

# Transforming Organizational Culture: The First Gender Equality Plan of Akdeniz University in Turkey

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## Abstract

The article aims to analyze the effects of the Equality and Diversity Action Plan and Policy of 2022–2026 (Akdeniz University Gender Equality Plan, most commonly known as AU-GEP), prepared for the first time at Akdeniz University, on women’s inclusion processes within the university. The article first describes the institutional dynamics behind drafting the first Gender Equality Plan (GEP) of Akdeniz University. This study presents a comparative analysis of data collected before and after the GEP’s implementation, with a specific focus on 2024. Additionally, qualitative data on the implementation process and the experiences of key actors were gathered through focus group discussions with members of the Gender Equality Monitoring Commission at Akdeniz University, which was established to oversee and monitor the GEP. The analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data identifies the successes and challenges of the university’s first GEP. Furthermore, the study examines the limitations of the initial plan and proposes strategies for enhancing future gender equality initiatives within Akdeniz University’s broader diversity and inclusion framework.

## Keywords

diversity; Equality and Diversity Action Plan and Policy; Gender Equality Plan; organizational culture; structural change; Turkey

## 1. Introduction

Universities have traditionally been gendered institutions. Intensive efforts have been made in universities and research institutions to address gender inequalities. The European Technology Assessment Network first published a report on this issue, highlighting factors that influence an individual’s ability to enter, remain

in, and succeed within the scientific community. The report emphasized that women are particularly disadvantaged in this regard (Osborn et al., 2000). It also underscored the underrepresentation of women in senior positions and recommended the development of policies promoting equal treatment, affirmative action, and the mainstreaming of gender perspectives.

Based on the findings of this report, the EU has advocated for and supported the implementation of gender equality plans since 2015. To facilitate structural change, it encourages the adoption of Gender Equality Plans (GEPs), recognized in the literature as strategic and policy documents aimed at ensuring gender equality in universities. Research and innovation programs such as Framework Programs 6 and 7 and Horizon 2020 incentivized institutions to develop GEPs as part of the application process. Since 2021, having a GEP has become a mandatory requirement for participation in these programs. Despite nearly two decades of policies aimed at creating space for women in academia and notable improvements across European universities, a balanced representation has yet to be achieved (Rosa et al., 2020).

In Turkey, data from the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) reveal persistent gender disparities in academic representation. According to 2020–2021 data, although women constitute 45.3% of academics, their representation drops drastically at higher levels, with marked underrepresentation in senior academic positions such as associate professorships and professorships. While women outnumber their male colleagues in lower-ranking positions such as research assistants and lecturers, this ratio shifts significantly in senior roles, with a disparity of up to 50% against women (Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu, 2021). Despite the prevalence of a feminized workforce in academia, women predominantly occupy the lowest levels of the hierarchy. Data from 2023–2024 point to an improvement in ratios. The proportion of women in academia has increased to 46.4%, surpassing the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development average of 43%. Moreover, the number of women in senior positions has improved, though disparities remain visible (YÖK, 2024). As of 2024, 14 universities out of 74 private universities (19%) have women as rectors, whereas among 128 state universities, only 5 (4%) are led by women. Overall, the representation of women in decision-making positions within the universities remains extremely low. This pattern of gender inequality in leadership and power structures is also evident across EU countries. Within 28 EU nations, 47% of women are concentrated in the most precarious academic positions, while only 24% hold full professorships. Additionally, university rectorships across the EU remain overwhelmingly male-dominated, with 86% of rectors being men (Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, 2019). The underrepresentation of women in senior academic positions is often explained through the metaphor of the “glass ceiling” (Teelken et al., 2019). Another relevant metaphor is “sticky floors,” which describes the concentration of women at the bottom of the academic hierarchy, where working conditions are precarious, and access to intellectual leadership is limited (O’Keefe & Courtois, 2019).

Efforts to improve women’s status in universities and achieve gender equality in Turkey began in the 1990s with initiatives such as the introduction of graduate programs, the establishment of research centers, and the promotion of the feminist movement. These efforts were initially limited to a few prominent universities, including Istanbul University, Ankara University, and Middle East Technical University. Since the early 2000s, gender equality strategies have expanded, with an increasing number of universities developing policies on the issue. These strategies include drafting regulations against sexual violence and harassment, establishing centers to handle such cases, and creating strategy documents or GEPs. In 2018, YÖK organized a workshop with scholars from various universities across Turkey who specialized in gender studies. As a key outcome of

this workshop, YÖK issued a Document of Stance on Gender Equality, which was distributed to all universities. This document played a crucial role in encouraging the establishment of additional research centers and promoting the development of GEPs and gender equality policies across universities (Ankara University, 2015).

Within this framework, this article examines the process of organizational transformation of Akdeniz University since 2021, focusing on the adoption and implementation of the Equality and Diversity Action Plan and Policy of 2022–2026 (Akdeniz University Gender Equality Plan, most commonly known as AU-GEP). Despite the fact that its title refers to diversity more generally, the plan itself is geared to deal solely with gender inequality within institutions as outlined in EU policy frameworks. Due to the absence of institutionalized data collection practices on ethnicity, religion, and other markers of diversity within Turkish universities, the operational scope of “equality and diversity” remained largely limited to gender-based indicators. In the context of Turkey, there are significant structural limitations that hinder the implementation of intersectional frameworks, which enables us to question how gender intersects with other axes of identity such as ethnicity, religion, or sexuality. Official statistical datasets—including those used in higher education and public administration—do not include categories related to ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation. As such, the quantitative data available for universities, including Akdeniz University, lack the disaggregated indicators necessary to meaningfully assess or plan for institutional diversity beyond gender. This represents one of the peculiarities of Turkish universities, distinguishing them from their European counterparts. Therefore, this first plan and policy of Akdeniz University towards achieving a more equal and diverse institutional environment is considered the first GEP. Drawing on institutional theory, the study aims to elaborate on the potential of GEPs to drive cultural and structural transformation within higher education institutions in Turkey through a case study of AU-GEP while also highlighting key differences from their European counterparts. The article is structured into five main sections. Section 2 establishes the theoretical framework. Section 3 outlines the process of developing the AU-GEP, highlighting the institutions and policies that influenced the university’s decision to initiate a gender strategy. Section 4 presents the methodology used to analyze AU-GEP actions within the organization and defines the research questions of the article. Section 5 focuses on the analysis of cultural and structural changes introduced through the AU-GEP at Akdeniz University. Section 6 discusses whether the initiative successfully challenged traditional gender power relations at the university and the limitations of the first GEP. It also offers recommendations for further enhancing the transformation of organizational culture to better support women’s empowerment.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

