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Edited by Katalin Tardos, Veronika Paksi, Judit Takács,
and Rita Bencivenga

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Gender Equality Plans in European Research Performing Organisations

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Abstract

This thematic issue explores diverse perspectives on the experiences of European research performing organisations (RPOs) and their stakeholders in designing, implementing, and evaluating Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) in practice. The 16 articles included apply a wide range of methodologies, from single organisation case studies to international comparative qualitative and quantitative analyses. To address the complexities of whether and how GEPs can achieve their intended gender equality outcomes, the contributions primarily draw on feminist institutionalism, complexity theory, and intersectionality theory. While the call for papers aimed to highlight good practices to be shared in the European Research Area, most articles instead bring to the fore the challenges and organisational resistance of putting inclusive and intersectional GEPs into practice. From a content perspective, the articles can be broadly grouped into four categories: (a) comparative studies focusing on the process of implementing GEPs, (b) studies examining specific dimensions of GEPs, as gender-based violence, work–life balance, gender equality in teaching and research, etc., (c) analyses of policy discourses and their real-life implementation, and finally, (d) holistic case-studies of individual organisations. This thematic issue is special in that it is among the first such collections examining GEPs in European RPOs, in particular with a high representation of articles addressing experiences with GEPs in the Central and Eastern European region.

Keywords

European research area; feminist institutionalism; gender equality plan; gender equality; gender-based-violence; intersectionality; research performing organisations; universities

1. Introduction

Despite the European Commission's strong recommendations and financial support, progress towards gender equality (GE) in the European Research Area (ERA) has been slower than anticipated. The European Commission has funded numerous initiatives under FP6, FP7, and Horizon 2020 programmes to promote GE through Gender Equality Plans (GEPs), yielding valuable outcomes and expertise. A key lesson is that advancing GE requires institutional change (Clavero & Galligan, 2021), underpinned by strong commitment from senior leadership (Carvalho et al., 2013; Lipinsky & Wroblewski, 2021; Tardos & Paksi, 2024). Such change is fundamental to dismantling gender stereotypes, ensuring fair evaluations, reducing vertical segregation, preventing gender-based violence (GBV), building institutional capacity, integrating gender into research and teaching, and introducing gender budgeting.

Nevertheless, by 2020, more than half of higher education institutions in EU member states and "associated countries" had taken action (European Commission, 2021). Under its Gender Equality Strategy (2020–2025), the European Commission made GEPs a requirement for participation in Horizon Europe programmes. GEPs must address recruitment, career progression, leadership balance, organisational culture, work–life balance, GBV, and the gender dimension in teaching and research. They must also be public documents, allocate resources, draw on sex-disaggregated data, include training and monitoring, and increasingly incorporate intersectional perspectives.

While institutions with established GE policies are now adopting advanced GEPs or diversity plans, many—especially in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)—are developing GEPs for the first time. Here, traditional norms, weak policy support, and anti-gender movements can pose significant challenges (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Even in Western Europe, gaps persist between GEP policy and practice, with organisational resistance often undermining structural change (Tildesley et al., 2022). Such barriers are especially acute in highly gendered environments, including STEM fields (O'Connor & White, 2021).

This thematic issue seeks to examine the effectiveness of GEPs, assess the content of recent plans, and share experiences of their design and implementation. By doing so, it aims to advance strategies for GE, diversity, and inclusion within research performing organisations (RPOs) and identify practical entry points for stakeholders. From the large number of high-quality submissions received by *Social Inclusion*, a total of sixteen manuscripts were accepted. The published studies share several key features: They focus on GEPs and gender inclusion or exclusion within RPOs, mainly universities. Research spans the EU27 member states, with valuable contributions from several "associated countries." Some articles examine a single organisation as a case study (in Slovenia, Italy, Norway, and Turkey), others several RPOs within one country (in Spain, Belgium, Norway, and Slovakia); six adopt a comparative international perspective, ranging from three countries to an analysis of the EU27 (Campanini Vilhena et al., 2025; Kalpazidou Schmidt & Pedersen, 2025; Karatas et al., 2025; Paksi et al., 2025; Vilarchao et al., 2025; Wroblewski & Grasenick, 2025).

2. Contributions

The articles in this thematic issue significantly contribute to the different academic discourses on gender inequality and GEPs, offering numerous practical recommendations and policy implications. Most studies examined various dimensions of GE in GEPs, focusing rather on the GEP implementation process itself.

Based on a large-scale comprehensive research, Karatas et al. (2025) highlighted that the approaches of diversity and inclusion are more widespread in the European landscape than intersectionality, and gender is mainly understood in GEPs as a binary division between women and men. Based on a wide-scale international sample, Wroblewski and Grasenick (2025) explored how gender-competent management and gender expertise can fruitfully interact, enhancing GEP implementation and overcoming institutional tensions. Kalpazidou Schmidt and Pedersen (2025) interpreted the GEP-related challenges of nine universities, sharing valuable insights about how structural and cultural change can be effectively fostered by university alliances.

Lagesen et al. (2025) revealed fundamental tension in contemporary diversity governance in Norwegian universities and called for a more productive balance between institutional guidance and local agency. Musubika and Lothingington (2025), also in the Norwegian context, found that instead of diversity, mainly women and their underrepresentation in senior/leadership roles are problematised in the GEP, distracting from more nuanced problems of gender representations. Campanini Vilhena et al. (2025) shared experiences gained through a wide-scale research, revealing how the lack of clarity around the meaning and conceptualisation of institutional change contributed to the uneven and slow progress toward GE. Analysing the database of the Catalan Government, Arroyo and Berga (2025) underline the role of an inter-university council in catalysing GE in Catalan universities.

Concerning the five mandatory dimensions of GEPs, single-focused studies, such as Švab et al. (2025), researched work-life balance in Slovenia, showing the gap between the formally inclusive policies and career advancement shaped differently by informal rules. Three articles focused on the issue of GBV: Vilarchao et al. (2025) explored resistances in eight CEE sport universities, particularly toward measures against GBV. Avery et al. (2025) highlight that organisational procedures in Flemish universities ignore the intersectional experiences regarding sexually transgressive behaviours. Kuhar et al. (2025) use the theoretical framework of feminist institutionalism to show how a bridge can be built between top-down expectations, such as those from the European Commission, and bottom-up initiatives at the University of Ljubljana. Beyond other GEP dimensions, they put emphasis on GBV and the application of the 7P model (Mergaert et al., 2023), and also on the institutionalisation and sustainability of the GEP. Finally, Mas de Les Valls et al. (2025) contributed to the least addressed and understood GEP dimension, the integration of the gender dimension in teaching and research, by analysing the experiences of GE training educators in Catalan STEM universities.

We received several studies sharing experiences about GEP implementations in CEE and STEM contexts. Beyond the above-mentioned CEE-focused studies, the impact of broader political contexts on GEP implementation also became particularly visible in Paksi et al.'s (2025) research, which explored GE barriers in Czech, Hungarian, and Slovenian universities in eight GEP dimensions, with particular attention to sectoral specificities in the field of agriculture and life sciences. The less supportive local context in STEM fields also hinders progress toward GE in Slovak universities, as explored by Šebová et al. (2025). Leone et al. (2025) present the unique and voluntary progress of the non-academic Italian Institute of Technology regarding their GEP. Last, but definitely not least, Yilmaz and Adak's (2025) study is also a unique contribution by evaluating the Turkish Akdeniz University's first GEP, calling attention to the role of both national and transnational dynamics in shaping GE processes of provincial universities.

3. Theoretical Frameworks

The articles of our thematic issue embed their investigations into different mainstream theoretical frameworks relevant to research in GEP-related gender issues. One of the main approaches is feminist institutionalism (Mackay et al., 2010), which builds on both the theory of new institutionalism (March & Olsen, 1983) and the theory of gendered organisations by Acker (1992). Feminist institutionalism interprets organisational processes through the gender lens and underlines the role of both formal and informal institutional rules in organisational changes. It puts a strong emphasis on informal processes, which can undermine even formal ones, enabling us to understand why organisations resist change, which is a fruitful approach given that the main goal of GEPs is to achieve strategic change (Clavero & Galligan, 2021).

Another often considered theoretical framework is intersectionality, and not by chance. The European Commission strongly recommends and expects to apply a gender+ equality perspective in policy making, recognising that “other axes of inequality always intersect gender” (Lombardo et al., 2017, p. 2). The intersectionality framework was fruitful in exploring multiple sources of disadvantage, highlighting multiple forms of discrimination and oppression whose combined effect further exacerbates the disadvantageous situation of gender minorities. At the same time, Karatas et al. (2025) proved the considerable lack of the intersectionality approach in GEPs in the whole ERA, while Avery et al. (2025) explored the gap between how intersectionality is aspired in policy commitments regarding sexually transgressive behaviour and discrimination, and how it fails to be operationalised in policy documents of Flemish universities.

Resistance, as a theoretical framework or focus of research, was also applied to understand why the progress of GE is so slow in organisations (Lagesen et al., 2025; Vilarchao et al., 2025). Some studies (Campanini Vilhena et al., 2025; Kalpazidou Schmidt & Pedersen, 2025) drew on complexity theory (Byrne & Callaghan, 2022) to highlight how institutional change is shaped by complex, non-linear, and unpredictable processes.

The infiltration of the neoliberal agenda into higher education has clearly positioned the embeddedness of some of the studies received (Musubika & Lotherington, 2025; Paksi et al., 2025; Švab et al., 2025) within the framework of the “neoliberal academia” (Rosa, 2022), interpreting the slow improvement or stagnation of GE as a result of processes arising from prioritizing market principles and managerialism, as well as profitability over traditional teaching and research work or academic freedom.

