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Navigating Conflicting Interests: The Role of Gender Competent Management for Effective Gender Equality Plans

Angela Wroblewski [1] **and Karin Grasenick** [2]

[1] Social Cohesion and Polarization, Institute for Advanced Studies, Austria
[2] Convelop—Cooperative Knowledge Design (Gmbh), Austria

Correspondence: Angela Wroblewski (wroblewski@ihs.ac.at)

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Abstract

The Horizon Europe mandate requiring Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) for funding eligibility has initiated a veritable wave of documented initiatives across research performing organisations (RPOs). While this development signifies a progressive step towards institutional gender equality, there is a growing concern that these plans may become mere formalities without proper resource allocation and genuine commitment from leadership. Research has demonstrated that management commitment, support, and active involvement are crucial for successful GEP implementation. Additionally, the effective implementation of GEPs depends on the collaboration between gender-competent management and gender expertise to navigate and reconcile conflicting interests and expectations. However, the current discourse lacks a precise definition of gender-competent management and gender expertise and an in-depth exploration of their interaction to facilitate a sustainable structural change within RPOs. This article addresses a critical gap in the literature: how gender-competent management and gender expertise interact to implement effective GEPs and overcome institutional tensions. Derived from a reflexive approach grounded in a full policy cycle, we propose a detailed definition of gender-competent management and gender expertise. Using examples from EU-funded projects, we illustrate how these elements contribute to resolving conflicting expectations and structural barriers to equality. Finally, we offer recommendations based on our analysis to guide future GEP implementation contributing to sustainable structural change.

Keywords

gender competence; Gender Equality Plans; management; structural change

1. Introduction

Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) comprise various measures aimed at making career paths and decision-making more inclusive (i.e., reducing career barriers for underrepresented groups), changing the work culture, strengthening the gender dimension in the content of research and teaching, and countering gender-based violence. GEPs are complex and multidimensional instruments that compensate for the fact that singular measures that are not integrated into a comprehensive context do not trigger sustainable changes (Chang et al., 2019; Dobbin & Kalev, 2018; Kalev et al., 2006).

In Europe, it is widely acknowledged that GEPs represent a pivotal catalyst for fostering gender-equality-oriented and inclusive scientific and research practices, both at the European level and, frequently, at the member state level (see European Commission [EC], 2021; Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2021). These strategies are carefully designed to catalyse a profound cultural transformation, with the overarching objective of ensuring tangible and sustained change within research performing organisations (RPOs). To achieve this, RPOs must navigate multiple, sometimes conflicting priorities and institutional dynamics, requiring leadership frameworks that are both reflexive and adaptive in reconciling tensions (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

Guidelines supporting GEP development and implementation, as well as research on the implementation of GEPs (e.g., Drew & Canavan, 2020; Madsen & Scribner, 2017; Morley, 2013; O'Connor & White, 2021; Ruggi & Duvvury, 2023; Sağlamer et al., 2016), stress the role of senior management in that context. The EC guidance on GEPs (EC, 2021) requires senior management commitment to gender equality, as the GEP must be a public document signed by the senior management. The European Institute for Gender Equality states in the online-version of its Gender Equality in Academia and Research (GEAR) Tool that members of management teams are important change agents when setting up and implementing a GEP, and that "their support and commitment are invaluable assets that lead to success, for example when engaging other stakeholders and overcoming resistance" (European Institute for Gender Equality, n.d.).

Most RPOs that have recently adopted GEPs are obliged to comply with a requirement imposed by a national authority or a funding body (such as Horizon Europe). Addressing gender equality is, therefore, regarded as an additional task alongside various obligations, including the delivery of excellent research and teaching. It is evident that these divergent expectations can be concomitant with conflicting objectives, a phenomenon that is particularly salient when resources are limited (e.g., Leemann, 2014).

Conflicting expectations arising from the involvement of different stakeholders or with their specific interests have been addressed in various contexts. Heintz (2018) observes that universities are subject to two logics that can contradict each other, particularly in the context of gender equality: an organisational logic and the logic of the academic field. An organisational logic includes standardised procedures and indicators that can be applied throughout all units, but do not correspond equally to both logics. Indicators relevant to pursuing a scientific career relate to scientific excellence as individual achievement measured mainly by peer-reviewed publications whereas supporting gender equality, for example by contributing to mentoring or fair co-authorship, are rarely considered (Grasenick et al., 2023).