GEPs have been widely adopted by universities with the aim of institutionalizing gender-sensitive practices and policies that promote women’s participation, representation, and advancement. These plans typically include measures to reduce gender-based inequalities in areas such as academic recruitment, promotion, decision-making, and the allocation of research funding. However, the implementation and impact of GEPs are often contingent upon the specific institutional context in which they are embedded. Drawing on institutional theory, the study examines how institutional structures, norms, and cultural expectations shape the implementation of gender equality measures. In particular, it explores how institutional isomorphism, the pursuit of legitimacy, and patterns of internal resistance or compliance influence the transformative potential of GEPs in higher education.

While the implementation of GEPs in universities signals a growing formalization of gender equality objectives through organizational policies, this process is deeply shaped by institutional dynamics and remains highly complex. Institutional theory offers a robust analytical framework for understanding these dynamics, particularly the interplay between formal rules, organizational behavior, and cultural norms. Meyer and Rowan (1977) argue that formal organizational structures often serve a symbolic function, producing legitimacy-conferring “myths” rather than enacting substantive operational change. In the context of GEPs, this suggests that universities may adopt gender equality policies that align with external expectations or funding requirements without necessarily altering entrenched gendered practices. The concept of institutional isomorphism, as articulated by DiMaggio and Powell (1983), further illuminates this phenomenon by identifying coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures that drive organizations toward convergence. Universities may implement GEPs in response to regulatory mandates (coercive), to emulate perceived best practices from successful institutions (mimetic), or to conform to professional norms within academia (normative).

The concept of institutional work, as developed by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006), underscores the role of individual and collective agency in the creation, maintenance, and disruption of institutional structures. In the context of gender equality, institutional transformation requires more than the formal adoption of policies; it necessitates the active engagement of institutional actors who are willing to challenge entrenched cultural values and norms. Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) also highlight how the gendered culture of academia can constrain the effectiveness of equality initiatives. Similarly, Acker (1990) and Morley (2013) emphasize that gendered power relations are deeply embedded in both everyday practices and organizational structures, often rendering gender equality policies superficial or ineffectual. These dynamics are particularly evident in leadership and promotion processes, where informal networks and cultural expectations continue to privilege male-dominated norms. Dobbins and Kwiek (2017) argue that applying institutional theory to the field of education provides deeper insights into how educational institutions respond to external pressures while maintaining internal coherence. This perspective is crucial for assessing the extent to which GEPs function as genuine mechanisms of institutional transformation rather than symbolic tools for compliance.

Recent studies examine how GEPs are designed and implemented in universities. Most of these studies focus on EU countries and universities participating in EU framework programs. Comparative analyses have been conducted across different university samples to assess the implementation of GEPs. Furthermore, these studies explore whether GEPs have the potential to drive institutional transformation within academic structures while also identifying their limitations. However, this research predominantly concentrates on academic institutions in EU member states such as Germany, Italy, Switzerland, and the Czech Republic (Bencivenga & Eileen, 2021; Clavero & Galligan, 2021; Drew & Canavan, 2021; Schmidt & Cacace, 2019; Timmers et al., 2010; Wroblewski, 2017). Although there are many studies on gender equality in higher education in Turkey (Acar, 1991; Adak, 2018; Aktaş et al., 2019; Sağlamer et al., 2018), no research specifically focuses on GEP plans in Turkish universities. Building upon these theoretical insights, the present study, which investigates the impacts of the 2022–2026 AU-GEP in Turkey, a country that is not a member of the EU but a candidate for accession, offers a significant contribution to the existing literature. It does so by focusing on a public university located in Antalya, a provincial context of Turkey, representing both the characteristics of a regional state institution and a novel institutional initiative. As a university that voluntarily aligns itself with EU GEPs frameworks and seeks to emulate pioneering higher education

institutions implementing gender equality policies, Akdeniz University provides a distinctive case for analyzing how such efforts unfold within different institutional environments.

### 3. Drafting Gender Equality: Institutional Dynamics Behind Akdeniz University's GEP

The Turkish higher education system has undergone rapid expansion and transformation since the early 2000s, with a strong emphasis on increasing access, institutional diversification, and alignment with European standards through the Bologna Process. As of 2024, the country hosts over 200 universities, including a mix of well-established metropolitan institutions, newer state universities in regional provinces, and a growing number of private (foundation) universities. Akdeniz University, established in 1982 and located in Antalya, is one of the major public universities in Turkey outside the capital and Istanbul. It serves over 70,000 students and encompasses a broad range of faculties. As a large provincial university with a diverse student body and extensive regional influence, Akdeniz University holds significant representative value for understanding gender equality initiatives in Turkey's higher education landscape.