4. Methodological Insights

Important methodological insights emerge from this thematic issue, depicting how European researchers are experimenting with ways to study GEPs as both policy documents and institutional practices. Several studies used participant observation, autoethnography, and critical-friend approaches (Campanini Vilhena et al., 2025; Kuhar et al., 2025; Wroblewski & Grasenick, 2025), demonstrating that researchers are not necessarily external neutral observers but often insiders and co-creators of institutional change. For example, when authors position themselves as “feminist critical friends,” they apply a research approach to study institutional change in academic settings that contributes to feminist institutionalism-informed research with ethical and methodological reflections (see also Campanini Vilhena, 2024). In this context, reflexivity becomes a data source—as documented in fieldnotes—that can highlight previously ignored aspects, such as informal

practices and the emotional labour of change. As illustrated by these examples, interpreting researcher positionality as part of our methodological toolkit can also contribute to institutional change research.

Several authors applied participatory and interactive action research designs, integrating knowledge production with capacity building (Mas de Les Valls et al., 2025; Vilarchao et al., 2025). When research becomes part of an intervention, it can produce more situated and context-specific results; at the same time, it can raise questions about generalisability. A great advantage of these approaches is that their findings can provide feedback directly into practice.

Studies relying on critical policy and discourse analyses broadened the understanding of “policy” to include various forms of organisational documents, web pages, and institutional narratives (Avery et al., 2025; Musubika & Lotherington, 2025), sometimes combined with qualitative interview material (Lagesen et al., 2025). The findings revealed how formal commitments to equality can be undermined by informal institutional routines and power structures and highlighted that analysing GEPs requires moving beyond formal plans to their discursive ecosystems.

Cross-national and sector-specific case studies showed that national context, sectoral traditions, and organisational culture can shape GEP implementation as much as institutional design (Kalpazidou Schmidt & Pedersen, 2025; Paksi et al., 2025; Šebová et al., 2025; Vilarchao et al., 2025; Yilmaz & Adak, 2025). Authors using quantitative survey and indicator-based approaches (Arroyo & Berga, 2025; Karatas et al., 2025; Leone et al., 2025; Švab et al., 2025) attempted to generate comparability and benchmarking, while also noting the limitations that these metrics can fail to detect intersectionality, structural inequalities, and informal practices.

The applied methodologies in our thematic issue can illustrate that European scholars tend to move away from interpreting GEPs simply as static compliance tools and instead are increasingly treating them as evolving—sometimes contested—co-produced practices.

5. Policy Implications

Analysing the articles included in this thematic issue reveals a rich and diverse landscape of policy insights on GE in higher education and research. Some recurring themes emerge as particularly relevant: the political and strategic implications of introducing GEPs, the transformation of internal practices within universities, the opportunities and challenges associated with their implementation, follow-up measures to increase their effectiveness, the interaction between European policy frameworks and national or local regulations, and the potential for scaling up and replicating successful approaches in other contexts. For obvious space reasons, it was not possible to analyse all these dimensions in depth. We therefore focus on the more proactive and generative aspects that can serve as inspiration for institutions and working groups committed to meaningful and sustainable institutional change.

Putting policy into practice requires targeted follow-up measures. Operationalising intersectionality is crucial and goes beyond mere recognition in documents to influence procedures, training, and access to services for multiple minoritised groups. Strategic planning and clear communication will help institutions—especially those that are still in the early stages or in a resistant environment—navigate the challenges and effectively

engage stakeholders. Strengthening leadership and expertise, institutionalising gender competence, and fostering collaboration with gender specialists are critical to managing change. Systematic monitoring and reflective evaluation will ensure that interventions lead to tangible improvements, while targeted training and support for educators, particularly in curriculum redesign and GBV prevention, will address key barriers. Adequate allocation of financial and human resources, and the creation of safe spaces for dialogue, will increase the effectiveness of GEP and go beyond symbolic gestures to real institutional change.

The thematic issue is particularly topical in view of the upcoming political developments in Europe. The recent proposal for a Council Recommendation on the policy agenda for the ERA 2025–2027 confirms that the EU will continue to pursue a structural policy aimed at promoting GE, equal opportunities, and inclusion. In particular, it emphasises the strengthening of inclusive and intersectional GE within the ERA, signalling a sustained institutional commitment to promoting systemic change in the research and higher education environment.

Complementing this, the proposal for a Council Decision on the Specific Programme implementing Horizon Europe (2028–2034) sets out concrete measures to achieve these objectives. By ensuring diverse representation on the Scientific Council of the European Research Council, the proposal enshrines the principles of inclusion and equity in the governance of European research. In addition, collaborative research activities under the “Competitiveness and Society” agenda explicitly address societal challenges by promoting democratic values, civic engagement, and pluralistic, resilient societies, while countering discrimination, disinformation, and hate speech. The programme also emphasises widening participation and reducing disparities between leading and less advanced research systems, promoting equality and cohesion across the Union’s research and innovation ecosystem.

These policy developments underline the strategic relevance of analysing the current implementation of GEPs at universities. The insights from this Thematic Issue offer practical guidance that is closely aligned with the EU’s forward-looking commitments. The evidence-based reflections on operationalising intersectionality, fostering leadership and expertise, creating supportive infrastructures, and promoting flexible yet systemic frameworks offer valuable lessons for institutions anticipating the next phase of Horizon Europe. In this sense, the current research not only maps the state of the art but also provides stakeholders with the conceptual and practical tools to proactively engage with upcoming EU initiatives and ensure that equality, inclusion, and diversity remain at the centre of the evolving European research landscape.

6. Conclusion

The present thematic issue on GEPs in European RPOs is one of the first of its kind. The authors share their valuable experiences with the implementation of GEPs across the EU and some “associated countries.” However, they draw more attention to challenges than good practices and show the clear gap between policy and practice in many cases. Advancement is clearly visible; nevertheless, key GE challenges clearly remain. One of the main requirements of GEPs—gender budgeting—remains a challenge due to budget cuts under neoliberal governance, particularly in the presence of underfinanced Research & Innovation systems and traditional gender roles, as in the CEE context. Meanwhile, the lack of resources can also be interpreted as a “resistance strategy and an excuse for inaction and not taking responsibility” (Peterson et al., 2021, p. 40, as cited in Kalpazidou Schmidt & Pedersen, 2025).

The analysis of the thematic issue highlights a variety of opportunities, follow-up actions, and lessons learnt for the expansion of GEPs in higher education institutions. EU mandates and institutional initiatives act as powerful catalysts, prompting universities to plan and implement necessary changes. The interaction between top-down directives and bottom-up advocacy often proves critical to achieving meaningful and sustainable change, while collaborative frameworks, such as university alliances, provide platforms for knowledge exchange, resource sharing, and collective learning. Local initiatives, if successful, can create a multiplier effect, influencing practices beyond the initial unit and even shaping policy at the national level. Embedding GEP activities in existing institutional structures ensures progress and guarantees long-term sustainability.

Finally, the effective scaling and replication of GEPs require careful contextualisation. One-size-fits-all approaches are insufficient; strategies must consider national, institutional, and sectoral specificities. Systemic and data-driven approaches that focus on structural changes and not just numerical targets strengthen credibility and long-term impact. Alliances and networks facilitate cross-institutional learning and mentoring, allowing less experienced institutions to benefit from existing expertise. Proactively managing resistance, adopting a holistic framework that considers individual, structural, cultural, and epistemological dimensions, and balancing institutional leadership with local flexibility are critical to sustaining transformative potential. Exploring regionally focused models can further tailor interventions to the specific socio-political environment and often leads to greater effectiveness than broad, pan-European initiatives.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Beyond Policy: The Odyssey of Implementing GEPs in European Academia

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Abstract

This article investigates the design and implementation of Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) across nine European universities within a university alliance, emphasising the importance of context-specific interventions. It explores the diversity in GEPs’ content, structure, and implementation, as well as the organisation of gender equality work, revealing how national policies, institutional priorities, and socio-cultural contexts shape these processes. Key challenges include gendered academic cultures, internal resistance, structural and organisational barriers, resource limitations, national commitment disparities, and deeply ingrained societal norms affecting gender equality. Drawing on complexity theory, this article advocates for gender-sensitive and context-aware frameworks to navigate the non-linear nature of institutional interventions in academia across diverse settings. Moreover, it offers insights into the implementation of GEPs within university alliances, a context underexplored in the literature. By examining the dynamics of GEP implementation across multiple institutions within a collaborative framework, the article uniquely contributes to understanding how alliances facilitate knowledge exchange, resource sharing, and collective learning, enhancing institutional capacity and fostering synergies to more effectively address gender inequalities.

Keywords

barriers to gender equality; complexity theory; context-aware approach; European universities; gender sensitivity; structural and cultural change; university alliance

1. Introduction

In recent years, gender equality (GE) has become a central focus in European research policy, with strong commitments driven by the European Research Area and Horizon Europe (EIGE, 2024). GEPs are now a

formal requirement for EU-funded research, positioned as key mechanisms for structural change and promoting inclusion in academia (Caprile et al., 2022). However, their effectiveness depends on context and implementation, not just formal adoption (Hodgins et al., 2022; Palmén & Kalpazidou Schmidt, 2019; Tzanakou, 2019).

