributed to the sensibilization and consequent adoption of the GEP.

The combination of these factors led to the successful adoption of the GEP. However, the journey was fraught with obstacles and resistance.

3. From Point Zero to the Adoption of the GEP

Although the Faculty of Arts at the University of Ljubljana was not entirely new to the field of gender equality, it was at the early stages of implementing practical measures and institutional-level changes. The faculty had a solid foundation in gender studies at certain departments, offering gender-related courses integrated into the curriculum and serving as co-coordinator for a doctoral program in gender studies. Additionally, several research projects on gender issues had been conducted across various departments. However, these initiatives were largely dependent on the goodwill of individual faculty members or departments and were not systematically embedded in the institution's core policies or programs.

At the institutional level, Slovenia's higher education sector lagged behind comparable European institutions in systematically addressing gender equality. According to the 2020 Gender Equality Index of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), Slovenia's most pronounced gender inequalities were in the domains of power and knowledge, scoring 55.0 and 55.9 out of 100, respectively. In the knowledge domain, which includes educational attainment and participation, Slovenia ranked 21st in the EU, highlighting the need for improvement (EIGE, 2020).

Recognizing these gaps, the Faculty of Arts initiated a comprehensive assessment of its gender equality status (Faculty of Arts, 2020). Although this task seemed straightforward, it soon became evident that data collection was challenging due to incompatible datasets and the lack of a standardized, coherent system. This limitation emphasized the need to systematically collect, monitor, and analyze gender-disaggregated information to establish a clear institutional overview and map out evidence-based strategies, as recommended by the EIGE (2022) and corroborated by studies in other contexts (Drucza & Curbelo, 2023).

The faculty prioritized developing a robust data collection system and key indicators to monitor progress in achieving gender equality. This evidence-based approach was especially critical in areas heavily regulated at the national level, such as wage gaps and employment policies, where strong evidence is essential for planning targeted actions.

In addition to the lack of comprehensive statistical data, there were no clear policies or mechanisms at the faculty level to address gender equality issues. The absence of guidelines for work-life balance, gender-sensitive recruitment protocols, frameworks for integrating gender perspectives into curricula, and

specialized complaint mechanisms for handling discrimination and sexual harassment were notable deficiencies. Gender biases, stereotyping, and discriminatory practices were inadequately addressed, reflecting a broader cultural tendency to overlook these issues following the belief in academic meritocracy as inherently equitable and gender-neutral (Podreka, 2024; Smrdelj et al., 2024).

Despite these initial challenges, progress was made. Through the involvement of the group of researchers participating in the GEARING Roles project, an institutional baseline assessment report was produced (Antić Gaber et al., 2019). This report, based on agreed-upon indicators, provided a detailed overview of the state of gender (in)equality at the institution. The analysis revealed that while the faculty demonstrated overall gender parity or a slight predominance of women, significant disparities persisted within specific departments. However, the availability of data on hiring practices and career development was limited, and no targeted measures were in place to address underrepresentation.

Challenges were particularly evident in obtaining detailed information on habilitation ranks and employment duration. The data revealed significant gender disparities, with only 18% of female pedagogical staff holding the rank of full professor, compared to approximately one-third of their male counterparts. Additionally, male researchers were found to occupy salary grades nearly four levels higher on average than their female colleagues (Kos et al., 2022). Furthermore, in the field of the humanities in 2019, women-led research programs received just 22% of the available funds compared to their male counterparts, highlighting a pronounced funding imbalance (Fišer et al., 2022).

Policies designed to support work–life balance were found to disproportionately disadvantage women on maternity leave, while the effectiveness of flexible working hours yielded mixed results. Among non-academic staff, distinct career advancement regulations further contributed to existing inequities, underscoring the need for comprehensive and gender-sensitive policy interventions.

Other concerns identified included uneven workload distribution, limited opportunities for remote work, and a higher proportion of female students requiring parental leave. These findings highlight the necessity of implementing targeted interventions to address gender-related challenges across various domains at the institution.

Regarding leadership and decision-making, the faculty adhered to its internal regulations and protocols, which were aligned with national policies. However, no specific initiatives or strategies were implemented to actively promote gender equality in leadership roles. While gender balance was generally observed among staff and leadership positions, qualitative data highlighted notable variations across departments. The appointment of department heads followed departmental traditions, with the position often perceived more as an additional responsibility than a privilege. Moreover, work–life balance considerations for individuals in leadership roles were neither explicitly addressed nor regulated, leaving potential challenges in this area unaddressed.