According to data from Times Higher Education and other ranking systems, Akdeniz University has made systematic efforts to enhance its research profile and global visibility. In the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2025, the university was placed in the 1201–1500 band globally and ranked 7th among Turkish public universities (Times Higher Education, 2025). Strategically, Akdeniz University has invested in expanding its research capacity across multiple domains. According to EduRank, it currently ranks 20th nationwide and 1312th globally, and performs within the top 50% in over 140 research subject areas (EduRank, 2025). There is a strategic push by Akdeniz University to transition from a large regional public university toward a fully-fledged research university in the Turkish context—emphasizing publication performance, international partnerships, innovation ecosystems, and improved standings in global rankings. The aspiration to enhance the university's international research profile has also influenced its institutional engagement with gender equality frameworks. In particular, the adoption of a GEP in 2022 can be understood as a response to external funding criteria, notably the European Commission's Horizon Europe program, which requires participating institutions to have a GEP in place. The Horizon program has played an even more decisive role in other cases. For instance, Kadir Has University in Istanbul has also developed and implemented a GEP as part of the Horizon 2020 Systemic Action for Gender Equality project (Bailey & Drew, 2021, p. 125).

The initiation of AU-GEP was not solely driven by the regulatory mandates of the EU or by a desire to emulate successful higher education institutions in Turkey and abroad, as noted in the institutional theory. Rather, it also stemmed from sustained local civic and feminist advocacy, particularly by NGOs and gender equality networks, which had long called attention to the absence of institutional gender policies at the university. These locally grounded efforts played a crucial role in pushing gender equality onto the university's agenda, complementing external pressures and aligning with broader aspirations for research competitiveness and international funding eligibility.

The institutional assessment of gender equality at Akdeniz University was conducted by the women's NGO, the Antalya branch of the Turkish University Women's Association (Türk Üniversiteli Kadınlar Derneği [TÜKD]), which was founded on December 19, 1949, by Turkey's first female university graduates. The Antalya branch of the association was responsible for monitoring universities in Antalya, including

Akdeniz University. The monitoring process involved collecting statistical data to assess gender equality within the universities and conducting a survey with female students in 2021. The TÜKD Antalya branch shared its findings as a report with relevant stakeholders at Akdeniz University, contributing to raising awareness and encouraging the initiation of a gender equality strategy (TÜKD, 2021a).

When examining the institutionalization processes aimed at achieving gender equality, it is essential to consider factors such as the diversity of institutional mechanisms and variations in geographical and structural context. In Turkey, the transformation toward gender equality in universities has been largely driven by the establishment of Research Centers for Women and Gender Studies. These centers play a crucial role in raising awareness, developing GEPs, drafting regulations on sexual harassment and violence, contributing to National Action Plans for Combating Violence, and engaging in broader feminist activism. Currently, there are 119 such centers across Turkish universities, all directly affiliated with university rectorships. Their strategic importance has made them a decisive factor in the development of GEPs and strategies within universities. Akdeniz University's center (Kadın Çalışmaları ve Toplumsal Cinsiyet Araştırma ve Uygulama Merkezi or KATCAM) was founded in 2008. The center presented a GEP plan aimed at addressing gender inequality, as outlined in a report by a local women's NGO. Danowitz (2008, p. 97) emphasized that gender equality initiatives must be tailored to the specific needs of each university and should be grounded in the university's strategic plan—two of the five key factors for the advancement of gender equality. In this sense, the initiative at Akdeniz University originated from grassroots efforts, was designed to meet institutional needs, and was subsequently approved by the university senate for implementation from 2022 to 2026 (Akdeniz Üniversitesi, 2022). However, as the university's first GEP, it exhibits several significant limitations. While the plan outlines key goals to be achieved in the short, medium, and long term, it has not been integrated into the university's broader strategic development framework. Moreover, no specific financial or human resources were allocated to support its implementation. The responsibility for carrying out the plan was primarily placed on KATCAM. Danowitz (2008) also highlights the necessity of establishing a monitoring system with accountability to assess both short and long-term outcomes. As part of the GEP, the rectorate established the Gender Equality Monitoring Commission on March 18, 2022, to coordinate the preparation, guidance, implementation, monitoring, and updating of all related activities within the university.

#### 4. Methodology

The research adopts a mixed-methods approach, specifically an explanatory sequential design. In this methodology, quantitative data are first collected and analyzed, followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data. This sequential process enables a more nuanced understanding of aspects that cannot be fully explained by quantitative analysis alone (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Clark, 2020). As Patton (2015) argues, employing multiple data collection or analysis methods in a single study enhances the reliability and validity of the research.

In the quantitative phase of the study, gender-related data concerning students and academic staff at Akdeniz University for the years 2021 and 2024 were used. Gender-disaggregated data from 2021—prior to the implementation of the GEP—were descriptively compared with the 2024 data for both students and academic staff, in order to assess whether there had been any positive or negative changes regarding gender equality over the three-year period.



The first qualitative data set was derived from a focus group session conducted on December 6, 2024, with seven volunteer academic members of the Gender Equality Monitoring Commission, which is composed of 13 members. The volunteers consist of one research assistant, one assistant professor, three associate professors, and two full professors—comprising five women and two men. Participants represented diverse academic disciplines, including sociology, psychology, social work, history, economics, and agricultural economics. The study employed purposive sampling, one of the non-probability sampling techniques, selecting participants directly involved in the implementation and monitoring of the AU-GEP. Approval for the study was granted by the university's Social Sciences Ethics Committee. This phase of the study focused on understanding and explaining in detail how and why gender equality-related indicators evolved during the implementation of the GEP process. The session, which lasted approximately one hour, was recorded with the participants' consent using the Microsoft Teams platform's automatic transcription feature. The audio recordings were subsequently transcribed, yielding a 7,066-word document. This transcript was reviewed and verified by two researchers through cross-checking with the original recordings. No data analysis software was used.

