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Gender Equality Plans in Slovak Universities: Between Implementation and Resistance

Miriam Šebová [1], Ivana Lukeš Rybanská [2], and Tatiana Čorejová [3]

[1] Faculty of Economics, Technical University of Košice, Slovakia
[2] Faculty of Business Administration, Prague University of Economics and Business, Czechia
[3] Department of Communications, University of Žilina, Slovakia

Correspondence: Ivana Lukeš Rybanská (ivana.rybanska@vse.cz)

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Abstract

Gender equality initiatives in higher education face numerous challenges, from persistent meritocracy myths to gendered workload allocations and the influence of neoliberalism. Research on this topic has examined how institutions address these barriers through policy interventions such as Gender Equality Plans (GEPs), but less attention has been paid to the impact of broader political contexts on GEP implementation, particularly in cases where measures face pushback. This article analyses GEP implementation at two STEM-oriented institutions in Slovakia operating within a national context that is broadly sceptical of such values. Drawing on institutional theory, this study examines how organizations navigate this challenging environment through a series of 19 semi-structured interviews with administrators, researchers, and institutional representatives. The study shows that external pressure exerted with a lack of localized expertise can lead to fragmentary implementation and highlights the fact that hostile local contexts compel a greater reliance on "common sense" approaches and commitment on the part of management. The article advances our understanding of how national discourses influence GEP implementation and argues for context-sensitive evaluative approaches with broader implications for GEP assessment practices.

Keywords

Central Europe; gender equality; Gender Equality Plans; higher education; Slovakia

1. Introduction

While the academic community is generally seen as an island of progressivism in terms of gender issues, considerable scholarship (Clarke et al., 2024; Docka-Filipek & Stone, 2021; Holter et al., 2022a; Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2024) has shown that this is not, in fact, the case, particularly in regions such as Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). This article examines the implementation of Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) at two higher education institutions (HEIs) in Slovakia, focusing primarily on local meaning-making processes and understandings of the value of gender equality in academia. It explores the implementation of GEPs from the perspective of a variety of actors. Given the critical role of leadership (Palmén & Kalpazidou Schmidt, 2019), we aim to delve more deeply into how decision-makers perceive, interpret, and enact gender-equality policies. The results of this analysis should shed more light on how social and political contexts dominated by entrenched gender stereotypes shape GEP implementation outcomes (European Commission, 2024).

This study offers a unique contribution in terms of its empirical examination of the largely understudied context of academia in CEE, especially Slovakia. In many ways, the implementation of GEPs in the Slovak higher education sector faces unique challenges due to the general scepticism of Slovak society towards such initiatives. Slovakia ranks among the most conservative in terms of the endorsement of traditional gender roles; 75% agree that men should be the breadwinner in the family, while 74% see a woman's primary duty as home and family care, with 63% suggesting that women should prioritize their families over their careers (European Commission, 2024). Only 57% of Slovaks believe men and women have equal rights, a figure well below the 75% median across 34 other countries (Pew Research Center, 2020).

In recent years, Slovakia has witnessed a surge in anti-gender public discourse, which has also been manifested in right-wing agitation targeting the so-called "gender ideology" that frames gender equality as an ideological imposition from abroad (Maďarová & Valkovičová, 2021). This reflects a broader illiberal turn throughout the region, most notably in Hungary, which has included systematic rollbacks of gender equality norms (Gregor & Kováts, 2019). Although Slovak universities, unlike NGOs and civil-society groups, have largely avoided the worst of this anti-gender backlash, gender and feminist scholars have nonetheless faced systematic challenges connected with GEP implementation. Kállay and Valkovičová (2020), Valkovičová and Maďarová (2022), and Valkovičová and Meier (2022) have noted the inferior "epistemic status" of gender-studies scholars in Slovakia and the issue of "affective alliances," a situation that mirrors the struggles over gender studies programs in Hungary (Pető, 2020). Within such a context, EU-mandated GEPs are often perceived not as tools for organizational improvement but as extensions of an undesirable foreign agenda.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Institutional Norms of Higher Education

European higher education continues to prioritise measures aimed at increasing excellence through competition (Krücken, 2021; Marafioti & Perretti, 2006; Musselin, 2018), including quality assurance mechanisms, performance metrics, careerism (Gribling & Duberley, 2020; Oliveira et al., 2024), and standardized evaluation criteria (Brankovic et al., 2018; Musselin, 2018). The quest for "excellence" has served as a benchmark of scholarly merit, understood qualitatively as academic distinction but measured quantitatively, in practice, through publications, grants, and competitive project funding, a process which

paradoxically has created conditions of precarity that compromise the excellence which it purports to promote (Bristow et al., 2017). These inherently neoliberal market principles (Cortes Santiago et al., 2017; Linková & Vohlídalová, 2017; Mudrak et al., 2021) have resulted in remarkably uniform patterns across higher education systems in Western Europe and the US, including a proliferation of temporary contracts and increasing numbers of administrative and managerial staff (Stage, 2020).