In the domain of research and knowledge transfer, the Faculty of Arts demonstrated a lack of clear strategies for integrating gender analysis, leading to the limited adoption of gender-sensitive practices. While national research frameworks and collaborations with the European Commission contributed to shaping research agendas, these efforts were often hindered by funding limitations and inconsistencies. Although domestic projects featured a moderate representation of women, relatively few explicitly addressed gender-related topics.

An analysis of publication patterns at the Faculty of Arts between 2018 and 2020 revealed that, although women had a higher overall share of publications, men consistently produced a greater proportion of scientific publications relative to their representation among employees across all three years. This discrepancy suggests that women's scientific output may still be influenced by gendered factors that constrain their research productivity (Gulić Pirnat, 2022).

Gender-sensitive curricula were uncommon, with significant variability in their adoption across teachers and departments. The integration of gender-sensitive content in teaching largely depended on the interests, awareness, and engagement of individual faculty members. Participation in feminist activities and personal commitment to these issues played a crucial role in determining the extent of gender sensitivity in curricula. This ad hoc approach underscored the need for systematic policies to ensure consistent and comprehensive inclusion of gender-sensitive content across all academic programs.

Reports of gender biases, stereotypes, sexism, and sexual harassment indicated some efforts to incorporate gender-sensitive communication in formal documents. However, these practices varied significantly across individuals and departments, lacking consistency and institutionalization. The Faculty of Arts did not have any systematic gender equality training or awareness campaigns aimed specifically at addressing gender disparities within academia. Instead, gender inequalities and instances of sexism were often disregarded under the prevailing assumption that academic meritocracy is inherently fair and gender-neutral.

A pilot study on sexual harassment among the student population, conducted at the Faculty of Arts in 2020, found that 38% of the surveyed students had experienced some form of sexual harassment during their studies, with female students being disproportionately affected compared to male students (Bizjak et al., 2020). This alarming finding underscored the urgent need for a comprehensive GEP to address issues related to safety, well-being, and gender equality at the institution (Podreka et al., 2022). This need became even more evident following a highly publicized case of sexual harassment at the Faculty of Arts, further highlighting the importance of systematic and proactive measures.

Although legal frameworks prohibit sexual harassment, formal complaints were rare, primarily due to the lack of effective complaint mechanisms. This deficiency highlighted the pressing need to establish improved institutional systems and conduct further research to adequately address these issues at both institutional and national levels (Antić Gaber et al., 2019).

Based on these assessments, five priority areas were identified within the GEP and approved by the senate of the Faculty of Arts on May 27, 2020:

1. Systematic collection and monitoring of disaggregated data to establish coordinated and standardized databases to assess current conditions and plan measures to ensure gender equality among faculty members and students.
2. Equal opportunities in hiring, promotion, career advancement, and work-life balance: Mechanisms should be developed to systematically monitor and evaluate hiring practices, promotions, leadership appointments, and career development. Special attention was paid to traceability and transparency in these processes.

3. Gender in research, curricula, and teaching: Institutional policies should be introduced to ensure the development, monitoring, and updating of curricula and research from a gender-sensitive perspective. Measures aimed to eliminate gender stereotypes and enhance the visibility of gender-related research topics.
4. Gender-sensitive language: Continuing efforts initiated by the faculty senate in 2018 to institutionalize gender-sensitive language in all official communications should be made.
5. Gender stereotypes, discrimination, sexual harassment, and violence: Institutional mechanisms should be developed for the prevention against stereotyping, discrimination, sexual harassment, and violence as well as for the protection of and support for the victims of gender-based violence and discrimination.

Dedicated working groups were formed to address these priority areas, laying the foundation for meaningful institutional change. The adoption of the GEP soon had a broader impact, combining a top-down requirement for institutional change with a bottom-up approach involving dedicated faculty members. This approach ensured that effective solutions implemented at the Faculty of Arts extended to the wider university and even national levels.

To illustrate the multiplication effect of the GEP, the following discussion focuses on the prevention of sexual harassment and violence—one of the five key areas addressed by the GEP. This analysis applies the theoretical 7P Model (Mergaert et al., 2023) to demonstrate how interventions have been implemented across various levels, ranging from personal experiences at the micro level to broader changes in national policies at the macro level.