The second set of qualitative data was derived from the open-ended survey administered to volunteers following the Gender Equality Trainer Training Certificate Program, organized by the Department of Women's and Gender Studies at Akdeniz University. The two-day training program was delivered by 12 faculty members affiliated with the department, covering various aspects of gender equality. It targeted academic staff interested in gender and women's studies or planning to teach in these fields. Fifteen academics (12 female and 3 male) participated in the training, and 7 (6 female and 1 male), primarily early-career researchers, responded to the nine-question open-ended online survey administered at the end. The third source of qualitative data comprises the minutes of 10 meetings held by the Gender Equality Monitoring Commission, established on March 18, 2022. These data were thematically analyzed under eight pre-determined categories using descriptive analysis, which included examination of relevant contexts, intentions, and implementation processes.

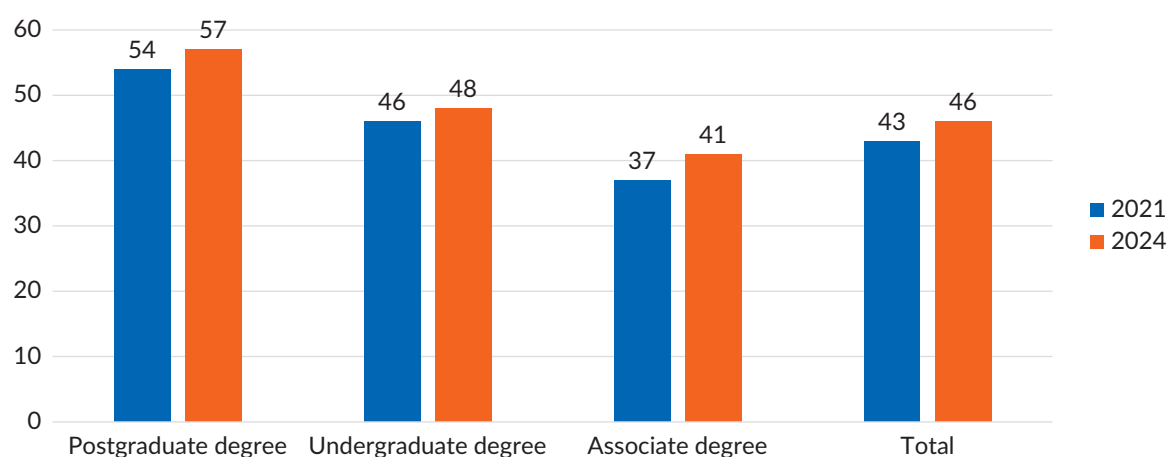
One of the authors is the founding director of KATCAM and currently serves as a board member, while the second author later served as the director as well. As such, both authors were actively involved in the processes that form the core focus of this study. The researchers' direct engagement in the activities related to the research topic allowed for observation within the natural context of the study, enabled a deeper understanding of participants' experiences, and facilitated the collection of richer and more meaningful data. In qualitative research, such involvement helps the researcher develop empathy, acquire contextual knowledge, and interpret observations in a multidimensional manner (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). The researcher's presence in the field and direct participation in the process enhance the credibility and internal validity of the data obtained. Moreover, it helps establish a relationship of trust between the researcher and the participants, contributing to the acquisition of more open, sincere, and detailed data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This, in turn, enables a deeper understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, and attitudes.

## 5. Research Findings

The study used the eight themes of the 2022–2026 AU-GEP as an analytical framework. Data derived from open-ended surveys, focus group discussions, and monitoring commission meeting minutes were analyzed manually within the scope of these eight themes.

### 5.1. Ensuring Gender Equality in Education

Between 2021 and 2024, a 2–4 percentage point increase was observed in the proportion of women across all levels of education, including associate, undergraduate, and graduate programs. The percentage of female students at Akdeniz University rose from 43% to 46%. However, as a state university, Akdeniz University admits students through Turkey’s national centralized examination system. Thus, it is unclear to what extent the AU-GEP contributed to this increase (Figure 1).



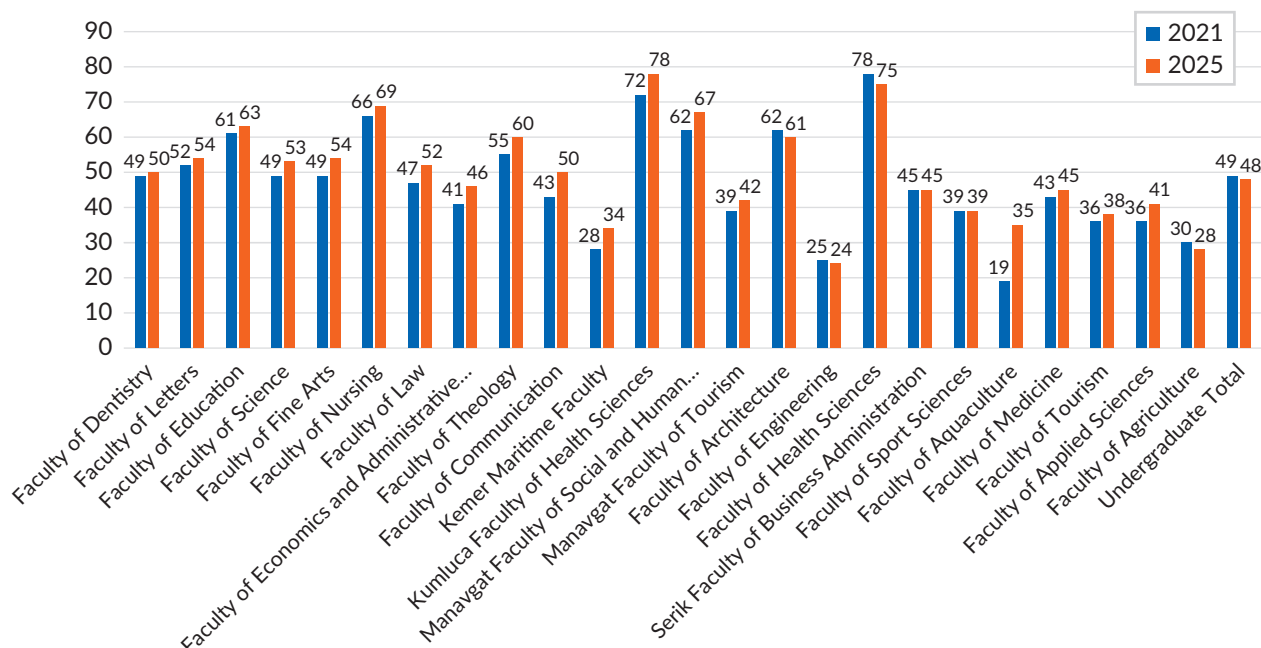
**Figure 1.** Percentage of female students by level of education (%).