Despite the existence of countless GEPs in European universities, the literature reveals a critical gap in understanding how national and institutional contexts influence the implementation and effectiveness of GEPs. While there are a few studies—focusing mainly on the Nordic countries (Husu, 2015; Nielsen, 2017; Silander et al., 2024)—there is limited insight into how diverse European contexts shape GEP implementation and effectiveness. Research reveals that legislative support in certain countries may facilitate GEP integration in academia, whereas, in other countries, cultural norms and structural barriers may hinder progress despite existing GE policies (Benschop & Verloo, 2011). Focusing on the institutional level, research reveals that key obstacles to GE in universities include the persistence of patriarchal norms, rigid organisational structures, and exclusionary academic cultures (Morley, 2015; Nielsen, 2017; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012). While the impact of these structural and cultural barriers is recognised, existing literature often overlooks how these challenges vary across different socio-cultural and organisational settings (Nelson & Zippel, 2021; Nielsen, 2016). Although research emphasises the importance of understanding local gender dynamics (Kalpazidou Schmidt & Graversen, 2020) there is still insufficient cross-national and institutional insight to support effective strategies tailored to specific contexts (Palmén & Kalpazidou Schmidt, 2019). Resistance—ranging from disengagement to active opposition—can also undermine progress (Powell et al., 2018; Snickare & Wahl, 2024).

Furthermore, while existing research has focused on the role of individual universities' efforts to promote GE through GEPs, there is a notable gap in understanding how collaborative frameworks, such as university alliances, can enhance these initiatives. These alliances may foster synergies, but comprehensive analyses and practical guidance for alliance-level strategies remain scarce (cf. EC2U, 2022).

This article addresses these gaps in the literature by exploring two primary research questions:

1. What are the common challenges European universities face in designing and implementing GEPs, and how do these challenges unfold in different contexts?
2. How can university alliances enhance the development and implementation of GEPs through inter-institutional collaboration and collective learning?

The first question focuses on identifying key obstacles—socio-cultural, legal, structural, and organisational—that universities encounter when implementing GEPs. Understanding these challenges in various contexts can inform more effective, tailored strategies for promoting GE in academia.

The second question explores how collaborations within alliances can strengthen the capacity of member institutions to address gender inequalities. Focusing on the role alliances can play may provide insights into collective approaches for achieving sustainable progress in GE and highlight the strategic importance of alliances in harnessing inter-university synergies.

2. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework employed in this study is designed to navigate the complexities inherent in implementing GEPs within academia across national and organisational contexts. Recognising that GEPs operate within multifaceted systems, this framework adopts a complexity theory and gender-sensitive approach that stresses an understanding of the local dynamics and emerging conditions, and identifying the structural causes of inequality (Chen, 1990, 2012; Kalpazidou Schmidt & Cacace, 2017, 2019; Patton, 2011).

2.1. Complexity Theory

At the core of the conceptual framework is complexity theory, which acknowledges that GEPs are embedded in multilayered systems where numerous variables interact in dynamic, non-linear ways (Greenhalgh & Papoutsi, 2018; Halpern, 2014). Complexity theory emphasises that interventions—particularly those addressing GE—exist within and interact dynamically with complex, adaptive systems. This makes assessing GEPs challenging, given the complexity of gender norms and the multiple interacting factors involved (Bührer et al., 2020; Patton, 2020).

To address these challenges, it is essential to recognise and incorporate complexity as a foundational framework in assessment processes. This involves a number of key considerations (Halpern, 2014; Kalpazidou Schmidt & Ovseiko, 2020; Patton, 2020; Rogers, 2008), namely:

- a. Multiple actions and areas of intervention: GE initiatives encompass numerous actions across various domains (e.g., the UK's Athena SWAN GEPs typically include over 30 actions across organisational culture, career development, and flexible working arrangements);
- b. Focus on local dynamics: Interventions are tailored to the specific contexts to effectively challenge deep-rooted gender norms, a localised viewpoint that acknowledges that a universal approach is ineffective;
- c. Non-linearity: Given the numerous variables and their evolving nature, it is challenging to directly link outcomes to specific interventions—effects emerge in a non-linear fashion, making straightforward attribution difficult;
- d. Dynamic adaptation to emerging conditions: Continuous monitoring and adjustment of interventions are crucial, as this allows for modifications based on feedback, unforeseen consequences, and shifts in contextual conditions;
- e. Probabilistic nature of change: The impact of GE interventions is better understood in terms of their contribution to change—rather than guaranteeing specific outcomes, interventions aim to create conditions that enhance the likelihood of achieving change.

According to complexity theory, great changes can also emerge from small actions, tipping points, critical mass momentum shifts, or turbulent conditions. Complexity thus involves non-linearity, emergence, adaptability, uncertainty, and co-evolution (Gamble et al., 2021; Greenhalgh & Papoutsi, 2018; Patton, 2011). Embracing this perspective helps GEP assessments reflect the interconnected, systemic nature of change—capturing indirect effects and cumulative impacts shaped by multiple influences (Chen, 1990; Pawson & Tilley, 1997). This enables continuous learning and redesign, essential for tailoring GE interventions to dynamic academic environments (Van Belle et al., 2010).

2.2. Gender-Sensitive Point of Departure

Addressing systemic inequalities requires interventions that target underlying structures rather than isolated events (Podems, 2010). This involves identifying the often-hidden inequalities that sustain these biases. It is therefore important to follow up on GE interventions and scrutinise the implementation process, identifying challenges and evolving conditions (Bustelo, 2017).

Integrating a gender-sensitive and reflexive approach is crucial for assessing GE interventions effectively (Bustelo, 2017). According to Espinosa (2013, p. 174), “gender-sensitive evaluation seeks to discover the structural causes of inequality between women and men in the context of intervention.” This approach views inequality as systemic and structural (Bustelo, 2011; Seigart & Brisolaro, 2002). Thus, the gender-sensitive perspective stresses structural awareness in addressing gender-specific barriers (Brisolaro et al., 2014; Espinosa, 2013; Lombardo et al., 2017).

Bustelo (2017) points out the necessity of integrating a gender-sensitive and reflexive approach into intervention assessment to address inequalities, acknowledging the political nature of evaluation, its role in promoting social justice, the importance of stakeholder involvement, and the need for diverse methodologies. Reflexive assessment from a gender perspective adopts a critical viewpoint during the entire process, questioning the neutrality of policies and interventions. By critically examining the neutrality of GE interventions, such an approach ensures that assessments are attuned to the structural factors perpetuating gender disparities. This comprehensive approach not only assesses outcomes but also scrutinises implementation processes, challenges, and policy design, recognising that policies and interventions themselves can construct and perpetuate inequalities. In developing the conceptual assessment framework presented here, we have adhered to these principles, focusing on structural and systemic factors.

3. Methodology

To address the research questions, this study looked into a university alliance consisting of nine European universities. Specifically, we conducted qualitative case studies consisting of two main methods (Creswell, 2009; Flyvbjerg, 2013): The first method consisted of desk research that involved examining existing university GEPs, national legislation, and other relevant information on GE. This phase took place in 2022, and the data therefore reflect the legislation and GEPs that were in effect during this period. The second method included interviewing employees engaged in GE work at each university. The approach of qualitative case studies was chosen due to the complexity of the research questions being examined (Gerring, 2017; Rog, 2012). This approach had to capture both the contextual factors at the national level, the role of this in GE work at the universities according to the interviewees, as well as the interviewees’ understandings of GE, i.e., their interpretations of the causes and manifestations of inequality within the university, and approaches to and goals of GE work (Espinosa, 2013).

The desk review of the national context across the nine member countries utilised various national and European sources, including prior EU projects—such as STAGES (<http://www.stagesproject.eu>), GARCIA (<http://garciaproject.eu>), and EFFORTI (<https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/710470>)—to investigate relevant legislation and cultural factors that could affect GE initiatives within the universities. The focus was on understanding legislative frameworks related to GEP requirements, national funding, parental leave,

recruitment, and anti-discrimination policies (EIGE, 2024). This country-specific information, capturing both supportive and challenging aspects of the legislative landscape that impact the universities' equality efforts, was validated by administrative staff at each university. By examining these elements, the study achieved a more nuanced view of how national contexts shape GE work within the alliance institutions. This contextual understanding informed interviews with university staff involved in GEP design and implementation, which illustrated their on-the-ground experiences and insights.

Furthermore, the study comprised an analysis of each university's GEP, some of which required translation. To summarise the actions outlined in each GEP, a 15-category template was used, including detailed sub-questions on items like the public accessibility of the GEPs. Information was gathered from GEP documents, university websites, and direct communication with university staff. Insights from this process informed the interview guide by highlighting questions arising from the GEP analysis and the translation process, ensuring an accurate understanding of each university's GE efforts.

A total of 26 semi-structured interviews were carried out to identify university strategies for advancing GE and explore employee experiences and challenges with GEP design and implementation (for an overview of interviewee distribution see Supplementary File, Table 1). A general interview guide was crafted based on insights from the country reports and GEPs. This was later customised for each university and, in some cases, adjusted for individual interviewees, depending on their roles in GE work. Participants included GE committee members consisting of academic and administrative staff, as well as a combination of staff working with GE in addition to their full-time academic or administrative responsibilities, and a few who worked full-time with GE. Notably, all interviewees were women, likely reflecting the predominance of women involved in GE work.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis, which was conducted using NVivo software. The initial coding followed a deductive approach, focusing on predefined themes such as the organisation of GE work, practices, facilitating factors, barriers, and challenges. A second round of coding was then performed, incorporating new codes that emerged from the insights gathered in the first round of analysis.