The 7P Model is a comprehensive framework designed to analyze, assess, and develop policies aimed at addressing and eliminating gender-based violence. It encompasses several interconnected dimensions: policy development, prevalence data collection, prevention initiatives, protection mechanisms, prosecution measures, provision of services, and partnerships. Through this model, the institutional response to gender-based violence can be systematically examined, ensuring that interventions are effectively designed and implemented across all relevant domains (more about the model can be found here: <https://unisafe-toolkit.eu/7p-framework/#7p-framework>).

4. Sexual Harassment in the Academic Context

Interpersonal relationships and power dynamics are fundamental to understanding harassment and violence, as they often involve unequal power relations, where perpetrators abuse their position to maintain or increase power over others. These dynamics intersect with gender in hierarchical structures like academia, where political, economic, and social inequalities further exacerbate these issues (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Jogan, 2007). Studies show that androcentric institutional cultures are associated with higher incidences of gender-based violence and discrimination, particularly affecting women in male-dominated environments resistant to change (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Johnson et al., 2018). Research consistently highlights the widespread, complex, and often hidden nature of gender-based violence in academia, revealing significant barriers for victims to report their experiences due to fear and inadequate institutional responses (Bull & Rye, 2018; Klein & Martin, 2019; Lipinsky et al., 2022; Pilinkaite Sotirovic et al., 2024). As a result, many cases remain unreported, leading to impunity for perpetrators and perpetuating cycles of abuse due to weak or non-existent regulatory frameworks (Bondestam & Lundqvist,

2020; Lipinsky et al., 2022). Recent findings further demonstrate that undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral students, particularly women, are disproportionately affected by sexual harassment in academia (Hagerlid et al., 2023), and that this problem is often trivialized or even normalized (Pantelmann & Wälty, 2022). Similar findings emerged at the University of Ljubljana, where the student research group Rezistenca conducted a study on sexual harassment and violence in Slovenian academia. An anonymous survey of over 1,600 students, conducted between 2020 and 2022, revealed that nearly half of the respondents—predominantly women—had experienced some form of sexual violence or harassment (Rezistenca, 2022).

These findings highlighted the urgent need for comprehensive measures to address and prevent gender-based violence in academia. Along with the first reported cases of sexual harassment involving university teachers and female students, it provided the impetus to actively address this issue. This reflects the “prevalence” dimension of the 7P Model, which includes ongoing research aimed at understanding the scope and nature of gender-based violence. As suggested by the model, prevalence serves as the foundation of all related activities, providing essential evidence that informs the development of actions and measures across the other six dimensions.

The GEP subgroup tasked with preventing violence and sexual harassment at the Faculty of Arts conducted a thorough analysis of existing studies, initiatives, systemic mechanisms, and key weaknesses in the institutional framework (Antić Gaber, 2022). Their findings revealed that, unlike mobbing, sexual harassment and other forms of violence had been largely unregulated and overlooked, with Slovenian academic institutions frequently lacking effective solutions and preventive measures. Moreover, the absence of both general and specific complaint mechanisms for victims emerged as a critical gap. This recognition led to a focus on the next components of the 7P Model, namely “prevention” and “protection.” In response to these findings, the Faculty of Arts implemented substantial measures aimed at systematically addressing the issue of sexual harassment and violence.

One of the most important innovations was the establishment of the role of a confidential advisor. This individual serves as a trusted, confidential, and anonymous point of contact for those experiencing sexual harassment or violence. The role of the confidential advisor is to support individuals by providing information about their rights and available options for filing complaints, guiding them through the process of reporting incidents, offering basic assistance and support, and, if requested, referring them to appropriate support services inside or outside the university. The introduction of this role marked a groundbreaking step in combating sexual harassment. Although implemented prior to the adoption of the GEP, it later became an integral part of the plan.

By January 2020, three individuals had been appointed as confidential advisors at the Faculty of Arts, each undergoing specialized training for the role. The Faculty of Arts became the first member of the University of Ljubljana to establish a dedicated group of confidential advisors serving both staff and students. Recognizing the importance of strengthening this initiative, the faculty leadership expanded the group in 2020 by appointing additional specialists. This included an expert in sexual violence and harassment and an advisor trained to support students with special needs.