While the proportion of women pursuing graduate education stands at 57%, evoking the concept of the feminization of higher education, this positive trend has not prevented the persistence of the leaky pipeline phenomenon in advancing through academic career stages. Gender parity has not been achieved in attaining professorial positions. Furthermore, horizontal segregation in higher education remains prevalent. The student profile at Akdeniz University reflects the global trend of horizontal segregation in higher education, where male students tend to prefer traditionally male-dominated fields such as agriculture and engineering, while female students are more inclined toward disciplines such as language and literature, arts, and education (Passaretta et al., 2023). Moreover, horizontal segregation within faculty persists. In disciplines such as agriculture and engineering, the proportion of female professors remains notably low (14% and 17%, respectively), whereas fields like nursing, architecture, and communication exhibit much higher representation (100%, 75%, and 58%, respectively; see Figure 2).

Several initiatives have been organized at Akdeniz University to raise awareness about gender equality among students in STEM fields. One such initiative was the collaboration of Akdeniz University with civil society organizations in Antalya. A noteworthy initiative in this context is the STEM Girls Project, launched in September 2024, which aims to inspire primary and middle school-aged girls in the Antalya region to pursue careers in STEM fields. The project also seeks to support families and educators in encouraging children to explore these disciplines while raising overall societal awareness.

One of the objectives of the AU-GEP is to increase and sustain opportunities for work-study scholarships for female students. At Akdeniz University, no non-repayable student scholarships are offered. The number of male and female students receiving part-time work-study scholarships appears to be relatively balanced.





**Figure 2.** Distribution of female students according to faculties (%).

In 2021, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, only 18 female and 18 male students were supported equally on a part-time basis. However, by 2024, the number of students benefiting from part-time work-study scholarships increased to 143 female and 115 male students. Although women constitute 46% of the student population at Akdeniz University, positive discrimination seems to have been applied, as women represent 55% of those receiving part-time work-study scholarships.

## 5.2. Integration of Gender Studies Courses Across Faculties

There are 18 graduate programs offering graduate degrees in women and gender studies within universities across Turkey. Among these, only seven universities offer doctoral programs, four of which are public universities. Since the 2011–2012 academic year, Akdeniz University has offered a master's program under the Women's and Gender Studies Department and, since the 2017–2018 academic year, a doctoral program. Given its interdisciplinary nature, 12 faculty members teaching within Akdeniz University's Women's and Gender Studies Department are drawn from various departments across the university. The AU-GEP recognizes the importance of further integrating gender studies across various faculties and departments within the university.

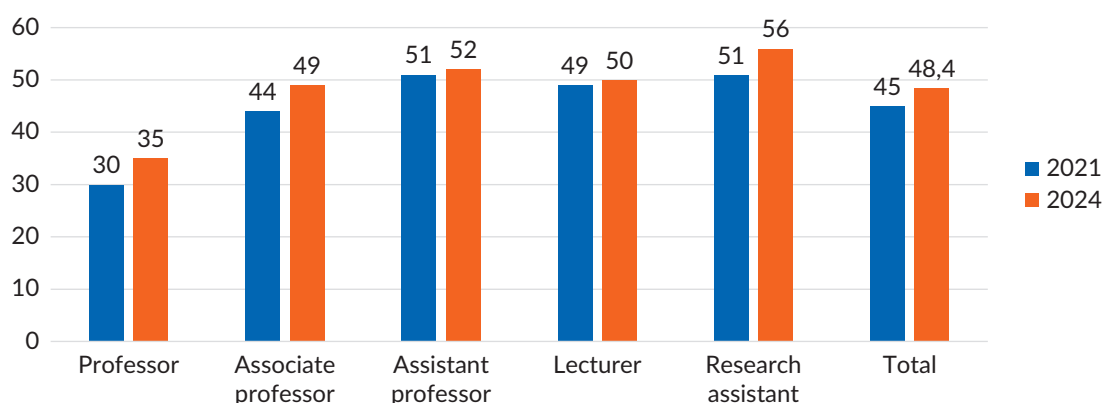
In the fall semester of 2021, only four elective courses were available in the fields of gender studies and women's studies. However, by the fall semester of 2024, as part of the GEP, the number of such courses increased to 11, with 255 students enrolling. The introduction of gender equality courses at Akdeniz University within the scope of AU-GEP represents a multifaceted institutional response. This initiative constituted both a strategic move aimed at expanding research capacity and positioning the university among globally recognized institutions committed to gender equality (mimetic isomorphism), and an adoption of evolving professional standards and values in the field of gender equality (Normative Isomorphism).