These differences can lead to conflicting expectations (Schad et al., 2016). For example, organisational policies may mandate standardised requirements for gender equality, such as specific targets for female

representation in leadership roles. However, these targets can provoke resistance, especially in fields with significant gender imbalances (Kleinberger-Pierer et al., 2020; Zippel et al., 2016). Moreover, focusing narrowly on such key performance indicators risks signalling that gender equality is limited to leadership appointments. This overlooks the deeper structural issues, such as the criteria used to assess academic achievements and the entrenched values and norms that favour specific genders or ethnicities (Bhopal & Henderson, 2021).

Effectively addressing these tensions requires what can be termed "gender-competent management." This involves top leaders who are not only aware of gendered organisational dynamics (Acker, 1990) but who are also equipped to navigate and reconcile the competing priorities and expectations of diverse stakeholders. Such management is particularly critical in the context of European RPOs, where GEPs are mandated under Horizon Europe. These plans aim to drive structural change toward greater gender equality, but their success depends on the ability of managers to translate policy goals into actionable practices that accommodate varying stakeholder priorities. Without this capacity, the adoption of GEPs risks becoming a superficial exercise.

The challenges faced by gender-competent managers are significant, as they must mediate between competing objectives and contradictory expectations across institutional, disciplinary, and cultural contexts (DeFillippi & Sydow, 2016; Grasenick et al., 2023; Heintz, 2018). This complexity underscores the importance of close collaboration with gender experts, who bring the specialised knowledge needed to ensure that GEPs are not only technically compliant but also contextually relevant and impactful (Timmers et al., 2010). Research has shown that this partnership is essential for managing stakeholder conflicts and enabling the successful implementation of GEPs (e.g., Drew & Canavan, 2020; Laube, 2021; Woodward, 2004; Wroblewski & Palmén, 2022).

This article frames gender competent management not only as a leadership skill but as a critical framework for handling the nuanced challenges that RPOs face in advancing sustainable structural change. In the following section, we present our approach for developing and implementing GEPs, grounded in a full policy cycle. We propose a detailed definition of gender-competent management and gender expertise. Through examples from EU-funded projects in which we have served as coordinators and advisors, we demonstrate how these elements interact and contribute to resolving conflicting expectations and interests. Finally, we offer recommendations based on our analysis to guide future GEP implementation, contributing to sustainable structural change.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. RPOs as Gendered Organisations

RPOs are gendered organisations (Acker, 1990), even though structures and processes seem to be gender neutral. However, organisations are based on a substructure that reproduces gender-bias in practical work activities. The overarching objective of GEPs is to effect a transformation of exclusionary practices. The present analysis is therefore embedded in the theoretical framework of feminist institutionalism (Kenny, 2014; Krook & Mackay, 2011; Mackay et al., 2011). Discussing GEP development and implementation following a feminist institutionalist approach allows the analysing of the gendered foundations of RPOs, the

operations and importance of informal institutions, and the general and gendered mechanisms of persistence and change.

Feminist institutionalism is concerned with how "formal structures and informal 'rules of the game' [are] structured" (Krook & Mackay, 2011, p. 1). This is especially pertinent in the context of gender bias, as formal regulations are typically formulated in a gender-neutral manner. However, gender bias is more or less perpetuated through informal rules of the game, i.e., it is not reflected (Yancey Martin, 2006) and difficult to detect. These informal rules of the game also stress the relevance of power and power dynamics. Gendered power dynamics frame decision-making and access to hierarchies within RPOs: "The power relations that sustain political processes are produced and reproduced through gender" (Mackay et al., 2011, p. 583). Power and resistance are key factors in understanding why equality-promoting measures, such as GEPs, often result in limited or no change. Following to the concept of stealth power (O'Connor et al., 2019) we argue that GEP implementation requires not only the involvement of top management but also the ability of top management to engage stakeholders who represent the academic logic and are able to resist change.

Looking at GEP implementation from a feminist standpoint helps us better understand the politics and power at play in the implementation of change processes, including the gendered nature of outcomes. In the context of this article, taking feminist institutionalism as a starting point allows us to analyse how the relationship between RPO top management and gender expertise is shaped and what factors contribute to it.

In the context of GEP development and implementation, members of top management and gender experts represent two central stakeholder groups. Nevertheless, it is imperative to acknowledge the significant impact of other groups, namely members of the administration and academic staff, on the effective implementation of GEPs. Another group that is affected by GEPs but has only a limited influence on their implementation are students.