How specific norms and behaviours are transmitted within individual fields or organisations is the key focus of the discipline of institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Within the specific context of HEIs, actors attempt to maintain their legitimacy by adopting to and expressing their agreement with the dominant values of competition and excellence, invariably leading to a growing formal conformity across organizations in line with demands to adapt formal structures or language (North, 1990). These should be seen as a complex process of realignment whereby HEIs are forced to navigate between multiple institutional complexes rather than mere market conformity (Besharov & Smith, 2014). The aim of increasing the quality of HEIs is inherently linked to raising the reputation and status of the institution within its field, and this can result in considerable differences between institutional actors (Paradeise & Thoenig, 2013).

2.2. Translation of Policies Into the Local Context

Research into the heterogeneity of European HEIs (Dobbins et al., 2011; Lepori, 2022) suggests substantial differences in the outcomes in terms of governance structures and the impact on academic cultures despite similar institutional pressures for standardization and excellence. Case studies of the Latvian and Bulgarian (Dobbins & Leišyte, 2014) academic environments show that the levels of state control, institutional autonomy, and influence of other stakeholders can differ even under the same paradigm of market-oriented higher education. Dobbins and Leišyte (2014) concluded that external pressures for HE marketization were more effective for countries with a stronger history of state influence (e.g., Lithuania, Bulgaria, and Romania) than in countries such as Poland and Czechia with a greater tradition of academic autonomy. Nonetheless, HEIs in CEE occupy a subordinate position within the European research hierarchy, marked by the lack of robust local networks of gender specialists and an overdependence on "Western" templates for programs of structural change (Zippel et al., 2016), often failing to take account of national features and fuelling resentment in the academic environment (Bencivenga & Drew, 2021; Caprile et al., 2022).

2.3. Contested Nature of Gender Equality in Academic Environments

Despite a stated commitment to achieving gender equality in the higher education sector, gender and equality issues remain neglected or disregarded in many HEIs. Holter and Snickare (2022) list three prevalent viewpoints among academic communities regarding gender imbalance: (a) gender imbalance is not a problem; (b) gender imbalance is a women's problem; and (c) gender imbalance is a systemic issue. A study by Clarke et al. (2024) echoed these findings and noted that organizations tend to interpret similar procedural measures (e.g., gender equality in hiring processes) differently when trying to integrate the ideal of meritocracy with gender equality.

There are several reasons why such opinions persist in the modern academic environment. Discussions about performance measurement often refer to the unequal allocation of academic activities such as

teaching, mentoring, and giving feedback which are often delegated to women, but these tasks are not esteemed as highly as publishing articles, an activity in which female academics are less involved (Docka-Filipek & Stone, 2021; Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2024). Similarly, Snickare et al. (2022) discuss the masculinization of research tasks, with the competitive pressure for results and publications exacerbating existing hierarchies and even excluding women, especially in the STEM sector (Holter et al., 2022b). Research from Czechia shows that subcultures within institutions also contribute to the continuation of disparities in performance and subsequent career achievements (Linková & Vohlídalová, 2017). This systemic barrier is also reflected in the finding that women are more likely to consider leaving academia than their male counterparts at the same career stage, signalling that the perception of one's own position may be gendered (Cidlinská & Zilincikova, 2022).

In more conservative countries in which gender issues are seen as reflecting Western cultural hegemony, GEPs have been perceived as an externally imposed administrative requirement (Pereira, 2017). This preconception fuels anti-gender sentiments, and GEPs, like their accession-era predecessors, may be framed by some stakeholders as bureaucratic impositions that privilege "Western" templates over indigenous priorities (Bencivenga & Drew, 2021). GEPs serve as compliance mandates with reporting requirements and funding-loss threats, and thus exert external pressure on institutions. The resulting bureaucratic strain often outweighs their incentive value, especially in institutions with limited administrative support (Bencivenga & Drew, 2021). These tensions are particularly acute in Slovakia, and this study includes them by analysing the role of this local context in shaping the GEP implementation in two HEIs.

3. Methods

A qualitative research design was applied in order to explore the role of gender equality as a whole and GEPs in academic life in the chosen Slovak HEIs. The authors' professional experience indicated that this topic would be perceived as sensitive and thus best explored through an anonymous approach.

3.1. Selection of Cases and Participants

The chosen HEIs were selected based on two criteria: Institutions should be known to the authors in order to facilitate data gathering, and they should be STEM-related universities given the general lack of awareness about gender issues in the STEM environment (Salminen-Karlsson, 2023). Based on these criteria, two technical universities were chosen as case studies. In order to ensure anonymity, specific details were generalized, and the universities are referred to as Institutions 1 and 2.