To enhance accessibility and awareness, the faculty created a dedicated section on its website, providing comprehensive information, resources, and a list of confidential advisors available to address the issues

related to violence, sexual harassment, and mobbing. This initiative, along with the establishment of confidential advisors trained to offer various forms of support, aligns with the principle of “provision of services” within the 7P Model. The availability of a dedicated online platform significantly improves the accessibility of these services, ensuring that victims, bystanders, and other stakeholders can easily access support and guidance.

By fall 2020, the GEP subgroup working on violence and sexual harassment developed comprehensive professional guidelines aimed at preventing sexual harassment, mobbing, and violence. This initiative represented the first step in addressing the “policy” dimension of the 7P Model, while also encompassing some elements of “prevention” by promoting awareness and providing clear information to the academic community. The primary objective of these guidelines was to facilitate effective communication between the individuals affected by violence and the relevant authorities, ensuring timely and appropriate responses.

Furthermore, this initiative also touched upon the “prosecution” dimension, as the establishment of clear rules and procedures aimed at holding perpetrators accountable for their actions. However, the scope of this dimension extended beyond the faculty’s authority, necessitating broader changes at both university and national levels in terms of “policy” and “prosecution.”

These efforts initiated by the Faculty of Arts also began to establish “partnerships” with other institutions. Not only did the faculty collaborate with non-governmental organizations specializing in gender-based violence to provide training for staff and students—the training now periodically conducted for new generations of students—but it also spurred wider institutional changes. The professional guidelines developed by the Faculty of Arts were presented to the rector and deans of other faculties, generating interest in implementing similar guidelines across the University of Ljubljana.

In response to these efforts, the University of Ljubljana established a working group of experts in March 2021 to draft the *Rules on Measures Against Violence, Harassment, and Mobbing* (University of Ljubljana, 2022). These rules were finalized and adopted in 2022, replacing the inadequate and outdated regulations from 2012. The new *Rules* introduced several critical advancements aimed at improving clarity, accountability, and effectiveness in handling cases. By providing precise definitions of key terms and violations, clearly delineating the responsibilities of leadership (the dean, the secretary-general, and the rector), introducing a confidential advisor, enhancing the commission’s composition and procedures, and expanding measures against offenders, the new *Rules* addressed previous regulatory ambiguities and established more robust mechanisms for reporting, processing, and preventing violations of dignity.

This adoption represented a significant step toward a more systematic and progressive approach to addressing violence and harassment at the university. Building on this progress, and inspired by the Faculty of Arts’ initiative, the university leadership mandated in April 2021 that all member faculties appoint at least one confidential advisor. The new regulations made the appointment of confidential advisors obligatory. As of now (March 2025), the University of Ljubljana has 71 confidential advisors across its faculties. While the regulations recommend appointing at least one advisor per faculty, the number of advisors varies across faculties. Some faculties have only one advisor, while most have two. Notably, the Faculty of Arts and two other faculties have appointed five advisors each.

The role of confidential advisors is pivotal in creating a safer and more inclusive academic environment. These advisors are required to complete specialized training and participate in regular supervision or professional support provided by the University of Ljubljana. Advisors must be university employees, ensuring continuity in their role and the opportunity to build expertise over time. Their responsibilities extend beyond handling individual cases; they are also tasked with fostering community engagement and promoting awareness about violence and harassment through faculty-specific initiatives.

The diversity of backgrounds among the confidential advisors—ranging from teachers of science and technology to economists and lawyers—has been instrumental in broadening understanding and sensitivity to issues of violence and harassment. This diversity also underscores an intersectional approach to gender-based violence and reflects a proactive policy of focusing on early intervention rather than relying solely on reactive measures. Through mandatory annual training and lectures, advisors develop skills and knowledge that they might not otherwise acquire through their regular professional roles. Over time, this ongoing education fosters a growing network of individuals sensitized to these issues, forming a community dedicated to combating violence and harassment at the university.

Although the number of formal complaints has not significantly increased since these changes were introduced, the introduction of confidential advisors has led to a marked rise in individuals seeking informal support and discussing experiences of violence. In some cases, these interactions have facilitated proactive solutions without requiring formal complaints. This highlights the value of the confidential advisor system as an effective mechanism for addressing violence and harassment in academia and for promoting a shift in institutional culture to challenge and dismantle the existing structures of oppression and inequality.