Administrative staff and academics are relevant stakeholder groups for effective GEP implementation. Due to their adherence to divergent institutional logics (Heintz, 2018; Jongbloed, 2015), a tailored, nuanced approach by GEPs is essential to address each group appropriately. As already mentioned, Heintz (2018) differentiates between two distinct logics: Firstly, from an organisational perspective, RPOs are entities that adhere to a set of administrative rules and processes, which facilitate the seamless functioning of their day-to-day operations. Secondly, RPOs—and especially universities—are part of the scientific field. Both functional systems of a RPO are based on specific logics in which gender plays a different role. While in the scientific field, the relevance of gender is often denied by referring to excellence as the guiding principle, which is seen as gender neutral, it might be accepted in the organisational logic (e.g., when positive action measures are taken to promote qualified women). These two different logics also entail different power structures. While decision-making powers regarding strategy and resources are exercised by the top management of the RPO (e.g., rectorate in case of a university), decision-making in academic contexts is assigned to the highest scientific positions (e.g., full professors). These power structures exist in parallel and, in most cases, remain unconnected alongside each other. If they are not coordinated and work against each other, progress towards gender equality is unlikely to happen because gendered practices in the scientific logic remain unchanged.

2.2. A Reflexive Approach to Gender Equality

The ideal process of GEP development and implementation follows a complete policy cycle (May & Wildavsky, 1978). The process starts with an empirical analysis of the status quo regarding gender equality and the institutional context (gender analysis). The core task of the gender analysis is to identify practices and structures, which produce inequalities based on gender or other social criteria like age, race or ethnic origin, religion, disability, or sexual identity. This is not a straightforward process, as in the majority of cases, discrimination or inequalities are not intentional but are the result of a lack of reflection and therefore "just happen" (Yancey Martin, 2006). Accordingly, a reflexive gender equality policy approach to GEPs (Wroblewski & Palmén, 2022) focuses on the identification of the root causes of gender-related inequalities and the underlying mechanisms. Based on the gender analysis gender equality priorities and objectives are formulated. Concrete measures to pursue these objectives are developed, implemented, and monitored. Ideally, the process is completed by an external evaluation of the GEP (see Figure 1). Based on the monitoring and an evaluation the GEP or individual measures are adapted if necessary. As previously stated, the process described is idealised and simplified. It is important to note that reality frequently deviates from the model outlined. For instance, there is often an absence of systematic monitoring of the implementation of equality measures, and evaluations are typically conducted only in rare and exceptional circumstances (e.g., Timmers et al., 2010).

In order to facilitate the effective development and implementation of a GEP, it is essential to engage the various stakeholder groups. Ideally, members of senior management and gender experts collaborate in all stages of the GEP process and involve other stakeholder groups where necessary. It is reasonable to assume that gender experts will primarily conduct the gender analysis, but it is essential to reach a consensus with representatives of top management on the central topics and processes to be covered in the analysis.

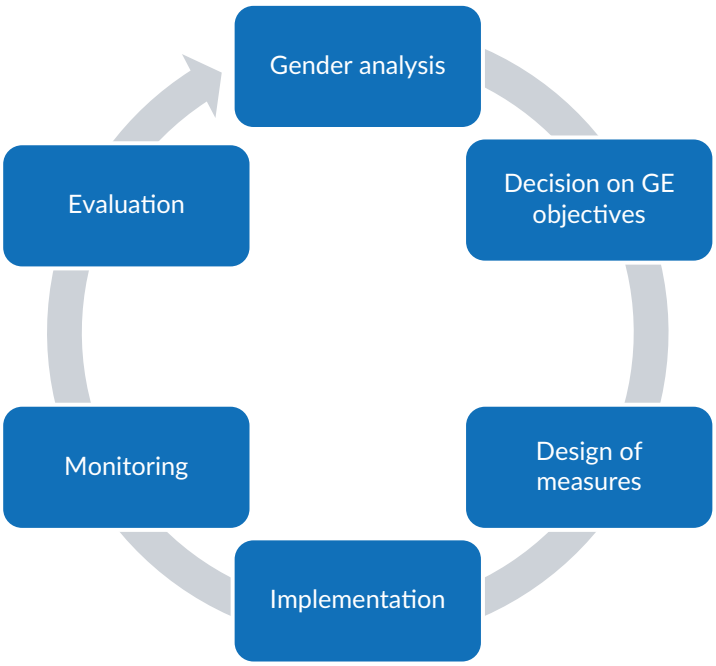

Figure 1. Cycle of GEP development and implementation. Source: own elaboration based on May and Wildavsky (1978).