Starting in 2022, as part of the AU-GEP, a gender equality course at the master's level and another at the doctoral level were added to the curriculum each academic term, open to students from all faculties. To ensure accessibility for all interested students, these courses are scheduled for 5:30 PM. Each course is taught weekly by a faculty member from the Department of Women's and Gender Studies, who has extensive experience in the field and represents a diverse range of disciplines. At the end of the semester, students participating in these courses provided positive feedback about their experiences.

Participants in the focus group session positively evaluated the increase in both the number of courses and student enrollment in the gender equality course. However, they identified a limitation: the majority of students attending these courses predominantly came from social science fields, reflecting horizontal segregation in academia. We interpret incorporating relevant courses into the curriculum as an achievement of the AU-GEP, although insufficient. We believe it is important to have faculty members go beyond theoretical instruction to connect course topics with real-life behaviors and attitudes.

### 5.3. Increasing Women's Participation in University Administration

One of the major issues in academia is the lack of gender equality in leadership positions. The data from 2021 shows that one of the critical factors contributing to this inequality in leadership roles is the slower advancement of women into senior academic positions. This disparity in leadership positions requires increasing the number of women attaining associate professor and full professor positions. At Akdeniz University, women constituted 45% of academics in 2021, a figure that rose to 48.4% by 2024. The proportion of women in senior positions also increased during this period. The percentage of female professors grew from 31% to 35%, while the percentage of female associate professors rose from 40% to 49%. However, an examination of faculty career progression reveals the persistent presence of the leaky pipeline phenomenon. While women make up 51% of research assistants, who occupy the entry-level positions of academic careers, this proportion is significantly lower at the rank of professor (35%; see Figure 3).



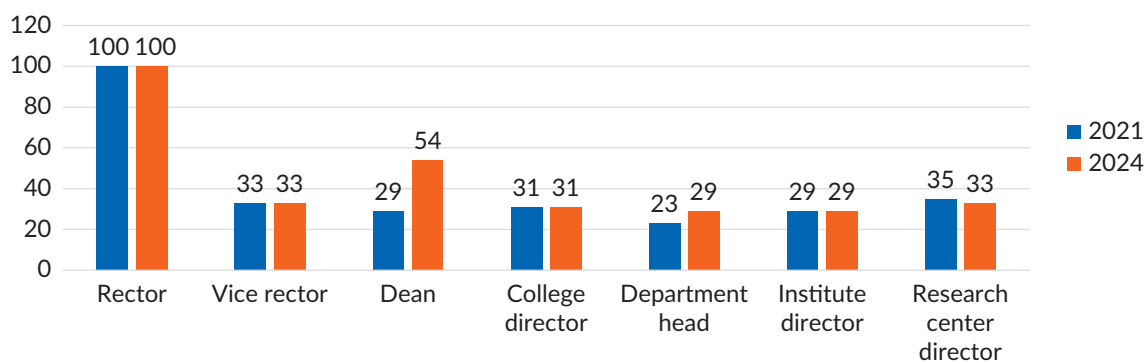
**Figure 3.** Distribution of academic positions of women (%).

Although these figures may be considered positive compared to EU data, this relatively favorable situation is closely linked to the socio-historical context of academia in Turkey and the societal status afforded to academics (Acar, 1996, p. 78; Ceglédi et al., 2022; Neusel, 1996). According to Özbilgin and Healy (2004),

the higher proportion of female professors in Turkish universities compared to their European counterparts can be attributed to three key factors: (a) state policies supporting women's entry into academia, (b) the perception of academia as a suitable and secure profession for women, and (c) the tendency of men to pursue more lucrative career opportunities outside the academic sphere. In this context, the relatively favorable conditions for women's entry into academia in Turkey should be leveraged to develop strategies for promoting gender equality in academic leadership.

The representation of women in decision-making and leadership positions plays a pivotal role in achieving gender equality within universities, and Akdeniz University has made significant progress in this regard. Prior to the implementation of GEP in 2021, only 7 out of 24 deans were women. By the end of 2024, however, the number of female deans had surpassed that of male deans, reaching 13. Additionally, as of the end of 2024, 73 out of 189 department chairs (39%) were women, indicating substantial progress in addressing vertical segregation within the institution. The Gender Equality Monitoring Commission regularly tracks the gender distribution of academic staff by title and by management positions within the framework of the third pillar of AU-GEP, as part of its periodic meetings (Akdeniz Üniversitesi, 2022).

At Akdeniz University, the leadership, vision, and strategic efforts of top management in adopting a GEP significantly contributed to the increased representation of women in leadership positions. However, in lower-level administrative roles, such as vocational school of higher education directors, institute directors, and research and application center directors, no notable changes in women's representation have been observed. In these positions, women continue to make up approximately one-third of the total, with representation rates of 31%, 29%, and 33%, respectively (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Women at decision-making levels (%).

In 2021, the deans of the faculties of literature, law, economics and administrative sciences, architecture, aquaculture, sports sciences, medicine, and tourism were male; however, by 2024, these positions were held by women. Dillabough (1999) highlights that male dominance often excludes women from administrative positions, leading to a reluctance among women to pursue or accept such roles. In this context, under the leadership of a female rector, Akdeniz University witnessed an increased willingness among female academics to take on deanship roles, resulting in their appointment to these positions. Particularly noteworthy is the appointment of female deans to faculties traditionally considered male-dominated, such as aquaculture and sports sciences, where male faculty and students are predominant. This shift reflects significant progress in challenging gendered norms within these fields:

The presence of women in senior management is not merely a matter of numbers. From a psychological perspective, it implicitly raises awareness and provides a foundation that significantly empowers women. Therefore, it is essential to consider the long-term impacts of this development. It is not just about numbers. (P5 female)

The fact that our rector is a woman has certainly played a role in this change. It is evident that the number of strong female leaders, particularly at the deanship level, has increased compared to previous periods. The increase in the number of women in managerial roles, including department heads and administrative positions, is, in my view, one of the positive outcomes of this action plan. (P3 male)