Three types of individual respondents were identified for the study: (a) implementation staff, administrative personnel involved in implementing and monitoring GEPs; (b) policy actors, decision-makers who have formally adopted or integrated GEPs; and (c) affected researchers, academics whose work and positions may have been affected by GEPs. The widest variety in terms of position, gender, discipline, and length of service was sought, as documented in Table 1.

Table 1. Respondents' characteristics.

ID of informant	Institution	Type of informant's position	Gender	Age	Career stage	Organizational unit	Role regarding GEP
1	1	Decision making	M	40–50	Senior	Rectorate	Policy actor
2	1	Decision making	M	50–60	Senior	Rectorate	Policy actor
3	1	Decision making	M	50–60	Senior	Faculty	Policy actor
4	1	Academic senate	M	50–60	Senior	Senate	Policy actor
5	1	Administration	F	40–50	Senior	Rectorate	Implementation staff
6	1	Research	F	60+	Senior	Research centre	Affected researcher
7	1	Research	M	40–50	Senior	Faculty	Affected researcher
8	1	Research	F	30–40	Mid-career	Faculty	Implementation staff
9	1	Administrative	F	50–60	Senior	Rectorate	Implementation staff
10	2	Decision making	M	40–50	Senior	Rectorate	Policy actor
11	2	Gender equality commission	M	60–70	Senior	Senate	Implementation staff
12	2	Decision making	M	40–50	Mid-career	Faculty	Policy actor
13	2	Decision making	M	50–60	Senior	University	Policy actor
14	2	Academic senate	M	40–50	Mid-career	Senate	Policy actor
15	2	Administrative	F	50–60	Senior	Rectorate	Implementation staff
16	2	Research	F	40–50	Senior	Faculty	Affected researcher
17	2	Research	F	50–60	Senior	Faculty	Affected researcher
18	2	Research	M	40–50	Mid-career	Faculty	Affected researcher
19	2	Decision making	M	40–50	Senior	Research centre	Policy actor

Notes: Career stage included: early-career (assistant professors up to five years since PhD); mid-career (associate professors 5–15 years after PhD or practice); and senior (full professors or leadership, 15+ years since PhD or practice).

3.2. Data Collection

The data was collected through a series of semi-structured interviews revolving around four main themes: the course of GEP implementation from an individual perspective, the daily impact of GEP on respondents' working lives, the current situation, and the general views of the respondents. Two different scenarios were formulated based on the types of respondents being interviewed.

The interviews were conducted at the selected universities either on site or via MS Teams in accordance with the ethical requirements for qualitative research. All interviews were recorded with the consent of the

respondents and obtained data were anonymized. No research ethics board clearance was required because the research was deemed to be of low risk to the informants. The interviews were transcribed and prepared for collaborative analysis in the Condens.io environment without the use of the program's AI features. Interviews were conducted in Slovak, and the translations of quotes used in this article were prepared by the authors to preserve the natural flow of the language.

A total of 41 potential participants were contacted via e-mail, of whom 19 agreed to be interviewed in November and December 2024 (details in Table 1). The research team agreed that multiple researchers should be present during the interview, with the team member who was least familiar with the respondents' institution guiding the discussion.

The data corpus was subsequently analysed by all authors using the thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). The coding process combined theory-driven and data-driven approaches in an iterative manner. Codes derived from the literature review served as a backbone that allowed the researchers to analytically dissect the specific features of the studied cases, identifying the topics that were missing and those that were overrepresented. The alignment of the code structure was achieved through weekly analytical meetings and discussions regarding the interpretation of data segments.

4. Findings

4.1. Context of the Study

The Slovak higher education sector is a particularly challenging context for the implementation of GEPs as it is characterized by a structural precarity that has a disproportionate impact on the career prospects of female academics. Women make up approximately half of the academic staff across Slovakia's 33 HEIs, forming 50% of the 9390 full-time staff and 48% of 2381 part-time academics (SO SR, 2025); 80% of university teachers work on temporary contracts averaging three years, an arrangement which is legally mandated by Act no. 131/2002 on Higher Education (OZPŠaV, 2025; see also Barinková, 2018). Also, the sector is marred by low salaries, with the average net salary for academics in 2023 was 1470 EUR, a figure barely above Slovakia's national average of 1430 EUR and significantly lower than those found in OECD standards (SO SR, 2025; OECD, 2024).

Slovakia ranks 15th among EU Member States in terms of gender equality (score 73.0), but this promising status masks significant disparities (European Commission, 2025). Women comprise 41% of researchers and 49% of doctoral graduates, but only 2% of scientists and engineers. The representation of women in university management is severely limited: Women hold just 18.2% of HEI leadership roles (compared with 26.4% in the EU-27; see European Commission, 2025), with only four of the 33 Slovak rectorships currently being held by women. In STEM areas, women make up less than 30% of engineering and computer science graduates and hold only about a quarter of senior faculty roles, despite being awarded nearly half of all doctorates; female academics' careers often stall at the postdoc and assistant-professor stages, while men advance more rapidly into tenured and leadership positions, highlighting the structural barriers and pertaining gender norms facing women in the STEM academic sector (Szapuová et al., 2009). Most concerningly, only 35.3% of universities published gender-equality measures in 2023, down from 46.9% in 2020, indicating a retrenchment from previously agreed commitments (European Commission, 2025).