A key consideration in the interviews was ensuring the anonymity of employees. To protect their identities, all universities and interviewees have been anonymised. Furthermore, the positions used to describe the interviewees have been categorised by the authors to remove any identifiable titles. Additionally, transparency and informed consent were prioritised by offering interviewees the possibility to review the interview guide beforehand, address questions, and receive a data information sheet outlining their rights regarding data usage. To ensure further accuracy, the relevant sections of the first draft of the findings were shared with all interviewees, giving them the opportunity to review and correct any misunderstandings that may have arisen during data collection.

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1. Contextual Mapping Across Nine Countries

To map the national context of the nine countries studied, short distinct reports were produced. Table 2 in the Supplementary File summarises the GE policies organised into general laws, labour market policies, HE initiatives, recruitment practices, and GE funding. In HE, policies vary widely, reflecting national

characteristics and highlighting diverse perspectives and attitudes to GE. Absence of robust governmental policies and financial support undermined efforts to advance GE in universities. Interviewees highlighted that lack of financial support worked against the willingness of people to engage with GE work: “We don’t have enough human resources to help with [GE] work. We are lacking resources to move forward with people’s willingness to engage” (member of GE committee, University G). A closer look at the countries involved reveals that while all share some foundational commitments to GE as regards general national and labour market laws, as well as gender mainstreaming in HE, there is notable variation in specific approaches and levels of regulatory and non-regulatory support as to HE and GE funding. All countries have anti-discrimination laws, public or subsidised childcare provisions, parental leave, and wage transparency/equal pay regulations. Countries like Germany, Norway, the UK, and Austria show extensive frameworks across all sectors, while others like Serbia and Belgium have fewer comprehensive policies, especially as to higher education recruitment, and France as to GE funding.

GEP requirements vary slightly, with Serbia and Belgium implementing these on a more limited scale. Gender budgeting in HE and a certification and award system are rare, while gender quotas in the labour market are used in Germany, Austria, Norway, France, and Italy. Denmark, Serbia, and the UK do not enforce this measure. This indicates variance in approaches to actively increasing representation. The UK is the only country with a certification system for GE (Athena SWAN), suggesting the use of a more structured approach.

Leadership gender quotas, promoting female representation in higher hierarchical positions, are implemented in Germany, Belgium, Norway, France, and Austria. Monitoring and reporting of GE initiatives are common in HE in all countries except Serbia. Only Italy has gender budgeting specifically for higher education. Finally, while open advertisement for positions and gender-balanced assessment panels are common across most countries, only Austria has a clear policy on gender-balanced shortlists, indicating a targeted effort toward balanced representation in candidate selection.

4.2. *Nine GEPs*

The nine universities’ GEPs were significantly diverse as to their content, structure, and approaches. Table 3 in the Supplementary File provides a concise overview of each GEP, highlighting their respective characteristics, and similarities and differences in focus areas. The nine GEPs reveal shared priorities but also distinct approaches influenced by local contexts and institutional goals. The plans differ in scope, focus, and methodology, reflecting both national influences and organisational trajectories.

For instance, University A grounds its GEP in a strategic focus on high-quality research. It identifies four key areas: recruitment, career development, management, and workplace culture. Each activity is systematically mapped out, complete with timelines and responsibilities, although compliance is not enforced with penalties. In contrast, University B’s GEP represents an initial step toward institutionalising GE. Emerging from a self-assessment exercise, this plan emphasises capacity building, data collection, and awareness-raising. It reflects a developing, sincere effort to align with international standards while addressing local challenges. University C adopts an evolutionary strategy, building on a legacy of GE initiatives dating back to 2008. Its GEP extends earlier efforts, focusing on women in leadership, family-friendly policies, and equality in natural sciences. This iterative approach highlights the value of sustained, long-term investment in GE goals.

Diversity of scope and focus is evident in other plans as well. University D's GEP during the studied period focused on governance, personnel policy, education, research, and societal outreach. University E integrates external standards through the Athena Swan framework, demonstrating a robust approach to advancing equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). Similarly, Universities F and G take a broader approach, embedding diversity within their GEPs. University F's GEP addresses gender, ethnicity, disability, and socio-economic background, reflecting a nuanced understanding of inclusivity. Similarly, Universities H and J adopt detailed frameworks. University H's plan emphasises thematic areas such as work-life balance and measures against gender-based violence, including timelines and evaluation metrics. University J's legally binding plan extends equal opportunities to marginalised groups, including those with disabilities and non-binary individuals.

The GEPs underscore shared themes, including recruitment, leadership, and career development, while demonstrating tailored approaches that reflect institutional and national contexts. Together, they highlight the dynamic nature of GE work, where institutions adapt and refine strategies to meet emerging societal and organisational needs.

4.3. Organisation of GE Work

The organisation of GE work across the nine universities reflects unique approaches, each tailored to institutional needs and priorities (for a brief overview see Supplementary File, Table 4).

At University A, GE is overseen by a Committee for Diversity and Gender Equality, which includes the Rector and Pro-Rector, alongside representatives from all faculties. This committee meets regularly to drive initiatives, follow up on progress, and manage the GEP, though faculty-specific committees operate separately. In University B, a newly established Committee for Gender Equality brings together members from faculties, institutes, and the student body. Their work, while unpaid, signals the university's intent to align with broader equality goals. Similarly, University C employs a dual structure, with a Central Women's Representative team dedicated to GE work full-time and decentralised representatives balancing their equality roles with other duties.

Some universities have opted for a staffing model over committees. At University D, five professionals spearhead GE work, including drafting and implementing GEPs. University E integrates GE into its wider EDI framework, involving full-time governance roles and part-time project officers. Elsewhere, committees include dedicated individuals. University F relies on a full-time Gender Equality Adviser, supported by a Coordination Group chaired by the Pro-Rector, which includes diverse stakeholders. Similarly, University G adopts a collaborative mission-driven model, engaging faculty representatives and specialists to raise awareness, monitor GEP initiatives, and address discrimination. In University H, a Committee on Equal Opportunities and an Equality and Diversity Office work in tandem to address a range of inclusion efforts, from work-life balance to anti-discrimination measures. Lastly, University I has decentralised its efforts across three units: a Human Resources & Gender Equality Department, a Gender Equality & Diversity Unit, and a Working Group for Equal Opportunities.

Across all universities, the size, composition, and focus of these bodies vary significantly, from single units to multiple interconnected teams. The level of leadership engagement, ranging from full-time professional staff to voluntary contributors, further underscores each institution's commitment to GE work.

4.4. Challenges, Obstacles, and Barriers

4.4.1. University Culture and Gender Stereotypes in Academia

Interviews across the alliance universities underscored persistent challenges in advancing GE, revealing common systemic barriers (for a summary of key barriers to GE see Table 1). Interviewees stressed that the culture, practices, and procedures of most universities discourage women from pursuing academic careers and create obstacles in retaining them. The “leaky pipeline” phenomenon, where women face obstacles and delays in advancing their careers, was frequently discussed (Clark Blickenstaff, 2005). The highly competitive nature of academia further hindered the attraction of women to the field, while some women also encountered difficulties in feeling included and envisioning a viable university career.

A key issue was the underrepresentation of women in leadership and high-ranking roles, as one interviewee highlighted: “The higher paid the professorships are, the more the women’s quota goes down” (head of GE committee, University C). As the pay and prestige associated with higher-level positions increase, the proportion of women in these roles decreases. This trend reinforces existing gender imbalances, narrowing the pool of female candidates for leadership roles and perpetuating a cycle of inequality.

The lack of female professors also impacts students, preventing them from having role models. In fields where women dominate the student body, the lack of female faculty creates a stark and discouraging contrast. As one participant noted: “We have a large gap between the number of girls that are students in that field and the number of women that we find in academic roles” (member of GE committee, University H).

These three challenges, the leaky pipeline, the underrepresentation of women, and the lack of female role models can be related to the national context discussed above. Implementing and enforcing national policies regarding gender-balanced shortlists in recruitment and gender quotas is one way to address such issues. However, as the desk research showed, many of the countries have such legislation in place, and yet these challenges were prevalent across most of the universities. Hence, although legislation regarding recruitment and gender quotas may be advantageous to GE work, this cannot stand alone in addressing the representation of women in universities. Systemic challenges within universities could explain this.

Systemic obstacles further slow women’s career progression, requiring them to take longer paths to professorships compared to men. “Women need on average more years to reach professor ranks,” shared one interviewee (member of GE committee, University B). The competitive and exclusionary nature of academia, compounded by “old boys’ networks” (head of GE committee, University C), discourages many women from pursuing academic careers. One respondent described the environment as “a very bad atmosphere full of competition, aggressive discourse, so it’s not favourable at all for any gender equality agenda” (member of GE committee, University B). This highlights how the cultural context of academia with its exclusionary nature—often steeped in harsh competition—can limit women’s progression.

Conservative traditions and hierarchical structures within universities exacerbate these issues, reinforcing power dynamics that disadvantage women. As one interviewee stated: “Universities are hierarchical structures where young researchers depend on the professor or leader of the group. This dynamic favours gender imbalance” (member of GE committee, University H). As highlighted in the citation, dependency on

senior academics—who are often men—creates an environment where power dynamics favour established networks and limit opportunities for young women. These hierarchies tend to privilege those already in positions of authority, making it difficult for early-career female researchers to access funding and career advancement opportunities.