The importance of addressing harassment and violence in academia, alongside the need for more robust regulations and progressive legislation, has also been recognized by policymakers in Slovenia, prompting a proactive response. Following the initiatives undertaken by the Faculty of Arts and the University of Ljubljana, the Ministry of Higher Education commissioned a targeted research project to examine how these issues are systematically regulated in Slovenian academia.

In 2023, the government amended the Higher Education Act, introducing a specific article dedicated to protecting students from all forms of harassment, violence, and abuse. Prior to this amendment, students were not adequately protected under Slovenian civil law against such misconduct in the academic environment.

Building on these developments, the Ministry of Higher Education has begun drafting comprehensive national regulations. These will require all private and public universities and faculties to either amend existing policies if they are insufficient or adopt new ones where no such regulations currently exist. These steps aim to ensure consistent and systematic protection against harassment and violence across all academic institutions in Slovenia (see Figure 1).

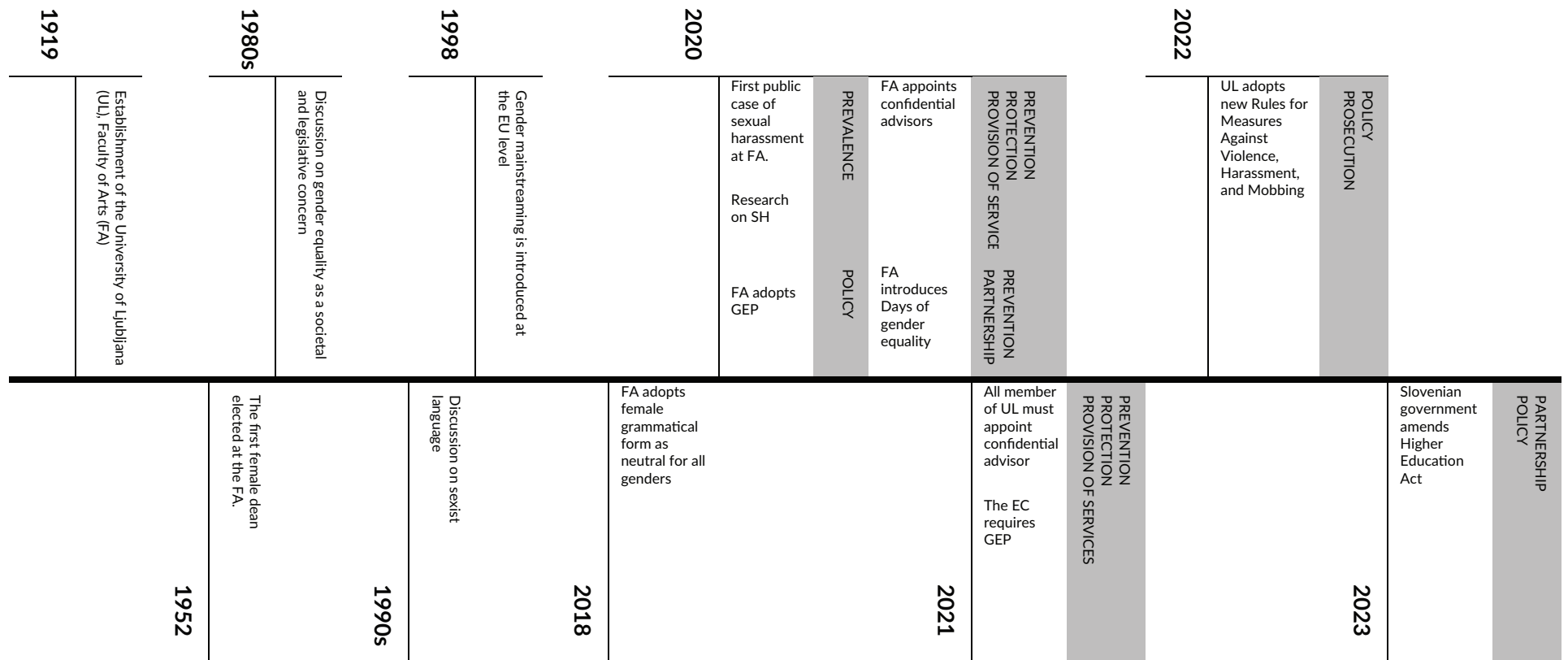


Figure 1. Timeline of events (Faculty of Arts 1919–2023) with the application of the 7P Model.