Despite these systemic problems, however, gender equality is officially recognized as a valid policy goal in higher education. The Slovak State Strategy for Equality Between Women and Men and Equal Opportunities 2021–2027 (MPSVaR, 2021) has explicitly encouraged the mainstreaming of gender equality in education, science, and research by increasing the representation of women in these fields. GEPs have been voluntarily adopted by the overwhelming majority of HEIs, with Comenius University pioneering the role of a full-time Gender Equality Officer (UK Officer for Gender Equality, 2024), while programs such as the HR Excellence in Research Award (EURAXESS, 2025) and other initiatives coordinated by the Slovak Centre of Scientific and Technical Information (2025), the Fair Academy Conference, and the Community of Practice for Gender Equality in Science have also focused on gender equality issues. However, it is still important to bear in mind that this supportive policy landscape is a relatively new phenomenon that exists alongside (and often in tension with) the institutional realities that constrain meaningful progress towards gender equality.

4.2. The Story of GEP Preparation and Adoption at the Studied Institutions

The impetus for developing a GEP at both institutions arose from their involvement in European projects. Institution 1 participated in an H2020 project (2018–2022) that financed the design and implementation of GEP. Institution 2 established a gender-equality working group upon joining the European University Alliance in 2020, which identified the need for a GEP and was tasked with preparing it in 2021. Although only two members of the team had prior contact with issues of gender equality, the group collated information and submitted a plan to the university management, which was published on the university website after approval by the rector. The GEPs at both HEIs were based on the nine building blocks recommended in the Horizon Europe guidance on GEPs (European Commission, 2021) and included the establishment of indicators, responsible bodies and persons, and a timetable for implementation.

At Institution 1, a vice-rector was appointed Gender Equality Ambassador; the GEP was embedded into HR processes, and the Ethics Committee's remit was formally expanded to oversee equality measures. Institution 2 incorporated its GEP into the internal quality management system as an official directive and established a Gender Equality Commission as part of its implementation. This five-member commission included representatives from the rectorate, academic staff, the legal department, and students, alongside an expert who directed the plan's development and provided specialized knowledge.

Our respondents repeatedly drew a connection between the implementation of GEPs and external incentives. As part of participation in the projects, one respondent recalled:

> We were actually forced into it; the management didn't make any effort at that time. (R5, I1, F, implementation staff)

The two institutions initially had little specialized knowledge of research into gender equality. European projects filled the gaps, however, providing opportunities for mentoring, sharing experiences and knowledge, and also pledging the financial resources needed for the formulation of GEPs. The plans themselves were based on a comprehensive quantitative and qualitative analysis of various gender issues relevant to the higher education sector, such as the representation of women in different positions, the gender pay gap, and participation in research and educational projects. Both analyses revealed significant gender imbalances in leadership positions, while focus groups with decision-makers at Institution 2 revealed the existence of

deeply ingrained gender stereotypes, a phenomenon which was also noted by our respondents:

> Since men were actually in management, I can tell you this issue was not very popular with them, because it was actually perceived generally—and actually by women too—as some kind of feminism and feminist movement. (R5, I1, F, implementation staff)

The application of negative connotations to the term "feminist" is a common feature of local discourse. For example, the GEP at Institution 2 was requested to avoid using the word "gender" (*rodový* in Slovak), and the GEP was accordingly renamed as Equal Opportunities Plan for Men and Women.

At Institution 1, the implementation of GEP was primarily driven by a single engaged female expert within the university:

> We opened the door for her, to pursue what was her own field. In her previous positions, she had pursued equality issues in general, and her focus shifted to equality for women in science and research….We created space within our university to address the implementation of gender equality….She naturally started to get inspired by universities abroad, and she was also given the task to find resources to implement such policies at our university. During her time in the position, she received the support that had been created for her and also from the leadership at that time. (R4, I1, M, policy actor)

A similar situation emerged at Institution 2, with the lead expert being appointed head of the Gender Equality Commission but was still expected to fulfil all of her teaching and research duties, resulting in an unsustainable workload. Ultimately, both of these dedicated specialists decided to leave their respective universities between 2023 and 2024. At Institution 1, a second trained researcher involved in the GEP preparation process also departed, leaving the university entirely devoid of in-house expertise.

Valkovičová and Maďarová (2022) also found that GEPs in Slovak HEIs are often dependent on a single individual, the so-called "gender person," whose commitment sustains all stages of the process. Although this role can open up career opportunities, it more typically leads to overload, as these scholars take on additional duties beyond their primary responsibilities. Moreover, these individuals often draw the ire of university management due to the perception that they are "troublemakers" (Henderson, 2019; Kállay & Valkovičová, 2020).