Subsequently, gender experts will involve representatives of the administration in the analysis, who possess a deeper understanding of the processes or provide the data for the analysis. The decision on specific objectives should be made by top management in consultation with gender experts and the administrative units concerned. The development and implementation of specific measures is generally undertaken by gender experts in collaboration with administrative units. Senior management should be involved again when monitoring results are presented and discussed and, if necessary, to decide on the adaptation of measures, additional measures, or the phasing out of measures. Finally, senior management should make the decision in favour of evaluating individual measures or the whole GEP.

Furthermore, it is essential to acknowledge the various areas of expertise. Gender experts may bring academic knowledge about gender biases to the table, but may lack more practical knowledge about how this is embedded in organisational processes and procedures (like recruitment processes). Representatives of administration units may hold gender competences in their specific field. For example, an information systems manager may have extensive knowledge of how to develop a sex disaggregated information system but not of how to expand the system beyond binary gender notions. Therefore, s/he might need gender expertise to include non-binary categories. Academics often have insufficient expertise about the gender dimension in their field of research, but have gender knowledge from their everyday lives, which has to be distinguished from gender competence related to professional life. According to Kahlert (2019, p. 180), gender knowledge refers to knowledge about the supposedly natural and social gender differences, as well as the hierarchizing gender classifications in a society. Gender knowledge is at the same time source of reproducing the status quo in social practice, changing it, and resisting change. The key challenge in developing gender competence within a professional context is to build on the individual levels of gender knowledge and transfer this knowledge through reflection and ongoing professional development into a job-related gender competence.

The different stakeholder groups and the knowledge they bring to the table operate on different levels and are difficult to reconcile (Bustelo et al., 2016). How these different types of expertise and competences are harnessed, reconfigured, and remixed in the GEP process is key to its success. Therefore, a key element of successful GEP implementation is the establishment of a Community of Practice (CoP). The notion of a CoP was coined by Wenger (1998) and is composed of three main elements: domain, community, and practice. The community is made up of those members who come together to pursue an interest in their domain and interact through activities, discussions, meetings, and engage in mutual learning. In our case, it refers to the group of people who come together to support GEP development and implementation. The primary function of a CoP is to serve as a platform for the development of gender competence and the promotion of reflexivity among individuals and institutions (Wroblewski, 2015).

Reflexivity presupposes that, based on identified gender-related differences, established practices are questioned as to whether or to what extent they contribute to these differences, i.e., whether they contain a gender bias. This reflection, or the desired alteration to existing practices, is integral to each stage of the complete policy cycle. The central task of gender analysis is the analysis of gender-related inequalities and the identification of the underlying mechanisms that cause them. Ideally, the measures designed and implemented as part of the equality plan target these mechanisms and aim to change the relevant practices. For example, if it is determined that specific regulations in advertisements or selection procedures have an unintended negative effect on the participation of women in personnel selection procedures, an objective

corresponding to this effect should be formulated for the equality plan. Such objectives are then reflected in concrete measures, for example, if the equality plan includes a change to the advertisement and selection procedure and anti-bias training courses are held for individuals involved in the selection procedure. Based on the monitoring data, it is possible to investigate whether the desired effect has been achieved, namely that women are less likely to be eliminated at earlier stages of the process. The causal relationship between the interventions and the observed effect can be established through a qualitative analysis of the selection procedures and the gender competence of the actors (i.e., an evaluation). The results of the monitoring and the evaluation can assist the actors in reflecting on the changes achieved, the conception and implementation of the measures, and in identifying any need for adaptation of objectives, measures, or their implementation.

To secure these reflexive elements of the GEP, senior management plays a pivotal role. The extant literature (e.g., Drew & Canavan, 2020; Lipinsky & Wroblewski, 2021; Morley, 2013; O'Connor, 2020) as well as GEP guidelines (e.g., EC, 2021; European Institute for Gender Equality, 2024; Salminen-Karlsson et al., 2016) repeatedly emphasises that the involvement of senior management in the development and implementation of the GEP is indispensable. However, in practice, the involvement of senior management is often limited to a rhetorical commitment to gender equality and the delegation of the responsibility for the development and implementation of concrete measures to gender experts. Such arrangements impede the efficacy of measures implemented.

A persistently active role for management would not necessitate, for instance, that management representatives be engaged in the specific implementation of GEP measures. Rather, it would entail that they consider the objectives and measures of the equality plan in all decisions they make and refrain from actions that would contravene them. This type of ideal setting requires, first of all, a gender competent senior management and the establishment of a specific cooperation with experts implementing the GEP.

In summary, the effective implementation of GEPs in RPOs relies on the development and application of specific competences within management and the necessity to navigate tensions inherent in such processes.