All participants in the focus group discussions emphasized that the female rector, as the head of the university's administration, plays a key role in promoting gender equality in leadership positions, such as deanships. A male participant (P3) also highlighted this point, stressing that the increase in the number of women in administrative staff roles, in addition to academic leadership, is equally significant:

Gender norms are such ingrained stereotypes that they cannot be changed quickly with an eight-hour training session, as history has shown. There is a certain momentum that follows the activist actions and movements of those in leadership. Therefore, I believe that the more there are women in leadership roles, the more their management policies can influence the organizational climate. It seems to me that if those women were to leave [the leadership], the situation would quickly revert. This is because patriarchy is a deeply traditional and cultural construct, a structure that has developed over centuries. (P3 female)

While participants unanimously agreed that the presence of women in top management is critical to achieving gender equality, they also emphasized the importance of having women in decision-making positions over an extended period. This would allow gender equality to be internalized as a core value within universities and to foster the adoption of an egalitarian organizational culture. This approach aligns with the recent research on the positive effects of female leaders and their limitations in terms of transforming an institution. It is frequently emphasized in the literature on higher education that women leaders are more likely to develop gender-sensitive policies (Morley, 2013; White & O'Connor, 2017). A woman serving as rector may take the lead in the formulation of strategic documents, such as a GEP, and facilitate their integration into the institutional structure. As in the case of Akdeniz University, such plans can ease women's access to decision-making positions such as deanships and bring about structural arrangements, including the establishment of gender equality monitoring commissions. In this context, the case of Akdeniz University demonstrates how female leadership can contribute to a more egalitarian and inclusive governance model through isomorphic mechanisms defined in institutional theory.

#### ***5.4. Promoting the Careers of Women Academics***

Income inequality based on gender has not been a central area of struggle for the feminist movement within government institutions in Turkey, as salaries are formally determined by position and title, irrespective of gender. In this respect, the Turkish context does not align with international patterns commonly observed in gender-based income disparities. Similarly, there are no established diversity employment quotas

mandated for universities in Turkey. As a result, diversity is not an institutionalized category of analysis at Akdeniz University.

The university operates both formal and informal systems of flexible working to support balancing work and life. Academic staff are required to teach at least 10 hours per week, but do not have other prescribed working hour obligations. For all staff, maternity leave is 16 weeks paid and unpaid leave is available for up to 18 months (with a medical board report) according to Article 104/B of Law No. 657. Paternity leave is limited to 10 days paid. However, the expectation of shared caregiving is not fully realized at the state level. Gender-determined roles in paid and unpaid leave are still decisive. Efforts to ensure a balance between family and career, and to harmonize work and private life, are integral to the university's action plan. To alleviate the caregiving burden on women, one of the central objectives outlined in the AU-GEP is the enhancement and expansion of the daycare facility located on the main campus, which currently accommodates 121 children. As part of efforts to promote the careers of women academics, an initiative to enhance and expand the capacity of the daycare center was discussed during the December 1, 2022, meeting of the Commission.

During the commission's deliberations, it was proposed that hourly playgroups be organized on weekdays for children aged 6–9 years at the daycare center. This initiative aims to support the active participation of parents—both women and men—working at Akdeniz University in professional life. The proposal was subsequently communicated to the Office of the Rector for further consideration. However, as highlighted by one of the participants (P5 female) in the focus group discussion, despite the AU-GEP's inclusion of plans to continue efforts to enhance and expand the day care facility located on the main campus and establish study centers for the children of academic and administrative staff, no progress has been made in this regard. In conclusion, not much has been achieved in supporting women in balancing their family and careers.

### ***5.5. Empowerment of the Centre for Women and Gender Studies***

Since the planning and implementation of the university's structural and cultural transformation on gender inequality rely on the activities of KATCAM, the plan sought to support the center and enhance its sustainability. The Center organized several meetings, seminars, conferences, and panels aimed at raising awareness. A gender equality training certificate program was conducted in May 2024 to raise awareness on gender inequality for faculty. A total of 17 faculty members, including 3 men, participated in this two-day training program. Following the program, an open-ended questionnaire was administered to evaluate the participants' feedback. The responses denote that the program was well-received. In general, the training was effective in raising awareness and was praised by the participants. The most frequently emphasized outcomes included increased awareness, development of a multidisciplinary perspective, improved empathy skills, questioning of gender biases, and strengthened interdisciplinary communication. Though several suggestions were made for improvement. Female participants (P2, P4, P6, and P8) mentioned that the program was effective in motivating faculty to be more conscious of ensuring gender equality in the classroom. Another participant (P2 female) expressed satisfaction with the program's multi-disciplinary approach. A third participant (P6) female commented that the program should be extended to cover more topics and offered every academic year. Additionally, a participant (P5 female) suggested that the training program could be more effective if workshops were organized following the training, allowing participants to engage more deeply with topics related to their fields. This was the first offering of the gender equality training program. The questionnaire responses from the participants and interviews with the

focus group members of the GEP Commission show that this program still needs to be structured to be offered annually.

We observed a significant increase in both the number of course offerings and student enrollment in the gender equality course, alongside several other initiatives led by the Center. The university provided the Center with an office and meeting room, yet, despite this growing workload, no additional resources were provided to support expanded staffing or any budget. This issue of overwork, frequently encountered by those engaged in institutional transformation, directly intersects with the broader concern of sustainability that we highlight in this study.

### ***5.6. Ensuring and Monitoring Gender Equality***

The Gender Equality Monitoring Commission's mandate includes not only managing and monitoring the university's GEP but also tracking and reporting the university's commitments in alignment with the National Action Plan for Combating Violence Against Women. Within this framework, the commission, consisting of 13 members, including 11 women and 2 men, initiated efforts to ensure collective participation and institutional transformation in the implementation of the AU-GEP. Through 10 meetings focused on monitoring and evaluation, the commission has contributed to the university's operations in a gender-egalitarian manner.