The fact that much of the heavy lifting in these projects was undertaken by female faculty staff also testifies to the disproportionate engagement of women in invisible, care-oriented tasks, a finding which resonates with FESTA's findings concerning the gendered burden of service work (Striebing et al., 2020) and analyses of "care as symbolic exile" in the Central European context (Maďarová & Valkovičová, 2021).

4.3. In Search of the "Natural": Interpreting Gender Inequality in Science

In general, our research identified examples of all three of the typical positions towards gender imbalance outlined by Holter and Snickare (2022) at both of the studied institutions. The most prevalent attitude among respondents fell into the "gender imbalance is not a problem" category. Interviewees argued that the current

situation was satisfactory, even "natural," and that no change was necessary, an approach which demonstrates that the stereotypes embedded in Slovak society are also prevalent in academia:

> It's a completely natural thing, actually it [gender equality] resolves itself automatically….In our environment, it strikes me as an automatic thing that shouldn't really even be dealt with systematically; it just sort of naturally emerges when some things are working well. Maybe this is a result of my environment, where it is [with projects], I would say fifty–fifty. (R7, I1, M, researcher)

Respondents also attributed gender imbalances to the decision of women to prioritize their families over their careers, implying that the issue is one of personal choices:

> The woman simply must ensure the things associated with motherhood….So, if she wants to do research, maybe in the evenings or at night….She should have a passion for research; it is not just an obligation. If she really lives for it, she can find time for it, even during maternity leave. This is excellent, and a lot of young people work like this. (R2, I1, M, policy actor)

This quote seems to imply that if female researchers truly want to advance their research careers, they can find a way to do it. It also elides the obvious fact that male researchers at the same career level can conduct research during their paid working hours.

Only a minority of respondents, primarily those with international experience or involvement in international projects, expressed the third viewpoint, that gender imbalance is a systemic issue embedded within the organizational structure. These respondents recognized that the problem extended beyond the scope of individual choices and should be addressed at the institutional level, particularly by faculty leadership:

> Here at technical universities, it was difficult. Yes, we have smart women here, but they had to put at least 30 percent more energy to be successful….There's still this stereotype that women should manage the household and so on. (R4, I1, M, policy actor)

However, even when respondents acknowledged the systemic nature of the problem, they were often unable to articulate practical solutions that could change the structure of their specific environment. This inability to envision structural solutions becomes particularly evident when examining how GEPs are prepared and implemented, in particular the tendency of institutions to favour formal compliance over substantive engagement with systemic change.

4.4. GEP Early Implementation: Between Formalism and Institutional Resistance

Our analysis reveals that GEP early implementation in the studied institutions was characterized by two interconnected challenges: (a) the tendency toward formal compliance without substantive commitment and (b) the emergence of institutional resistance that manifested itself through procedural barriers and contested definitions.

The implementation of GEPs at both institutions revealed a pattern in which formal compliance took precedence over substantive engagement. Formal documents in predominantly bureaucratic organizations

tend to morph into formalized regulations that have strayed from their original intention, and this was particularly apparent when discussing the processes required to update GEP documentation and evaluate progress. At Institution 2, the GEP was designed to cover the period 2022 through 2024. One of our interviews was conducted on December 12th, 2024, shortly before the commission meeting for the preparation of the next GEP was due to be held on December 20th. In the interview, the respondent emphasized the formality of the documentation itself:

> In the meantime, we should be working intensively on that document so that we have a new document approved for 2025. We still don't know how long the next stage will last. We have not even discussed the duration, but we know that a new document is needed. I think last Friday I spoke with the Chair of the Commission. So, we'll be working on it quickly even over the holidays. (R10, I2, M, policy actor)

This reactive approach suggests that gender equality initiatives remain a low institutional priority unless specific challenges arise that give a sense of urgency to the project.

Another significant issue that was raised in the interviews was the lack of a dedicated budget. The insufficiency or even total absence of dedicated financial resources is a fundamental constraint that has a huge impact on how GEPs are perceived and implemented. In 2024, no financial allocation was provided for gender equality initiatives at either of the analysed institutions.

GEPs had initially received EU funding that covered the costs associated with assessing the situation and formulating the plan, but once these funds had been exhausted, no further money was allocated. This situation was ultimately resolved in Institution 1 when the HEI applied for the HR Excellence Award and became aware of the need to dedicate internal resources to the topic of gender equality on a long-term basis:

> We've already committed to actually doing this [i.e., gender equality in research], so those resources must be found. It wasn't me who planned it, right? The vice deans and the vice chancellor were present at that meeting. It was presented, I think, at the [collective governing body of the faculty] as well. So, we made a commitment. If we don't deliver, if we get that award now, then in two years' time, we will have to explain ourselves at the performance review. (R5, I1, F, implementation staff)

While resource constraints and formal compliance form the structural conditions for the limited effectiveness of GEP initiatives, our findings regarding the implementation phase revealed how these constraints interact with institutional resistance to create markedly different outcomes at the two institutions. The transition from preparation to implementation exposed the gap between policy adoption and cultural acceptance within the institutions.