5. Sustainability and Institutionalization of the GEP

The planning and implementation of the GEP have brought about many positive changes to the Faculty of Arts and, in some areas, have had a significant impact on the wider academic field. However, the question of how to translate these plans into sustained actions and ensure the long-term achievement of the outlined goals remains critical. This challenge is not unique to the Faculty of Arts but is shared by many who have adopted GEPs. One of the most pressing concerns is how to mobilize the necessary human and financial resources to continue these activities and ensure institutional accountability for their implementation.

Following the adoption of the GEP by the faculty senate, particular attention was paid to ensuring the sustainability and long-term impact of the plan. Much of the groundwork for establishing and implementing the GEP was carried out within the framework of the GEARING Roles project. As the project neared its conclusion, a critical question emerged: how to maintain the mechanisms and progress achieved without continued external funding.

To address this challenge, the activities initiated under the GEP were integrated into the existing Quality Assurance Committee (QAC). The QAC, which oversees improvements in teaching, learning, research, and other key areas at the faculty, became the institutional framework for sustaining the changes introduced by the GEP. From the feminist institutionalist perspective, the integration of gender equality initiatives into the QAC exemplifies a successful strategy for embedding gender equality into existing institutional structures, safeguarding them from potential resistance—whether covert or explicit. This move toward institutionalization addresses the problem of path dependence by creating formal mechanisms that protect gender equality initiatives from potential disruptions caused by changes in departmental or faculty leadership, which occur every two to four years.

Furthermore, the QAC was tasked with producing an annual report that included a dedicated chapter on gender equality, providing ongoing institutional oversight and accountability. In this way, the changes introduced by the GEP were partially institutionalized, preventing them from becoming temporary outcomes of a single project. This approach also aligns with the “prevalence” component of the 7P Model, emphasizing continuous and systematic data collection as a foundational element that informs future actions and mechanisms aimed at achieving gender equality.

To build on these advancements and deepen the awareness of gender equality in academia, the faculty introduced the annual Days of Gender Equality, a series of events spanning a month or longer. This represents a strong “prevention” and “partnerships” component of the 7P Model, effectively enhancing public awareness and promoting collaboration with civil society organizations. This event was designed as a platform to raise awareness, foster a co-creative atmosphere, and enhance the integration of gender topics into curricula and research. It also sought to encourage collaboration with other institutions, communities of practice (Mihajlović Trbovc, 2022), and civil society organizations to broaden public awareness of gender equality and create opportunities for wider cooperation on these issues.

At the faculty, a range of activities related to gender equality was already underway, including mandatory and elective courses, research projects, special journal issues, and books addressing gender in specific contexts. Additionally, initiatives aimed at transforming harmful practices in public and private life were in progress.

However, these efforts were often known only to a limited internal audience. The Days of Gender Equality initiative aimed to amplify these efforts, making gender equality more visible and accessible to both the faculty and the wider public.

In the area of addressing sexual harassment and violence, notable progress has been achieved in ensuring the sustainability of related activities at the university level, too. The University of Ljubljana has committed to providing ongoing training and support for designated confidential advisors, while faculties are required to report annually on incidents in this field. The university's Career Centre has been tasked with implementing certain initiatives supported by dedicated funding. These measures have established a degree of permanence in combating sexual harassment and violence, ensuring the continuation of these critical efforts.

While the introduction of the GEP and the implementation of specific measures, such as the appointment of confidential advisors and the development of guidelines and protocols against sexual harassment, have contributed to institutional and even national-level changes, ensuring the long-term sustainability of these efforts has nonetheless proven challenging. Resistance within the institution rooted in established cultural norms and practices appears to have slowed down or constrained cultural transformation. For instance, although awareness of sexual harassment has increased and more individuals are seeking informal support, this has not been reflected in a proportional rise in formal complaints. This discrepancy suggests the persistence of barriers to reporting or a lack of trust in existing institutional mechanisms.