Traditional qualification assessment methods are flawed and pose additional challenges by undervaluing tasks often performed by women, such as teaching, mentoring, and committee work, while prioritising metrics like publications and grants, often associated with male academics. One interviewee observed: “Women end up doing more tasks that don’t add much to their CV, while men focus on ‘important things’” (member of GE committee, University H).

Finally, the unequal distribution of work and recognition often leads to women being overburdened and undervalued. This dynamic was summarised briefly: “The few women we have are overworked” (head of GE committee, University A). In contexts where structural barriers intersect with deeply ingrained academic cultures, these challenges are particularly pronounced, reinforcing gender inequalities in promotions and leadership appointments.

4.4.2. Structural and Organisational Challenges

The interviews revealed several structural and organisational challenges that hinder the progress of GE in universities. At the forefront is the insufficient effort dedicated to promoting GE. Ambiguity in GEPs often leaves them poorly understood and inadequately implemented. One interviewee highlighted this, noting: “Some of the activities are, on the one hand, very concrete, but in other ways, they are very generally described....If you don’t have the will, it’s a little bit easier to say that you’ve looked at it” (member of GE committee, University A). This lack of clarity leads to disengagement and limited impact. The existence of national legislation concerning GEP requirements may help to alleviate this challenge. However, most of the countries considered in this study had such legislation in place, and yet they still experienced a lack of effort at the university level. This could potentially be explained by the attitudes towards GE work and GEPs more generally at the universities.

One such attitude identified through the interviews was the perception of GE work as mere compliance with formal requirements. GEPs and related initiatives are sometimes seen as “mainly formalistic without proper implementation” (member of GE committee, University B), reducing their significance and undermining their effectiveness. This tokenistic approach often leaves little room for meaningful change.

Leadership support, while not overtly resistant, often lacks the tangible commitment necessary to drive progress. Many interviewees expressed frustration with the insufficient prioritisation and funding for GE work, with one stating: “There is no overt resistance...but there is also not enough support” (member of GE committee, University B). This sentiment was echoed by others who noted that financial and human resources targeting gender inequality are consistently limited, reflecting a broader under-prioritisation of the issue. One respondent pointed out: “Funding is always limited, and gender equality is always a nice way to save some money” (member of GE committee, University I). This lack of investment undermines the ability to implement effective and sustainable GE interventions.

The reliance on top-down approaches to implement GEPs was also criticised. While these models provide clear direction, they often fail to account for the diversity of needs across different departments. As one interviewee explained: “A university is a very diverse organisation....Our reality is just so different, so it may work really well somewhere, but then somewhere else it doesn’t work at all” (member of faculty GE committee, University A). This observation underscores the importance of flexibility and adaptation in GEP implementation to ensure that policies are responsive to varying departmental structures and cultures.

Moreover, universities are not fully utilising the resources and potential of their diverse staff. According to one interviewee: “[The university is] not using its potential because there is a wonderful human potential...that is not being used sufficiently” (former head of GE committee, University B). This underutilisation stems from a failure to integrate diverse perspectives, capitalising on existing expertise, and recognising the value of inclusivity.

Additionally, the focus on achieving gender balance in leadership and professorships, while important, may overshadow broader dimensions of GE. One interviewee cautioned against this narrow understanding of the GE perspective: “[Gender equality] is something we do in order to have gender balance among the professors...you lose out on [knowledge about the working conditions of researchers and academics]” (head of GE committee, University F). Such a limited view risks neglecting critical issues like career progression, work–life balance, and assessment biases.

Finally, the slow pace of change remains a significant barrier. Universities, described metaphorically as “an oil tanker [that] takes forever to get anywhere” (head of GE committee, University E), struggle with deeply entrenched organisational and structural barriers, slowly adapting due to their size, complexity, and deeply ingrained hierarchical structures. This metaphor reflects how bureaucracy and rigid governance processes impede swift transformations. While departments or smaller units may adapt more quickly, overall institutional progress remains painstakingly slow. One participant stated: “Nothing is really changing....It will take 80 more years, 100 more years [before] we have equality, because it’s so slow” (member of GE committee, University I). The comparison between faster-moving departments or smaller units and the slow-moving overall institutional change, reflecting a sense of frustration and disillusionment, underscores how local efforts may produce incremental progress, but systemic transformation remains challenging.

4.4.3. Work–Life Balance

Another challenge to GE that emerged from the interviews is the issue of work–life balance and the impact of family and care responsibilities. Work–life balance issues reflect deeply ingrained societal norms and structural inequities, disproportionately disadvantaging women. Specifically, societal expectations regarding family life and caregiving responsibilities were highlighted. The cumulative effect of these pressures leads many women to choose between family and career.

Societal norms often dictate that women bear the primary responsibility for caregiving and household tasks, regardless of their professional roles. This imbalance was especially visible during the Covid-19 pandemic, where women in academia struggled to manage remote work alongside caring for children. As one interviewee put it: “The majority of family care responsibilities are on women, even if they are professors and scientific researchers” (member of GE committee, University B). The caregiving burden extends beyond young children

to include elderly or unwell parents, further complicating women's ability to balance personal and professional responsibilities. The conflict between family responsibilities and career demands is particularly acute for young women in academia. The timing of key career milestones, such as obtaining tenure or research funding, often coincides with the age at which many women consider starting a family. This misalignment forces difficult choices, with one interviewee summarising: "The beginning of an academic career coincides with the time when women have children" (member of GE committee, University H). As a result, many women either scale back their ambitions or leave academia entirely.

Economic considerations exacerbate these challenges. With men frequently earning higher salaries, families are often compelled to assign caregiving roles to women, as it is seen as the more financially viable option. This reinforces a cycle of professional setbacks for women, contributing to their slower career progression and sustained income disparities. Inequities in parental leave policies further widen the gap. Women taking extended leave for caregiving often experience career stagnation, while limited leave options for men perpetuate the norm that caregiving is a woman's domain. A respondent highlighted the dual issue: "Women take time out for parenting and therefore do not progress as fast or as far, while men avoid parental leave due to stigma and a lack of male role models" (member of GE committee, University E). This systemic imbalance discourages shared caregiving and reinforces traditional gender roles. It is worth noting here, that these challenges relating to work-life balance and care giving responsibilities, in general, were stated by interviewees from all universities included in this study. Hence, regardless of the progressiveness of national legislation or GEPs, the societal norms surrounding these issues prevail.

4.4.4. Societal Attitudes and Cultural Norms

The interviews identified societal factors, cultural traditions, and a lack of national focus on GE as some of the most significant barriers to progress in academia. These challenges, prevalent across the nine alliance member countries, are rooted in entrenched societal perceptions and cultural norms. Key issues include deeply ingrained gender stereotypes, a prevailing belief in male superiority, and societal expectations for women to conform to male-defined norms to succeed. Societal perceptions about gender roles remain predominantly patriarchal, perpetuating male superiority and sidelining women. This systemic inequality is challenging to dismantle, as it is embedded in the fabric of societal and institutional norms. One interviewee remarked: "Our key issue is our deep-rooted prejudices about this patriarchal relationship between men and women" (former head of GE committee, University B). The absence of robust governmental policies and financial support further undermines efforts to advance GE in universities, and hence, the significance of the national and legislative context in which universities find themselves cannot be emphasised enough. This is true for all universities considered here, but Universities B, F, G, and I especially stressed this during interviews. For instance, interviewees highlighted that token policies without substantive implementation fail to inspire motivation or drive real change. An interviewee explained: "When reforms are not successful and you receive no support from the national level, you lose motivation to engage. Gender policies are there but not financed or implemented" (member of GE committee, University B). The lack of national-level commitment signals a broader societal disinterest, discouraging universities from pursuing impactful GE initiatives.

Moreover, stereotypical beliefs in academia about intellectual and professional capabilities continue to disadvantage women in academic settings. Men are often perceived as more competent, perpetuating biases

that limit women's opportunities for advancement. As one respondent shared: "Men were thought to be more cunning than women. Meaning they were more intelligent, measured in brains" (member of faculty GE committee, University A). Another noted that women's presence in academia and other societal positions is often conditional upon adhering to rules historically defined by men: "Women have done it on terms and rules of the game previously defined by men" (member of faculty GE committee, University A). Such stereotypes constrain women's ability to redefine roles and excel on their own terms, thus reinforcing the status quo.

4.4.5. Internal Resistance

Internal resistance to GE initiatives within universities is complex and multifaceted. It includes the belief that GE has already been achieved, the misperception that women's career choices are to blame for gender imbalances, and concerns that initiatives for women unfairly disadvantage men.

One of the most prevalent sources of resistance is the attitude that GE has already been achieved. Some staff members argue that the visible presence of women in various roles, such as professors and students, is proof that equality is no longer an issue. They question the necessity of continued efforts, with one interviewee remarking: "There are definitely some who don't think we have a diversity problem. Because they don't want to [be forced to] hire the 'least qualified' candidate just because it is a woman" (head of GE committee, University A). This perspective reflects a common view within the university that since women are already integrated into academic roles, further interventions are unnecessary.

Additionally, some academics argue that the gender imbalance is due to women's career choices rather than institutional barriers. According to one interviewee: "People believe that it's not that we don't let women do scientific careers, it's them. They don't want it. They would rather do something else" (member of GE committee, University H). This argument places the responsibility for gender inequality on individual preferences rather than structural biases.