3. Research Questions and Methods

The article addresses the identified gap in the discussion with regard to the gender competence of senior managers in RPOs. The concept of competence, as it is understood in the field of pedagogy (Vitello et al., 2021; see also Gutknecht-Gmeiner et al., 2017), forms the basis for the definition of gender competence for RPO managers. The subsequent questions are addressed:

1. How can gender competence be operationalised in concrete terms for the phases of the GEP process?
2. How can the gender competence of managers be determined in practice?
3. In what way(s) can gender-competent managers and gender expertise collaborate effectively?

The objective of the analysis is to reflect on the process of developing gender competence among members of senior management and establishing a cooperation with gender experts, which has unfolded over a period of four to five years. The analysis focuses on the authors' experience of participant observation (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998) in structural change projects, during which they have accompanied the development

and implementation of GEPs as experts. These projects are the structural change project entitled TARGET (Taking a Reflexive Approach to Gender Equality Transformation) and the HBP (Human Brain Project). The examples were selected based on their comprehensive approach to GEP implementation. They were compared to highlight variations in strategies, outcomes, and contextual factors in an RPO and one large scale research project, which due to its long duration of 13 years, its structures and procedures is defined as a temporary RPO.

The main source of data consists of fieldnotes in the form of unpublished minutes from workshops, working meetings, and interviews conducted by the authors in their capacity as experts during the implementation of the projects. Published documents, including project reports and equality plans of the RPOs, have been considered as complementary material. The material is analysed in a topic-centred manner according to Froschauer and Lueger (2003). The coding of the material is oriented towards the phases of the complete policy cycle and the core elements of the definition of gender competence (see the following section).

4. Findings

4.1. Gender Competent Management

For gender equality policies to be effectively implemented, senior managers must go beyond rhetorical commitment and create a climate where gender equality is a shared task for all members of the organisation. Gender competence, distinct from gender expertise, is defined as competence relevant to all members of higher education institutions (Gutknecht-Gmeiner et al., 2017; Wroblewski, 2021). In line with the conceptualisation of competence within the field of education, we define competence as "the ability to integrate and apply contextually appropriate knowledge, skills and psychosocial factors (e.g., beliefs, attitudes, values, and motivations) to consistently perform successfully within a specified domain" (Vitello et al., 2021, p. 4). It comprises of four dimensions: willingness, knowledge, ability, and reflection. Thus:

> Gender competence is defined as the fundamental recognition of the relevance of gender attributions in the context of one's own work and impact (knowledge). This recognition is linked to willingness and the ability to address this in everyday working and learning contexts, if necessary, with the support of gender experts, and to derive actions from this. The process of recognising, dealing with and acting is subject to a constant process of reflection. (Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research 2018, p. 36, translated by authors).

Gender competence on the part of senior management is essential for the successful implementation of GEPs. It is imperative that this competence is applied in all phases of the policy cycle. In the context of gender analysis, top managers must ensure that gender experts receive sufficient resources and a clear mandate for conducting a comprehensive analysis of gender imbalances and the underlying mechanisms. Managers must understand how norms and power structures shape gender inequalities and ensure that gendered implications of policies are recognised and communicated transparently. Critical reflection is essential to questioning assumptions, particularly regarding merit and excellence, so they do not reinforce systemic biases. Additionally, the tensions between the organisational change imposed by new standardised measures and established disciplinary cultures or prevailing assessment criteria in academia (Heintz, 2018) must be actively mediated.

Once the analysis is complete, management must engage in defining strategic gender equality objectives. Ideally, they are grounded in empirical data and integrated into broader institutional strategies rather than being treated as isolated initiatives. Managers must bridge competing institutional logics, such as balancing perceptions of research excellence with inclusivity. This necessitates a willingness to engage with gender experts in shaping objectives that reflect both academic and organisational priorities. Anticipating and addressing resistance from faculty and leadership is key, requiring the ability to engage with stakeholders to build coalitions that support gender equality measures.

The design of GEPs aims at ensuring that measures are not implemented as temporary initiatives but are integrated into governance structures and procedures. Senior managers must assess and reflect on resource constraints and prioritise gender-sensitive budget allocations to sustain these efforts. Additionally, gender equality measures must challenge power imbalances rather than reinforce existing hierarchies. Addressing these tensions and securing stakeholder buy-in requires the ability to critically assess the long-term impact of policy choices and adjust strategies accordingly.

During GEP implementation, top managers must support the integration of gender competence into daily operations and decision-making. To succeed, this requires both a willingness to lead by example and the ability to address resistance of individuals or specific stakeholder groups with strategic interventions to ensure that gender-sensitive practices are not undermined by entrenched norms, such as male-dominated leadership structures. Communication is vital to maintaining long-term stakeholder engagement and securing institutional transformation.