In certain areas where initial interventions have been attempted, observable changes are expected to take considerably more time to emerge. Efforts to introduce gender-sensitive curricula and research, for example, have encountered substantial resistance, particularly from specific departments or individual faculty members who invoke academic freedom to justify their opposition. Consequently, meaningful progress in these domains is likely to be gradual and uneven.

Moreover, securing adequate human and financial resources for the sustained implementation and monitoring of the GEP remains a critical challenge. The initial momentum was largely driven by the GEARING Roles project, and a significant setback occurred when efforts to institutionalize a new staff position dedicated to sustaining, monitoring, and further developing gender equality measures at the faculty proved unsuccessful. Much of the work continues to be conducted voluntarily, perceived as an additional commitment rather than an integral component of institutional priorities. Ensuring broader engagement and fostering long-term institutional commitment remain pressing challenges for the continued advancement of gender equality initiatives.

6. Discussion

By employing the feminist institutionalist framework, this article highlights how the adoption of the GEP at the Faculty of Arts was not merely a formal compliance with EU requirements but a complex process of institutional transformation shaped by the interaction between top-down mandates and bottom-up advocacy. The faculty's experience demonstrates that formal policies alone are insufficient for promoting gender equality. Instead, meaningful change requires engaging with informal practices, challenging path-dependent norms, and mobilizing agency in institutional structures (Kenny, 2013; Mergaert et al., 2022).

The adoption of the GEP at the Faculty of Arts, when analyzed through the lens of feminist institutionalism, reveals a multifaceted process extending beyond a simple reaction to external pressures. The initial impetus from the European Commission's Horizon Europe mandate, requiring a GEP for funding, can be seen as an example of how formal external institutions can create windows of opportunity for institutional change (Kenny, 2013). However, the successful adoption and meaningful content of the GEP were deeply intertwined with pre-existing internal dynamics and the agency of actors within the faculty. The GEARING Roles project, which provided both a mandate and resources for developing a GEP, acted as a critical juncture, a moment of significant opportunity that could lead to new institutional paths.

The implementation of the GEP at the Faculty of Arts has led to several notable achievements, including systemic changes, cultural shifts, and the introduction of new support mechanisms. This multi-year process has provided invaluable insights and lessons that extend beyond the immediate scope of the GEP, offering a roadmap for other institutions embarking on similar initiatives (Antić Gaber, 2022).

One of the most significant lessons learned is the necessity of systemic approaches to address gender inequality effectively. While isolated efforts by individuals or groups can spark awareness, long-lasting change requires institutional frameworks that are integrated into the fabric of the organization. The GEP at the Faculty of Arts provided a structured mechanism to identify priority areas, implement targeted interventions, and monitor progress. The systematic collection and analysis of gender-disaggregated data emerged as a cornerstone of evidence-based decision-making. This approach allowed the Faculty of Arts to address gaps in knowledge, challenge prevailing assumptions, and plan interventions grounded in empirical evidence. Other institutions can benefit from adopting similar data-driven strategies, as they not only ensure accountability but also build credibility and trust.

Feminist institutionalism underscores the importance of examining both formal and informal institutions and how they interact to either reproduce or challenge gender inequalities. Perhaps the most important lesson learned in this regard is the necessity of institutionalizing gender equality initiatives to ensure their sustainability. Embedding the implementation and monitoring of the GEP in the existing QAC at the Faculty of Arts was a strategic move that safeguarded the progress achieved and ensured that gender equality remains a core institutional priority. This integration protects the GEP from being sidelined due to changes in leadership or external circumstances. The introduction of systemic measures such as the appointment of confidential advisors and the development of new rules against violence, harassment, and mobbing represents concrete formal institutional changes aimed at challenging informal norms that perpetuate such behaviors.

The success of the GEP at the Faculty of Arts highlights the critical importance of broad-based stakeholder engagement. The early and continuous involvement of faculty members, students, administrative staff, and external partners, such as feminist non-governmental organizations, was instrumental in fostering a sense of ownership and shared responsibility. Initiatives such as the Days of Gender Equality, now recognized as a good practice example in the *Handbook for Creating a Gender-Sensitive Curriculum* (Kitchener, 2022), and research on sexual harassment served as effective platforms for engaging diverse groups. These initiatives helped ensure that gender equality was not perceived as the responsibility of a single department but rather as a core institutional priority.