Resistance also arises from a perception that current efforts to support women are excessive, leading to a sense of unfairness among some male colleagues. These staff members argue that GE initiatives may be tipping the scales too far in favour of women, with one interviewee noting: "Do we really need this anymore?...Isn't it men who are the minority?" (member of GE committee, University I). The belief that GE has already been achieved leads some staff to question the need for further action, viewing hiring policies as forced measures rather than necessary interventions. Another example highlighted discontent with specific programs designed to support women, such as scholarships for women in STEM, with some colleagues expressing frustration over the exclusive focus on women: "How is it possible that you are funding scholarships reserved only [for women]?" (member of GE committee, University H). This type of resistance is fuelled by a feeling of exclusion and an argument that men, too, deserve such opportunities.

There is also a belief among some that universities, as prestigious institutions, are immune to discrimination and gender inequality. This mindset suggests that the high status of academia makes issues like harassment or discrimination inconceivable within universities. One interviewee shared: "[Many think that] harassment and gender discrimination can't exist within a university. [The] university is a high-status part of the environment [made up of only good people]" (member of GE committee, University H). Thus, the prestige of universities

further fuels resistance, as some staff believe that academic institutions are inherently meritocratic. This view contributes to a dismissive attitude toward GE-targeted actions, as some think that such issues simply do not exist in academia.

Finally, a tension between GE and broader diversity efforts was noticed. Some interviewees expressed concern that expanding the focus to include diversity could dilute efforts and funding for GE, framing it as a zero-sum game: “This move towards diversity...could potentially become a barrier to gender equality” (head of GE committee, University C). Or as another respondent pointed out: “If we are to put money towards diversity measures, then the women will lose out” (member of GE committee, University F). The expansion of diversity initiatives alongside GE efforts raised concerns that resources may be diverted from gender-specific measures, prompting some to perceive it as a competition for funding rather than an integrated, intersectional approach.

Table 1. Summary of key barriers to GE within universities.

Barriers	Subcategories
University culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deep-rooted patriarchal views in academia Male-dominated norms and expectations Conservative traditional and hierarchical structures reinforcing power dynamics Competitive culture and resistance to change Women expected to conform to male-dominated academic norms Unequal distribution of work and recognition—women overlooked and undervalued Assessment systems pose challenges by undervaluing academic roles traditionally taken on by women
Structural and organisational challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender bias in recruitment, promotion, and tenure processes Tokenistic approach leaving little room for meaningful change Lack of leadership commitment at different levels Lack of institutional commitment and structures to support GE Lack of human and financial resources Fragmented organisation of GE work Lack of well-coordinated, top-down and bottom-up strategy Not utilising the existing resources and potential Discriminatory organisational practices and policies Underrepresentation of women in leadership and high-ranking roles Lack of role models
Work–life balance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disproportionate caregiving responsibilities for women—challenges for young women academics Gender pay gap and its impact on career advancement Parental leave policies that disproportionately benefit women and career stagnation Societal pressure on women to choose between career and family

Table 1. (Cont.) Summary of key barriers to GE within universities.

Barriers	Subcategories
Societal attitudes and cultural norms	Deep-rooted gender stereotypes
	Patriarchal norms and beliefs in male superiority and gender roles
	Societal expectations of women's primary responsibility for family and caregiving
	Lack of national and governmental support for GE work discouraging GE efforts at universities
Internal resistance	Institutionalised resistance
	Lack of leadership commitment
	Gender imbalance attributed to women's career choices—blaming the women
	Perception that GE had already been achieved
	Perception that initiatives for women disadvantage men
	Discontent with GE programs exclusive to women
	Universities viewed as immune to inequality
	Concern that diversity efforts dilute focus on GE

5. Discussion

The findings underscore the strong influence of national and institutional contexts on GEP design, implementation, and outcomes. Differences in national policies, governmental support, and institutional priorities across the alliance lead to diverse GEP structures and effectiveness. Academic culture, structural barriers, internal resistance, and societal attitudes further limit GEP impact, reinforcing that effective GEPs cannot follow a one-size-fits-all model (Benschop & Verloo, 2011).

A key finding is the variation in GEP design and implementation due to differences in national policies, governmental support, and institutional priorities (Ní Laoire et al., 2020). Complexity approaches emphasise that GEPs are evolving processes shaped by local contexts (Chen, 2012; Palmén & Kalpazidou Schmidt, 2019). Strong policies in some countries (e.g., Germany, Norway) boost GEP success, while deep-rooted socio-cultural norms in others (e.g., Serbia) hinder progress, despite similar formal policies. These findings stress the need for GEPs' adaptability.

An important dimension of these conditions is the *university culture*, which encompasses ingrained norms, values, and practices that influence academia (Wellcome, 2020). From a complexity theory standpoint, university culture operates as a dynamic system where historical gender biases persist, affecting individual and institutional behaviour. Hierarchical structures and entrenched norms often sustain gender disparities, particularly in how excellence and meritocracy are socially constructed, frequently privileging masculine attributes (Benschop & Brouns, 2003). These cultural norms, reinforced by informal practices such as gendered networking and implicit biases in recognition, contribute to the “leaky pipeline” effect, where women exit academic careers at higher rates than men (Morley, 2015). Our findings reveal that academic cultures that favour traditional assessment criteria may undervalue the contributions of women and other marginalised groups, creating an environment that prevents their advancement. The emphasis on metrics in

assessments of “excellence” and based on “meritocracy” often conceals systemic inequalities, as these ideals are frequently defined through traditional androcentric lenses (Broström et al., 2024; O’Connor & Barnard, 2021). A gender-sensitive lens with initiatives focused on reshaping these metrics to include diverse perspectives can drive incremental cultural changes. However, such efforts require ongoing reflexivity to avoid reinforcing existing male-dominated academic norms and practices (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2024). A reflexive approach also highlights how informal structures, including norms, values, and unwritten rules, impact GE by reinforcing cultural barriers that GEPs have to address to be effective (Bustelo, 2017). This underscores the importance of adopting a cultural and structural perspective in GEPs design that addresses not only formal policies but also the informal organisational norms that shape opportunities for career progression (Acker, 2006). University culture operates as a dynamic, interdependent system with a plethora of variables resistant to rapid change. Multiple actions, and long-term and reflexive strategies are necessary to disrupt deep-rooted inequalities (Kalpazidou Schmidt & Ovseiko, 2020). For example, deconstructing the language of “meritocracy” and embedding diversity into definitions of academic achievement or negotiating “meritocracy” can challenge patriarchal structures and foster inclusivity (Broström et al., 2024).

Structural and organisational barriers reflect deeply entrenched power dynamics within university hierarchies. Theories on gendered organisations (Acker, 1990) highlight how formal and informal practices perpetuate gender disparities, such as unequal recruitment processes and unclear promotion criteria (Nielsen, 2016). From a complexity theory perspective, these barriers are not isolated but rather interconnected with broader societal norms, often reflected in the operations and attitudes within the universities. Addressing them requires systemic, multilevel interventions to transform deeply embedded structural conditions. The organisational structure of each university plays a critical role in shaping the effectiveness of GEPs. In some institutions, GE efforts are centralised within a dedicated department (Universities A, E, F, and G), ensuring a coordinated and cohesive approach. This structure allows for more efficient resource allocation, clearer lines of responsibility, and the ability to monitor progress systematically. Centralised models can facilitate stronger institutional impact by maintaining consistency across departments and ensuring alignment with strategic goals. In contrast, other universities (Universities C, D, H, and I) distribute GEP implementation across various departments or units. While this decentralised approach can foster local ownership and tailored interventions, it also risks fragmented efforts, inconsistent implementation, and a lack of institutional cohesion. Top-down approaches can provide clear institutional direction but often struggle to accommodate the diverse needs of different departments in complex, multilayered institutions (Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013). In any case, decentralisation underscores the need for a well-structured approach to GEP implementation that is backed and followed up by ongoing leadership and institutional commitment (Tildesley & Bustelo, 2024).

The organisation of GE work locally proved important for the outcome and impact of GEPs. Some universities decentralised GEP responsibilities across multiple entities (Universities C, D, H, and I), leading to fragmented efforts, while others opted for a centralised approach (Universities A, E, F, and G). Universities adopting decentralised models often face challenges in maintaining consistent implementation and evaluating progress across different units. On the other hand, universities with centralised GE structures benefit from more streamlined decision-making and comprehensive monitoring systems. However, neither model guarantees success without active leadership engagement and institutional awareness at all levels. Governance frameworks that embed gender awareness into organisational culture are essential for initiating and sustaining change. Without these, GEPs risk becoming mere formalities with limited transformative

potential. This underlines the importance of a well-coordinated, top-down, and bottom-up strategy to ensure cohesive and effective implementation, supported by the active involvement of the leadership, other key actors, and robust internal and external networks (Caprile et al., 2022). A comprehensive, well-coordinated approach supported by engaged leadership and gender-aware governance is critical to overcoming structural barriers (Bacchi & Eveline, 2010). In most of the alliance universities, GE is an institutionalised value. However, while GE is embedded in formal rules and regulations, this does not mean that it also is institutionalised in the processes and practices of everyday life. Active institutional support is essential for providing GEP agents with legitimacy and authority, safeguarding progress, and ensuring the sustainability of change efforts (Tildesley & Bustelo, 2024).