Monitoring and evaluation must ensure that GEPs drive genuine change rather than becoming compliance-driven exercises. One of the key tensions at this stage arises from the need to balance accountability with flexibility. While standardised reporting mechanisms ensure progress tracking, they may not always capture the change that gender equality efforts seek to achieve. Based on their knowledge of indicators and how to use them as steering instruments, gender-competent managers must be able to interpret findings in close collaboration with gender experts. Reflexive dialogue with stakeholders supports ongoing assessment and refinement of gender equality strategies in ways that drive meaningful organisational learning.

Gender competent top managers play a key role across all policy cycle stages. They should foster a shared commitment to gender equality, ensure sustainable resource allocation, and anticipate resistance through reflexive leadership. While senior managers play a central role in GEP implementation, they do not necessarily need to possess gender expertise. Gender experts bring in-depth knowledge of feminist theories and gender mainstreaming, while gender-competent managers integrate gender perspectives into institutional decision-making. However, gender competence should not lead to the delegation of responsibility to gender officers while top management remains uninvolved (Keisu & Carbin, 2014; Laube, 2021). Such “down sourcing” contradicts the principles of gender-competent management and is unlikely to create structural change. Instead, an ongoing partnership based on trust, clearly defined roles, and mutual respect is required. Cooperation between gender experts and managers ensures that gender-sensitive strategies are not only theoretically sound but also practically integrated into recruitment, evaluation, and governance processes (Gutknecht-Gmeiner et al., 2017).

The cooperation of gender-competent management and gender expertise is further enhanced when embedded within a comprehensive collaboration involving relevant stakeholders. These stakeholders are key actors involved in the various stages of GEP development and implementation, including members of the HR department and quality assurance. By engaging them in the GEP process and an accompanying discourse on gender equality, gender competence is fostered among these stakeholders, thereby cultivating their potential as allies. It is the joint task of management and gender experts to develop specific formats for the involvement of different stakeholder groups. Management must cultivate an environment in which all stakeholder groups recognise their responsibility to actively contribute to gender equality. For higher education institutions to drive lasting transformation, gender competence must evolve from an individual skill to an institutional norm.

4.2. Gender-Competent Management in Practice

Cooperation between management and gender expertise that works in terms of gender equality can be organised in different ways. The following section presents an effective interaction between gender-competent senior management and gender expertise, illustrated by practical examples. These examples originate from EU-funded projects that the authors were involved in.

4.2.1. Examples That Illustrate Gender-Competent Management in RPOs

In the context of the TARGET project, seven RPOs in Mediterranean and former Eastern bloc countries were provided with support for the development and implementation of GEPs. A variety of approaches were employed with the aim of enhancing the gender competence of management and establishing a sustainable cooperation with gender expertise. The following example relates to a full university in a former socialist country (widening country). It has an academic staff of around 5,000 (of whom approximately 50% are women) and a student body of just over 100,000 (of whom approximately 60% are women). The key challenge to achieving gender equality, therefore lies not in the participation of women in studies or teaching, but rather in the underrepresentation of women in decision-making and management positions. Additionally, there is a need to strengthen the gender dimension in the content of research and teaching. The institution's equality plan was formulated as part of the Horizon 2020 funded project and formally adopted in 2019. Prior to this, the university had no systematic gender equality policy in place.

In this example, the member of the rectorate involved in the project possessed expertise in gender issues and collaborated with two gender experts from the RPO in the development and implementation of the GEP. One of the gender experts in question was a seasoned professional with a lengthy tenure within the RPO. She assumed the role of a mentor and guide to a younger colleague who had recently been recruited for her expertise in gender-related matters. In this setting, there was no requirement for persuasion or capacity building regarding the management team. However, it was necessary to establish a cooperation structure based on distinct roles of management and gender expertise. The member of the rectorate provided substantial support during the phase of GEP development (gender analysis and definition of GEP objectives) and the initial implementation steps (facilitating the introduction of the GEP and its associated topics to existing committees) but she decided not to appear as a gender expert and thus distinguished between the two roles. She also combined the presentation of the GEP to relevant stakeholders within the RPO with the establishment of a CoP. When setting up the CoP different stakeholder groups (like human resources,

statistics department, teaching staff, and students) were addressed with specific tasks at different time points to stress their specific role regarding the successful GEP implementation. Furthermore, the member of the rectorate engaged in persuasive discourse within the RPO, leveraging her managerial position to demand cooperation from individuals who were initially critical of or openly opposed to the GEP.