Feminist institutionalist arguments highlight how change often emerges from the interplay between top-down pressures and bottom-up initiatives, where internal actors leverage external opportunities to advance their goals. For instance, the long-standing internal debates on gender-sensitive language and the impact of the Slovenian #MeToo movement were crucial bottom-up forces that shaped the agenda of the GEP. The role of critical actors, acting as institutional entrepreneurs, has been paramount. In addition, various individuals embedded in institutions initiated proposals and mobilized support for gender equality measures.

The experience of the Faculty of Arts also illustrates the multiplier effect of good practices. The faculty's initiatives have not only influenced other faculties of the University of Ljubljana but have also contributed to national-level reforms, including the amendment of the Higher Education Act to include protections against harassment and violence. This ripple effect demonstrates that institutional change can serve as a catalyst for broader societal transformation.

Feminist institutionalism emphasizes that institutions are not static or neutral entities but are shaped by historically embedded gendered power relations. The GEP at the University of Ljubljana directly confronted these relations by addressing issues such as hegemonic masculine language, which was challenged through the adoption of inclusive language practices. Challenging dominant discourses is crucial for institutional change. The emphasis on aligning the GEP's objectives with the faculty's mission of academic excellence and societal impact proved effective in mitigating opposition. However, resistance to gender equality initiatives, sometimes framed through the lens of academic freedom, remains a challenge, indicating that the process of institutional change is often gradual and contested. Resistance is an inevitable part of introducing initiatives that challenge deeply ingrained cultural and structural norms. At the Faculty of Arts, resistance manifested in various forms, from skepticism about the necessity of the GEP to reluctance to adopt gender-sensitive practices in certain departments. Overcoming this resistance required persistence, strategic communication, and a clear articulation of the benefits of gender equality for the institution as a whole.

Despite contributions to institutional and national-level changes, ensuring the long-term sustainability of the GEP has been challenging due to institutional resistance rooted in cultural norms, limited resources, and uneven progress. Increased awareness of sexual harassment and informal support-seeking has not immediately translated into a proportional rise in formal complaints, indicating ongoing barriers to reporting or distrust in institutional mechanisms. Resistance to gender-sensitive curricula and research keeps on slowing down transformative efforts. The failure to institutionalize a new staff position for monitoring and developing gender equality measures, along with a reliance on voluntary efforts, highlights the need for a continued struggle for broader engagement and institutional commitment.

7. Conclusion

The adoption of the GEP at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, demonstrates how institutional transformation can emerge from the interplay between external pressures and internal advocacy. While the European Commission's mandate for GEPs provided a crucial top-down impetus, the success of the initiative depended heavily on grassroots engagement, including advocacy from critical actors, debates on gender-sensitive language, and responses to the Slovenian #MeToo movement. The integration of these efforts into a coherent institutional strategy illustrates how formal policies can be effectively aligned with internal priorities to produce meaningful change.

Ultimately, the faculty's experience offers valuable insights for other institutions seeking to implement gender equality measures. The key factors contributing to success include strong leadership commitment, effective use of external resources such as the GEARING Roles project, and the systematic integration of gender equality initiatives into existing institutional structures. However, challenges remain, particularly in ensuring the sustainability of these efforts amid shifting institutional priorities. Addressing these challenges will require continuous monitoring, resource allocation, and collaboration across various stakeholders to ensure that gender equality remains a central and enduring institutional priority.

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Conflict of Interests

The first author of the article, Roman Kuhar, was the dean of the Faculty of Arts during the adoption of the Gender Equality Plan at the faculty. Milica Antić Gaber and Jasna Podreka were both members of the working group responsible for preparing the Gender Equality Plan at the Faculty of Arts and the University of Ljubljana.

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About the Authors



Roman Kuhar is a sociologist at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. His work focuses on discrimination, human rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and equality policies. He has led various research projects and co-edited several books, including *Beyond the Pink Curtain* (with J. Takács) and *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe* (with D. Paternotte).



Milica Antić Gaber is a sociologist and senior researcher at the Department of Sociology at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. Her research focuses on the topics of gender equality policies, gender quotas in politics, GEP implementation in the academic field, and sexual harassment in academia.



Jasna Podreka is a sociologist at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. Her research focuses on gender-based violence, femicide, domestic violence, and sexual harassment. She has participated in numerous national and international projects on these topics, including the current Erasmus+ project With Knowledge Against Bullying.