Although GEPs play a strategically significant role in ensuring gender equality within universities, it is thought-provoking that some members of the commission, which oversees the implementation of GEP, were only made aware of these plans after being appointed to the commission. Some participants have stated that they internalized the process through the commission meetings that followed. This process of internalization is also significant in relation to the objectives of the GEPs.

### ***5.7. Measures to Be Taken by the University Against Sexual Harassment and Assault***

The university currently lacks a comprehensive guidance and support unit within its medical-social services to promptly respond to cases of harassment. Furthermore, the institution does not have a Harassment Policy Document or a dedicated unit to address harassment complaints. One of the objectives outlined in the AU-GEP is the establishment of institutional regulations and preventive measures concerning sexual harassment and assault:

We had also discussed measures against sexual harassment and sexual assault. In fact, together with the group I was part of, we had prepared guidelines on this issue, but they were never implemented. I believe this is an important matter. (P5 female)

As pointed out by P5 female, recalling the objectives related to taking necessary measures against sexual harassment and assault in the AU-GEP, there are shortcomings in the implementation in this regard. In this context, participants in the focus group discussion noted that KATCAM has prepared a draft directive on sexual harassment and assault. This draft is expected to be submitted to the Office of the Rector before the AU-GEP period ends.

### 5.8. Safe Campus

Findings from the female student survey of TÜKD indicate that 66% of participating students do not find the university campus sufficiently safe, particularly students who attend campus in the evening. They reported inadequate lighting and unsafe conditions in roads, bus stops, and secluded areas during evening hours (TÜKD, 2021b). As part of promoting the concept of a women-friendly campus, the head of the Protection and Security Department at Akdeniz University was invited to the Gender Equality Monitoring Commission meeting, where he provided a detailed presentation on campus security and addressed the commission members' questions. In this context, he noted that 47 additional camera systems were installed at 14 critical locations on campus, and additional lighting systems were installed in five areas that could pose potential risks or threats. He also emphasized that the number of security personnel had reached 208, with the addition of 30 new security staff members. To enhance campus safety, identity checks were implemented at campus entrances. Furthermore, eight personnel were trained to operate drones, and one thermal and two regular drones were purchased for use in campus events. Additionally, a phone number for security-related concerns was re-shared with all students via SMS to ensure easy access. It is observed that although some surveillance measures address female students' safety concerns, they were not introduced in response to feminist demands but rather as part of broader efforts to increase security on campus.

## 6. Conclusion

There is no standardization in GEPs; each plan is developed within the context of its own geographic and institutional conditions. Akdeniz University's GEP, likewise, reflects the unique socio-cultural context of the institution. The drafting of the AU-GEP was driven by a combination of factors outlined in institutional transformation theory: the desire to align with European standards (coercive isomorphism), to emulate successful practices within Turkish higher education (mimetic isomorphism), and to conform to evolving professional norms in the academic field (normative isomorphism). The case demonstrates that not only national but also transnational dynamics can shape the change processes of provincial universities in Turkey. In this regard, GEPs hold important potential as an initial step toward institutional transformation while ensuring gender equality in higher education in the Turkish context. However, as also discussed in the literature, the existence of a GEP alone is not sufficient to ensure meaningful transformation or long-term sustainability. Empirical research on research institutions in Hungary indicates that the majority of equality plans remain merely as documents posted on university websites, failing to initiate cultural or structural transformations (Tardos & Paksi, 2021). In a subsequent study, the same authors conclude that the successful implementation of a GEP requires top management's leadership, vision, and strategy. However, they also argue that a strategic approach from university management alone is insufficient; monitoring the process and being accountable for outcomes are essential to ensuring structural change (Tardos & Paksi, 2024). In light of these insights, the case of Akdeniz University represents a particularly promising endeavor. The success lies not only in policy formulation but in the everyday practices of implementation, negotiation, and institutional learning. Moreover, locally grounded efforts of feminist advocacy also played a crucial role in pushing gender equality onto the university's agenda.

The qualitative and quantitative data analysis shows that the plan has so far been applied successfully through policies such as ensuring stronger representation of women in academic administration, incorporating gender equality-related courses and course content into the curriculum, and increasing the



sensitivity of academic staff and students to gender equality by organizing academic events, conferences, panels, and certified training packages for relevant academics. The increase in the representation of women in managerial positions is also an achievement. However, the primary concern remains the institutionalization and widespread adoption of these changes, with measures needed to ensure sustainability. The rapid increase in the proportion of women in leadership roles was deemed critical both for functional improvements and psychological impact (Marvel, 2018). However, there is a need for more profound and widespread adoption of gender equality policies. The transformation in relation to gender equality must occur not only at the level of representation, but also in terms of power relations and institutional norms (Walby, 2005). Embedding gender equality into the university's governance structure, resource planning, and strategic vision remains essential for creating sustainable and systemic change.

The novelty of this article lies in its investigation of the drafting, implementation, achievements, and limitations of a GEP at Akdeniz University in Turkey. Thus, it provides a valuable lens for exploring the institutionalization of gender policies in contexts shaped by both transnational higher education reforms and local specificities.

A limitation of the research is its focus on a single university. Future studies examining additional examples from Turkey, along with comparative analyses, could provide a broader understanding of the impact of GEPs. Furthermore, the AU-GEP analyzed in this study is designed to be implemented until 2026, so a more comprehensive evaluation of its outcomes will be possible upon its completion.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors hold academic positions at the university examined in this study, which constitutes an advantage in terms of access to institutional knowledge and the interpretation of the research findings.

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