Acknowledging the management's duty to ensure the long-term sustainability of GEP implementation beyond the funding period, the member of the rectorate developed strategies to secure the necessary resources. Due to budgetary constraints within the RPO itself, an attempt was made to ensure the continuity of resources through a further EU-funded project. This has resulted in a lack of long-term stability in terms of resource allocation within the RPO. However, the subsequent project has ensured the continuation of work for a few years. Furthermore, since the individuals occupying management roles at the RPO are only appointed for a limited period, after which they return to their previous roles, the member from senior management supporting GEP implementation had to change roles. Upon departure from their managerial roles, the competencies and standing of the individuals in question undergo a transformation within the RPO. This signifies that it is no longer as straightforward to address resistance to equality objectives or measures based on the authority of the management position. The individual who left the management role within the RPO has remained available as a gender expert.

4.2.2. Gender-Competent Management in a Temporary RPO (Research Project)

The HBP (https://www.humanbrainproject.eu/en/) was one of the largest research projects in Europe for the study of the brain. Over 500 scientists and engineers from more than 140 universities, teaching hospitals, and research centres across Europe and beyond collaborated to provide brain atlases from the molecular level up to different spatial scales, simulation tools, medical applications, computing, and technology. HBP offers a compelling case for how gender competent management and collaboration with gender expertise evolved throughout its lifespan (2013–2023; the project officially started in 2013 with a two-and-a-half-year period called the "ramp-up phase"; this phase was followed by three more operational phases, SGA1, SGA2, and SGA3). Due to its long runtime and the aim to establish a sustainable European infrastructure, the HBP can be considered as a highly complex RPO with dispersed localities.

In the following section, we will explore how the HBP managed tensions and implemented a successful Gender Action Plan (in the following called GEP), a GEP on the project level by establishing a close collaboration between leadership, a gender expert, and an internal advisory committee coordinated and supported by the gender expert.

Early documents of the HBP lack awareness and demonstrate the need for a solid gender analysis of underlying mechanisms leading to an underrepresentation of women. These documents focused primarily on compliance with gender balance targets and aims to ensure women's representation in leadership. However, no specific roles or action plans were assigned. During SGA1, management became more gender aware and started to collaborate with an external partner. Among others, the external partner carried out a first analysis based on a survey and established a Gender Advisory Committee (GAC), which served as a CoP, including representatives from various partner institutions with leadership responsibility. At this stage of the project, the development of commitment and competence were still in the early stages, and the derived first GEP was not endorsed by the leadership board.

By SGA2, the project launched an open call for a gender expert, a fully-fledged project partner, which led to a change in support and enabled a stronger collaboration between management and gender expertise. The leader of the management board actively supported the further development of gender competence and a strong collaboration with the gender expert. The internal GAC was involved in discussing gender analysis, deriving objectives, and the design of suitable measures, which included capacity building for the leading principal investigators of the various partner institutions. The gender expert advised the project directorate on behalf of the GAC and participated in science and infrastructure board (SIB) meetings, raising awareness for the gender relevance of strategic decisions and actions taken by the SIB. This phase resulted in the first endorsed GEP and a comprehensive report on its implementation (Grasenick, 2019, 2020).

The GAC played a crucial role in the successful implementation of the GEP. The GAC was designed to represent the whole project as a microcosm of women and men, principal investigators and students, service and administrative staff, as well as scientific staff. The committee was supported by the gender expert in monitoring and developing conjoint solutions, bridging the different perceptions and overcoming resistance. The GAC developed and promoted a vision together with the leadership boards, which were responsible for setting priorities and taking decisions. These boards also endorsed guiding materials and participated in related capacity building workshops (see also www.edi-toolkit.org). Monitoring, reflection, and reporting helped to sustain the work and the improvements. Additionally, external evaluations at the end of each operational phase included feedback and suggestions for further improvement.

During SGA3 the now well-established collaboration between gender-competent management and gender expertise continued. It resulted in the HBP's pioneering role in advancing gender equality by improving the gender balance in leadership positions from 16% women in September 2017 to 40% women by September 2023 (35% in research, 53% in management; Grasenick et al., 2023).

5. Discussion

The article focuses on the role of gender competent managers and their collaboration with gender experts in the context of developing and implementing GEPs following a full policy cycle logic. The crucial relationship between top management and gender expertise has not been addressed in the current discussion and research regarding GEP implementation. Literature and guidelines supporting GEP development and implementation often fail to clearly define the expectations and criteria for managerial positions. This article provides a comprehensive definition of gender-competent management and illustrates its application through concrete examples.