Respondents cited a lack of institutional support and limited awareness of GEP concepts: "The implementation of GEPs began as a formal requirement, but the real challenge is making people understand why it is necessary" (R4, I1, M, policy actor). The gap between policy adoption and cultural acceptance within institutions was a serious issue, and our findings reveal that the capacity to envision how to nurture bottom-up support for GEP is the main point of departure between the studied cases.

The contrasting approaches of the two institutions illustrate how leadership commitment can either facilitate or hinder GEP implementation in institutions working under similar structural constraints. At Institution 1, top management perceived the GEP as a formal document endorsed at the university level; the vice-rector was involved in its creation and continues to act as an ambassador for gender equality. This continuity in leadership has enabled incremental progress in implementing the plan, with GEP measures being adopted in the collective agreement and other internal documents, the most significant of which was the Prevention and Elimination of Physical and Psychological Violence guidelines, officially approved in 2023:

> Last year, we adopted a directive about psychological and physical violence, which took nine months to integrate. Some of the terms and concepts were contested. Some of the terminology had to be removed because [people in the working group] didn't like the definitions, even though [the responsible person] had surveys from universities within Slovakia, and I think the Czech Republic as well, corroborating the concepts. We are trying, I think, and within the universities, we are still doing quite well. (R5, I1, F, implementation staff)

The fact that widely accepted terminology and definitions were contested in the Slovak context highlights the profound institutional resistance to gender issues and a low level of shared understanding.

In contrast, the situation at Institution 2 was quite different. A new rector was elected in August 2023, and this marked a turning point in the implementation of the GEP. The former rector and vice-rector had actively supported the GEP, but this was not shared by the new rector. No female vice-rectors were appointed by the new rector, and the Scientific Committee at the university was changed to an all-male body, even though 30% of the academic staff at the institution are female. The Gender Equality Commission's activities had stopped meeting regularly by March 2024. Although a new long-term strategy voiced support for fostering an inclusive academic community, the Commission was not involved in its preparation. This situation demonstrates a lack of clear commitment from top management at Institution 2. A particular criticism of current university leadership was the fact that the policy document was approved unilaterally by the previous rector without being discussed in the senate:

> When we consider some of the negatives of that document, which basically we as a leadership inherited in some form, even in those evaluations there are some negatives that were perceived by the stakeholders. For example, that the document delegates tasks, and from an evaluation of that document, it seems as if those deans were not involved in the making of that document and that is perhaps why they perceive it that way. (R10, I2, M, policy actor)

4.5. Incremental Changes Through Language

While our research has demonstrated the weak and largely formalized status of GEPs at the studied institutions, it would not be correct to state that no progress has been made. Even under the clearly unfavourable conditions, respondents identified some changes that they associated with gender equality.

The wider use of gender-sensitive language emerged as the most frequently mentioned and widely accepted change, primarily because it is highly visible and relatively easy to implement. However, the proper and consistent application of appropriate terminology remains a challenge in Slovak, a language that is structured

around gendered grammatical forms. Respondents noted inconsistencies in the use of gender-sensitive language, particularly on the universities' websites. The lack of clear guidelines and a unified institutional approach has led to selective applications, and some respondents had implemented the changes into their own teaching practice: "When I give a lecture, I address the audience the male students and female students [*študenti* a *študentky*]. When I write an email, so when I write *for our male and female students*" (R4, I1, M, policy actor). The use of this language form in Slovak acknowledges the presence of female students in the auditorium; they are no longer covered under the generic masculine Slovak word for student.

Nevertheless, challenges remain, particularly in terms of adapting official documents where gender-neutral language is difficult to integrate fluently. Respondents often referred to duplicated male and female forms of nouns as tiresome and hard to read. They lacked guidance from linguists on this matter and instead invented their own workaround solutions:

> We are not going to rewrite this [i.e., the rules of procedure] into gender-neutral language. There is a member, a female member, a chairman, a chairwoman, and so on....I would then still suggest that we place a declaration at the beginning stating that the Academic Senate subscribes to gender equality and when the document uses one gender in that document, the other is included implicitly....There is enough space [for the lengthy sentences] but the meaning is lost. (R4, I1, M, policy actor)

These modest yet visible changes in gender-sensitive language use (both in classrooms and in documentation) illustrate how GEP implementation can produce tangible outcomes even within highly constrained institutional environments. The extent to which these changes represent genuine progress or merely symbolic gestures becomes clearer when examining the different approaches adopted by two institutions to GEP implementation, revealing the critical role of institutional leadership and strategic commitment in determining outcomes.