As mentioned above, the focus must be on the local dynamics and GEPs designed and tailored to local contexts to disrupt local self-organisation processes upholding gendered norms. In contexts with high levels of uncertainty and complexity as universities, structural change processes rarely assume a linear trajectory. Instead, as discussed above, they tend to follow a non-linear path, marked by abrupt advancements or regressions, unanticipated challenges, unintended outcomes, and deviations from the initial GEP. As a result, the implementation phase of a GEP necessitates an adaptable, proactive approach, highlighting flexibility to respond swiftly to emerging dynamics (Kalpazidou Schmidt, 2023). For instance, reflexive practices, such as inclusive decision-making, utilising or developing existing potential, and transparent assessment processes can mitigate challenges and disrupt traditional patterns by ensuring that GEP actions are embedded in institutional practices rather than treated as external add-ons. Establishing structures dedicated to GE work, enabling institutions to draw on the expertise and experiences of a wide range of stakeholders (Bustelo et al., 2016) are other practical steps to address structural inequalities.

Resource allocation, human and financial, emerges as a critical structural factor in determining the attainment and sustainability of GEPs' goals. In many institutions (Universities B, F, G, I), limited funding and staffing for GE initiatives prevented GEPs from going beyond minimal, symbolic actions that satisfy policy requirements but fail to address structural inequalities. The findings highlight the compounded impact of these resource limitations, suggesting that consistent and adequate funding is necessary for GEPs to effectively tackle entrenched inequalities and foster sustainable change. In line with complexity theory, without sufficient resources, GEPs struggle to evolve and adapt to enduring challenges, limiting their transformative potential (Kalpazidou Schmidt & Cacace, 2017). Lack of resources is also a sign of underprioritising GE, while repeated calls for more resources without results may be interpreted as a "resistance strategy and an excuse for inaction and not taking responsibility" (Peterson et al., 2021, p. 40). Financial and human resource limitations restrict the scope and depth of GEP impact and reflect institutionalised resistance and lack of leadership commitment.

Work-life balance challenges highlight the intersection of societal expectations and organisational rigidity. Adopting a gender-sensitive lens reveals how caregiving responsibilities disproportionately expected to be performed by women exacerbate structural and cultural challenges. Complexity theory frames these issues as feedback loops where disparities, for instance, as to pay and promotion perpetuate unequal caregiving roles, further limiting women's advancement opportunities. Reflexive strategies, such as equitable parental leave policies, institutional childcare provision, and support systems for caregivers, can help to disrupt these loops and create more inclusive work environments. Such measures challenge broader patriarchal norms by promoting gender-just caregiving responsibilities recognition (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2024).

Broader societal attitudes and cultural norms profoundly influence GE efforts within universities. The wider societal context and stereotypes about gender roles create resistance to change both within and beyond academia. Patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes create implicit expectations that disadvantage women, even in academic settings (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Societal attitudes act as external constraints on universities, necessitating multi-level interventions to address them. Gender-sensitive approaches that engage with both internal university practices and external societal narratives are essential—change in societal attitudes often requires simultaneous top-down and bottom-up approaches (Caprile et al., 2022).

Internal resistance to GEP actions reflects different forms of opposition. Resistance often stems from the perception that GE has already been achieved (in some countries) or attributions of disparities to individual choices rather than structural inequities (Snickare & Wahl, 2024). Manifestations of resistance may also reflect concerns about the perceived fairness of targeted GEP initiatives and scepticism regarding the necessity of GE measures and competing institutional priorities. Although establishing legitimacy for GEP actions is crucial for driving change, in some cases the legitimacy of the GEPs has been openly contested (Peterson et al., 2021). Despite a formal mandate, GEP actions often encounter resistance, ranging from overt denials of their necessity to subtle undermining through cemented informal norms and practices (Agócs, 1997). The latter is described as “non-performative diversity,” where equality efforts are acknowledged but not notably pursued (Ahmed, 2012). GEPs implemented to appoint women to decision-making positions, such as professorships, often encounter resistance, which is frequently framed through meritocratic arguments. This perspective is commonly used to deny institutional accountability in addressing biases and inequities embedded in decision-making processes and practices regarding recruitment and promotion that produce gendered outcomes (Nielsen, 2016). This stresses the inherent complexity of overcoming resistance and points out the need for flexible, context-sensitive approaches to legitimise and sustain GE measures. According to complexity theory, resistance can act as a diagnostic and monitoring tool, revealing underlying tensions and identifying opportunities to adapt strategies. A reflexive dialogue that addresses concerns about fairness in implementing actions targeted to women, while demonstrating the interconnected benefits of GE, can help build collective buy-in (Palmén & Kalpazidou Schmidt, 2019).

In conclusion, the study underscores how national policies, institutional frameworks, and cultural factors influence the design, implementation, and impact of GEPs. It highlights that effective strategies must be tailored to specific contexts rather than relying on universal models. Our findings align with previous research in highlighting that effective GEPs cannot follow a one-size-fits-all model; instead, they must be customised to the specific national and institutional contexts where they are rooted. Customisation is critical for addressing unique challenges, leveraging local strengths, and fostering meaningful, sustainable changes that go beyond fulfilling basic policy requirements. To navigate the complexities of GE, we advocate for the integration of theory and practice through a reflexive, gender-sensitive lens. Finally, in the following section, addressing our second research question, we look at the results in light of the critical role of university alliances in advancing GE initiatives.

5.1. Implications of the Findings: Promoting GEPs Through Alliance Synergies

We identified distinct implications, which are related to the fact that the studied universities are members of an alliance. Alliances offer a unique platform to advance GE in academia by harnessing the power of inter-university synergies. Based on our findings, we highlight ways to enhance collaboration, align efforts, and strengthen GE initiatives, which may also benefit other alliances.

A strong, unified, and explicitly stated commitment to GE across all member institutions is critical. While all universities have GEPs, our findings reveal that the degree of dedication varies. Some institutions face greater barriers due to national-level constraints, such as legislation (e.g., University B) or socio-cultural obstacles, while others encounter institutional and academic culture challenges (Universities E and F). University leaders are crucial in embedding GE into institutional values and alliance principles, setting a powerful example. Public reporting on GEP progress can further reinforce commitment and sustain long-term engagement.

The findings indicate that the design of GEPs is based on varying interpretations of the GE concept within the studied alliance. For example, some universities (Universities B and D) focus primarily on increasing the number of women, while others (Universities C, E, and F) prioritise structural and cultural change, adopt intersectional perspectives, or integrate the gender dimension into research. A shared understanding of GE among alliance members is therefore crucial for ensuring consistency. By agreeing on core principles, universities can work towards a common vision for GE that aligns efforts and strengthens partnerships, making implementation more impactful. However, a flexible common framework can guide diverse institutions to address GE in their own context while upholding shared standards.

Close collaboration is a cornerstone of the potential impact of the alliance members on GE. Joint initiatives, human and other resource sharing, and common bodies for experiences exchange, allow for a broad and inclusive approach to existing and emerging challenges. Regular communication platforms, such as workshops and online hubs, can facilitate the exchange of best practices, allowing member institutions to draw upon each other's practices and strengths. Such a cooperative structure enables the alliance to address GE issues collectively, increasing the reach and effectiveness of GEPs across the alliance.

Systematic monitoring, evaluation, and reporting are vital for ensuring sustainable outcomes, yet the study reveals that not all alliance members (e.g., Universities B and D) currently have the necessary follow-up mechanisms or competences. Universities with expertise in GE and evaluation could support members with less competence, for instance in assessments, training, or mentoring exercises. Establishing joint mechanisms for accountability and a shared framework for monitoring progress on GEPs would enable each university to assess its efforts systematically and identify areas for improvement. Regular assessments and shared evaluations across the alliance could also foster evidence-based decision-making, ultimately strengthening the efforts of the entire alliance.

Open exchange of knowledge and shared experiences are fundamental to alliances' success in advancing GE. The findings reveal significant variation in universities' experience with GEP design, implementation, and evaluation. Some institutions face challenges due to limited GE expertise and capacity (e.g., University D). More experienced universities (e.g., Universities E and I) can support capacity building by offering mentorship and guidance. Regular workshops, shared human resources, and dedicated online platforms for GE knowledge exchange can further promote learning and the dissemination of effective practices. This collaborative approach would not only strengthen individual universities but may also enhance the alliance's overall GE expertise and capacity.

Overall, the alliance holds significant potential to advance GE by leveraging synergies across its member institutions. A unified commitment to GE, strengthened collaboration, and sustained engagement are crucial in driving meaningful progress. Additionally, systematic monitoring, evaluation, and transparent reporting

mechanisms can improve accountability and long-term impact, ensuring that GE remains a core priority across the alliance.

6. Conclusion

This article explored the challenges faced by nine European universities in designing and implementing GEPs within a university alliance. Findings revealed that national policies, institutional priorities, and cultural and structural barriers significantly shaped GEP implementation and effectiveness. Key challenges included fragmentation, resource constraints, deep-rooted gender stereotypes, and resistance to change, requiring strong leadership and a strategic balance between top-down directives and bottom-up engagement to ensure institutional buy-in. The article highlights the value of integrating complexity theory, gender-sensitive strategies, and reflexive practices in navigating the dynamic nature of GEP implementation in academia.

University alliances offer a promising platform for knowledge exchange, cross-institutional learning, and resource sharing. Through collaboration, universities can develop adaptive, context-sensitive strategies, leveraging shared experiences to navigate resistance and structural barriers. Further research is needed to assess the long-term impact of these alliances on driving sustainable, institution-wide transformations across diverse contexts.