The analysis reveals that the successful deployment of GEPs depends on the alignment and interaction between the two distinct but complementary domains of gender-competent management and gender expertise. While managers provide the authority and organisational oversight needed to integrate gender perspectives, experts bring specialised knowledge to identify biases and develop targeted interventions. This collaboration ensures that GEPs are not reduced to formal compliance but serve as tools for structural change.

Examples from EU-funded projects illustrate the transformative potential of collaboration between top management and gender expertise. In these examples, managers and gender experts jointly engage in

reflexive practices to identify systemic biases and power imbalances, enabling the development of effective strategies. Leadership engagement, reinforced by formal structures like CoPs, fosters a supportive climate for gender equality in which various tensions and challenges are addressed. Capacity building plays a vital role in enhancing gender competence among key stakeholders. Leadership's commitment to formalising roles, setting standards, and allocating resources further strengthens these initiatives, with tangible outcomes such as the HBP's significant improvement in gender balance in leadership positions.

These examples demonstrate how gender competent management fulfils its core responsibilities in the development and implementation of GEPs. In addition, the involvement of gender expertise helps managers to analyse the status quo, monitor and evaluate results on an ongoing basis, and design interventions accordingly. Effective collaboration between top management and gender experts is also essential for countering resistance to gender equality, the identification of which is challenging in itself given that resistance to equality is rarely openly and directly expressed. Gender expertise can support management in identifying a commitment to equality that is merely rhetorical, and in developing targeted interventions to address such subtle forms of resistance (Sağlamer et al., 2016).

Despite these successes, challenges remain. These challenges include navigating competing priorities, securing long-term resource commitments, and embedding reflexivity into leadership practices. A recurring challenge is the sustainability of gender equality initiatives. For instance, resource constraints and the temporary nature of management roles may hamper long-term stability. Generally, the reliance on external funding highlighted the need for institutional ownership to secure resources. The findings underscore the importance of equipping managers with the tools and frameworks needed to sustain equality initiatives beyond project timelines.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is imperative that in the GEPs, the role of gender-competent management and the cooperation with gender experts is explicitly considered and planned for. To achieve this it necessitates a systematic examination of management tasks in the development and implementation of GEPs. Furthermore, this also encompasses counselling and support for such processes, as well as GEP monitoring and evaluation. The resulting recommendations for the development of GEPs and for policies supporting GEP implementation can be summarised as follows:

- In the case of funded GEP implementation, it should be stipulated that the gender competence of management teams and the gender expertise involved should be articulated at the application stage and explicitly addressed in the reports on GEP implementation. Already at the application stage, the expected challenges during the development and implementation of the GEP should be addressed, including the relevant institutional logics as well as the expected tensions and resistance. The role of management and gender expertise should be clearly described through separate profiles, as well as how they plan to cooperate. Particular attention should be paid to how this collaboration will evolve over time and adapt to organisational changes.
- The development of gender competence among managers should be institutionalised in the context of leadership programmes. Capacity building and competence training for gender competence must be a core component of management profiles beyond the GEP context. Ideally, these programmes would be

designed to transcend institutional boundaries, thereby fostering the establishment of a distinct CoP comprising gender-competent managers of RPOs.
- Reflexivity should be institutionalised as an ongoing practice within RPOs. Supporting structures such as communities of practice or advisory committees can provide forums to address tensions, evaluate progress, and adapt strategies based on feedback and monitoring data.
- It is recommended that the existing guidelines for developing GEPs be revised. The revised guidelines should be oriented towards a complete policy cycle and contain a clear description of the roles and responsibilities of management and gender expertise in the individual process steps.

By equipping leaders with the competence to navigate the complexities of institutional change, a critical gap for effective GEP implementation is addressed. The article calls for a renewed emphasis on leadership competence, urging RPOs to prioritise gender competence as a foundational element of effective governance. By doing so, GEPs will go beyond compliance-driven approaches and will fully ensure their potential to achieve sustainable structural change for the benefit of research and academia.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors

Angela Wroblewski is a senior researcher at the Institute for Advanced Studies. Her research focuses on the analysis of gender inequalities in science and research and the monitoring and evaluation of equality, diversity, and inclusion policies at the European, national, and institutional levels.

Karin Grasenick is the founder of Convelop and an expert in gender equality, equity, diversity, and inclusion with a background in social sciences and biomedical engineering. She has been involved in the design as well as the evaluation of related strategies and measures of research performing organisations and science projects.