4.6. Leadership Makes the Difference: A Comparison of Two Institutions

We might assume broadly similar outcomes of implementation of GEPs at both institutions, given the common fundamental constraints under which they are operating. Significant differences in the trajectories of GEP implementation were identified, and this can be attributed to the marked differences in institutional leadership.

Leadership commitment and institutional ownership proved to be the decisive factors distinguishing these cases. Institution 1 appointed a full-time GEP officer under the Horizon 2020 project and maintained leadership continuity via a vice-rector who was actively involved in the GEP's creation and who continues to act as gender equality ambassador. This sustained top-level sponsorship ensured that the GEP could be ratified by both rector and senate without objection and facilitated the embedding of the equality agenda within the HR portfolio.

In stark contrast, the case of Institution 2 is a clear demonstration of how a lack of commitment on the part of university management and leaders can amplify institutional resistance. The new rector appointed in 2023 inherited the GEP from the previous administration and showed a reluctance to express ownership of the agenda. GEP tasks were delegated to existing staff as additional burdens, and the new leadership cited the

absence of senate approval as a "procedural barrier" to implementation, regardless of the fact that measures of this type did not, in fact, require full senate approval.

The varying levels of commitment between the two institutions were also reflected in the different support structures that were instituted. Institution 1 integrated gender equality into core institutional functions through HR portfolio embedding, while Institution 2 established a more elaborate Gender Equality Commission. Paradoxically, Institution 2's more comprehensive structure proved less sustainable when leadership commitment waned; the new rector called a halt to commission activities, demonstrating that formal structures cannot substitute for genuine institutional commitment.

As might be expected, these differing approaches produced markedly different results. Institution 1 achieved tangible progress, most notably in terms of developing and formally adopting comprehensive guidelines on sexual harassment. Annual progress reports are still produced, and systematic KPI monitoring driven by the HR Excellence Award has been introduced. Institution 2 struggled to produce significant achievements beyond initial document preparation and did not renew its GEP after December 2024, meaning that no GEP is in place at the time of final editing (July 2025).

This comparative analysis confirms that commitment on the part of university management is a key facilitating factor in GEP implementation and impact (Palmén & Kalpazidou Schmidt, 2019). Paradoxically, this may be even of greater importance than the presence of specialized expertise in gender issues. The contrasting cases outlined in our research demonstrate that while both institutions faced similar structural constraints, the degree of leadership commitment was fundamental in shaping how these constraints were navigated.

5. Discussion

The findings presented in this study demonstrate the interplay between external pressures, institutional commitment, and local context in implementing GEPs in higher education. The pattern of formal adoption without substantive implementation (a phenomenon which institutional theory terms "ceremonial adoption"; see Meyer & Rowan, 1977) is not surprising given the competing logics of excellence and equality that characterize contemporary academia. However, this study reveals the ways in which these institutional dynamics play out in contexts where gender equality faces social and political opposition.

The analysis offers further valuable context for Bencivenga and Drew's (2021) explorations on how "Western imposition" narratives shape GEP reception in the CEE region. The adversarial environment regarding gender issues in Slovakia encourages the adoption of formalistic approaches that prioritize incremental and almost invisible changes over genuine structural transformation. This is apparent in the focus on gender-sensitive language, the most widely accepted measure across both institutions, a largely unproblematic change that signals compliance without challenging existing power structures.

The data also expands upon Clarke et al.'s (2024) work on discursive practices in gender equality implementation by showing how the absence of gender expertise affects institutional responses. When stakeholders lack an understanding of gender equality concepts, they tend to reduce complex issues to familiar frameworks which tend to legitimize the existing state of affairs within an environment that is reluctant or even hostile to feminism and gender issues (Valkovičová & Maďarová, 2022).

Our findings indicate that both institutions lacked the enduring, bottom-up gender-equality initiatives that have long underpinned structural change in Western universities; studies have shown that the interplay between bottom-up and top-down approaches is crucial for the successful implementation of gender equality policies (Caprile et al., 2022).

The findings reveal an apparent paradox in GEP implementation; while external pressure without localized expertise typically leads to fractional implementation, successful integration within contexts where gender equality expertise is mistrusted may depend more on a "common sense" approach and practical commitment on the part of management than on specialized knowledge, challenging conventional wisdom emphasizing the importance of gender expertise (Palmén & Kalpazidou Schmidt, 2019).

Institution 1's relative success despite the relative lack of gender-related expertise illustrates how leadership commitment can navigate challenging environments by translating gender equality measures into locally acceptable frameworks.

The analysis also corroborates Zimmermann's (2010) critique of how neoliberal academia systematically devalues reproductive labour. Interviewees reported that GEP-related activities often increased unpaid service work, a field of activity which typically falls disproportionately on women and occurs at night and on weekends. This creates a cruel irony; policies which are explicitly designed to advance gender equality instead reproduce and reinforce existing gendered inequalities through the very process of their implementation.

The framing of GEPs as additional bureaucratic burdens rather than structural necessities reflects broader neoliberal trends in Slovak higher education, where metric-driven regimes and precarious employment conditions leave little space for meaningful engagement with equality initiatives. Under these conditions, gender equality becomes yet another performance indicator rather than a transformative goal. It is also apparent from the study that contemporary discourse about GEPs in Slovakia remains narrowly focused on male-female issues, with the broader LGBTQ+ agenda remaining largely neglected, reflecting the conservative character of academia.

The comparative analysis offered here demonstrates that leadership commitment serves as the crucial mediating factor between external pressures and institutional responses. However, this commitment operates within a web of specific constraints, more concretely, the need to maintain organizational legitimacy in gender-sceptical environments while satisfying EU requirements for gender equality measures. The contrasting outcomes at the two institutions illustrate how similar structural constraints can produce markedly different results depending on local leadership strategies. Institution 1's approach of embedding gender equality within existing HR functions and focusing on concrete issues like violence prevention allowed progress to be made without triggering wider resistance. In contrast, Institution 2's emphasis on excuses in the form of procedural barriers and technical obstacles demonstrates how leadership can apply bureaucratic processes to prevent substantive engagement.

The implementation process at both institutions highlights two potentially productive pathways for advancing gender equality initiatives. Firstly, international exposure through participation in projects and collaborations served as a crucial mechanism for change, raising awareness about talent diversity and competitive advantage. Nonetheless, this externally driven approach risks what Mišík and colleagues term

"pseudo-internationalization," the formal adoption of policies by institutions without substantial cultural transformation (Mišík et al., 2024). In order to help ensure real implementation rather than mere box-ticking, the EC should also expand its auditing of GEPs. In 2025, only 30 HEIs were randomly checked regarding GEP compliance, a figure which represents only 0.013% of the institutions eligible for such grants (Svickova, 2025). Secondly, the importance of strategic framing becomes particularly evident when gender equality initiatives need to be translated into locally acceptable terminology. These results suggest that effective GEP implementation in challenging contexts requires different strategies than those identified in Western European contexts, where gender equality enjoys a greater degree of social and political support. Rather than relying primarily on expertise from specialists in the issue, successful implementation may depend on strategic framing that focuses on incremental changes that build institutional capacity over time. Of course, this is not to diminish the importance of gender expertise but instead highlights how such expertise must be deployed strategically in hostile environments and where bottom-up initiatives are missing. The path to meaningful gender equality in Slovak higher education involves the establishment of procedural compliance as a foundation for gradual cultural change rather than as an end in itself.

6. Conclusion

The analysis of the implementation of GEPs at the two STEM-related Slovak institutions reveals the complexities involved in translating supranational policies into local institutional practices. These implementation pathways must be understood within the broader context of growing anti-gender and illiberal movements in CEE, the neoliberal restructuring of higher education, and the persistent East/West power asymmetries that shape local receptiveness to EU-mandated reforms, as reflected in the entrenched gender stereotypes of Slovak society.

This study's main contribution to discourse on the topic of GEP is its emphasis on how local context fundamentally shapes implementation outcomes. The studied cases were characterized by formal adoption of GEPs without substantive implementation and a heavy reliance on individual champions who were forced to work without sufficient structural support. Leadership commitment emerged as the crucial mediating factor between external pressures and institutional responses. The findings suggest that while external incentives can initiate change, successful implementation requires both dedicated resources and strategies for building sustainable expertise on gender issues within institutions. Importantly, evaluation frameworks for GEPs must consider how national and organizational contexts shape implementation possibilities rather than applying universal success criteria. In contexts where gender equality faces social and political contestation, the implementation of GEPs should be monitored more strictly, and measures combining top-down and bottom-up initiatives should be supported.

As one respondent poignantly asked: "On the other hand, where should the changes come from if not from the universities?" This question underscores the unique responsibility that universities bear as catalysts for social change, even in contexts where gender equality faces broader societal resistance.

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Conflict of Interests

One of the authors is a member of the committee for gender equality at the university level. The other authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to their sensitive nature and privacy considerations.

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About the Authors

Miriam Šebová (PhD) is a senior researcher of economics at the Technical University of Košice. Her academic interests lie in cultural economics, sustainability, public administration, and management. She advocates for social justice and equality in higher education institutions, both as a researcher and in practice as an active union member.

Ivana Lukeš Rybanská (PhD) is an assistant professor at the Prague University of Economics and Business. She is a qualitative researcher and ethnographer focusing on work and workplaces. Her research interests relate to how organizations can be more liveable spaces through care, commons, and self-organization. She believes academic workplaces can transform too.

Tatiana Čorejová (prof., PhD) is a professor affiliated with the University of Žilina in Slovakia. Her research interests encompass a variety of topics within economics and management, with a focus on regional development, innovation management, and the economic impacts of technological advancements, creative economy, and knowledge economy.