This study offers novel insights into GEP implementation, by detailing the barriers and challenges, emphasising the importance of contextual sensitivity, and highlighting the potential of university alliances in advancing GE in academia.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Due to the nature of the research, data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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The Complexity of Defining Institutional Change in Academia

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Abstract

In recent decades, the European research and innovation landscape has shifted from addressing gender inequality by focusing on “fixing women” to prioritising “fixing the institution,” with gender equality plans (GEPs) as the primary tool for transformation. While policies have spurred initiatives across EU member states and associated countries, progress remains uneven. Existing studies often attribute the gap between policy intentions and outcomes to GEP implementation issues. This article argues, however, that the complexity of framing institutional change strategies during GEP planning and design contributes equally to this policy–practice gap. Drawing on feminist institutionalism and complexity theories, this article examines how different stakeholders receive, interpret, and reshape policy ideas surrounding institutional change. It interrogates whether there is a shared definition of institutional change among those responsible for planning and implementing GEPs and discusses the (in)consistencies in the assessment of concrete initiatives as institutional change. Empirical data derive from a case study of six European institutions implementing GEPs under the Horizon 2020 project GEARING-Roles, complemented by interviews with representatives from other 7th Framework Programme and Horizon 2020 GEP-implementing projects. The findings reveal significant ambiguity in how institutional change is interpreted and translated into actions, with this ambiguity manifesting both among GEP implementers and the European Commission. We conclude that clearer guidelines and more consistent assessments are necessary, alongside theory-based and practice-oriented definitions of institutional change, which we propose as an attempt to address this gap.

Keywords

academic organisations; complexity theory; European research; gender equality plans; institutional change

1. Introduction

Since the inception of the European Research Area (ERA) in 2000, gender equality has gained increasing attention in European research and innovation (R&I). Over time, policy frameworks have shifted from addressing numerical representation and individual disparities (“fixing the women”) to tackling systemic challenges (“fixing the institutions” and “fixing the knowledge”; Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024; Schiebinger, 2016). This evolution acknowledges that achieving gender equality transcends numerical targets, requiring profound changes to institutional structures, cultural norms, and embedded practices that sustain inequality.

In 2009, the European Commission adopted a “structural change” approach as a cornerstone strategy for fostering gender equality in R&I, making gender equality plans (GEPs) the primary tool for institutional transformation. During the 7th Framework Programme for R&I (FP7, 2007–2013) and its successor, Horizon 2020 (H2020, 2014–2020), this approach was operationalised through projects aimed at implementing GEPs in both research performing and research funding organisations. GEPs were implemented in over 200 institutions under 30 projects (European Commission, n.d.). The current funding programme, Horizon Europe (2021–2027), has furthered these efforts, requiring all entities applying for funds to possess an *inclusive* GEP, a move aimed at expanding the adoption of GEPs across Europe’s academic landscape while fostering the integration of an intersectional perspective that addresses not only gender aspects but also other dimensions of diversity and inequality (European Commission, 2024).

Despite the EU’s position as a global leader in promoting gender equality in R&I, both empirical data (European Commission, 2021b) and academic studies (O’Connor & White, 2021b; Wroblewski & Palmén, 2022) indicate that the goal of equality remains elusive. While much of the literature attributes the slow pace of progress to issues in GEP implementation (O’Connor & White, 2021b; Palmén & Kalpazidou Schmidt, 2019; Tildesley et al., 2022), it often overlooks the earlier, foundational stages of change processes—namely, the conceptualisation and planning of these initiatives, where “institutional change” is translated from an abstract ideal into concrete actions. Scholars have already highlighted how variations in framing terms, such as gender mainstreaming, contribute to the policy–practice gap (see Bustelo & Mazur, 2023). We argue that the same logic applies to the notion of institutional change, where inconsistencies in interpretation and application hinder its full realisation.

The concept of institutional change through GEPs remains underexplored, often confined to technical descriptions in guidelines and toolkits. Key resources such as the GEAR tool (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2016, 2022) and Horizon Europe’s guidelines for developing and implementing GEPs (European Commission, 2021a) primarily outline operational aspects, offering limited conceptual clarity regarding the ultimate goal of institutional change. Meanwhile, scholars emphasise the inherent complexity of institutional change (Kalpazidou Schmidt & Cacace, 2019) and the challenges of translating policy ideas into effective actions. As Anagnostou (2022) notes, “there is substantial uncertainty as to what the threefold set of gender equality goals defined in the EU’s R&I policy actually entails in practice” (p. 80). Do change agents tasked with implementing GEPs share a common understanding of institutional change? Is there alignment between their definitions and those put forth by the European Commission?

This research seeks to fill this gap by examining potential inconsistencies in how institutional change is defined, which may help explain the limited progress toward achieving gender equality in R&I. We pursue three objectives: first, to assess whether a shared understanding of institutional change exists among

diverse stakeholders; second, to analyse how complexity manifests in the planning and design of institutional change actions; and third, to propose a definition of institutional change that is both theoretically grounded and practically applicable.

Theoretically, we adopt a qualitative approach grounded in feminist institutionalist theory, recognising academic institutions as inherently gendered (Acker, 1990, 1992), with potential change emerging through the dynamic and interdependent interaction of structures and agency (Clavero & Galligan, 2020). Furthermore, we integrate complexity theory, framing gender inequality as a “wicked problem” (Cacace et al., 2023) and highlighting the multifaceted, non-linear, unpredictable processes that shape institutional change (Kalpazidou Schmidt & Cacace, 2019). Empirically, our analysis draws on a case study of a H2020 project (GEARING-Roles) aimed at implementing GEPs across six academic institutions. To complement a broader perspective, we also utilise insights from interviews with change agents involved in other GEP-implementing projects under FP7 and H2020.

The article unfolds as follows: The second section introduces European policy articulations on institutional change. The third section outlines the theoretical framework underpinning the analysis. Next, the methodology employed is described, followed by an overview of European-funded GEP-implementing projects and the case study project, GEARING-Roles. The sixth section presents the research findings, examining (a) how different projects approached institutional change, (b) how change agents conceptualised it, and (c) how GEP implementers reported institutional changes to the European Commission, and how the Commission, in turn, evaluated and classified these reported changes as institutional change or not. Finally, the conclusions reflect on the implications of institutional change definitions in policy implementation.

2. European Policy Articulations on Institutional Change

The concept of institutional change in European policy has evolved from its initial framing as “structural change,” often used interchangeably with “structural and cultural change” and “organisational change” (e.g., European Commission, 2015). Since 2017, key documents such as European Commission communications and Council of the EU conclusions have exhibited a subtle yet notable shift toward the term “institutional change” (e.g., European Commission, 2017, 2020), though this evolution has occurred without explicit clarification of its rationale or implications.

A closer examination of reference documents that have guided European-funded GEP-implementing projects reveals how institutional change has been articulated over time. The 2012 benchmarking report *Structural Change in Research Institutions: Enhancing Excellence, Gender Equality and Efficiency in Research and Innovation* (European Commission, 2012) stated that “‘structural change’ in universities and research institutions means making them more gender-aware, thereby modernising their organisational culture” (p. 14) and that “it implies systemic, integrated, long term approaches rather than piecemeal short term measures” (p. 15). This systemic perspective laid a conceptual foundation for subsequent gender equality policies and initiatives in R&I.

While direct definitions of institutional or structural change were absent in the calls for project proposals, the focus of these calls remained consistent: promoting women’s participation and career advancement in research. Under FP7, the emphasis was on increasing women’s representation and improving their career prospects. In H2020, this focus expanded to include removing barriers to the recruitment, retention, and

career progression of female researchers. Additionally, the 2012 report brought attention to the need to integrate the gender dimension into curricula and research content—an objective reflected in all calls from 2013 onwards. Leadership development was also mentioned as a key area for GEPs, but it was not until H2020 that addressing gender imbalances in decision-making processes became an explicit and core objective. Although these calls and respective Work Programmes outlined specific objectives related to institutional change, along with recommended strategies and expected impacts, they fell short of providing a clear, singular definition for the concept. Instead, institutional change was presented as part of a multi-goal strategy for achieving gender equality in R&I.

Another significant reference for GEP-implementing projects is the GEAR tool, which provides detailed guidance to R&I organisations throughout the various stages of GEP implementation. Since its first publication in 2016, the GEAR tool has been mandated as a primary resource for GEP projects. According to its 2016 definition, “institutional change is a strategy aimed at removing the obstacles to gender equality that are inherent in the research system itself, and at adapting institutional practices” (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2016, p. 7). While the updated 2022 edition did not introduce substantial changes to this definition, it did emphasise intersectionality as a transversal approach to GEPs and, therefore, to institutional change (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2022).

Overall, European policy documents and tools primarily provide operational guidance for implementing GEPs, focusing on intervention areas and process-oriented strategies rather than offering a precise definition of institutional change. If we summarise the foundational representation of how institutional change processes and objectives in the R&I sector are currently articulated at the European policy level, a baseline depiction could take the form depicted in Figure 1.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. *Feminist Institutionalism: A Lens for Institutional Change in Academia*

Scholars in political science and organisational studies have long highlighted the inherently gendered nature of institutions (Acker, 1990, 1992; Beckwith, 2005; Connell, 1987, 2002; Hawkesworth, 2005). Feminist institutionalists argue that institutions do not merely reflect societal gender norms but that these norms are embedded within their logics, shaping day-to-day operations and decision-making. Feminist institutionalism highlights how institutions follow a “gendered logic of appropriateness,” where formal and informal rules “prescribe (as well as proscribe) ‘acceptable’ masculine and feminine forms of behavior, rules, and values for men and women within institutions” (Chappell, 2006, p. 226). These rules, operating in interconnection with gendered power dynamics, shape both institutional continuity and change.

While institutions are typically stable and resistant to immediate change, they remain capable of evolving over time. Change is rarely abrupt but unfolds through gradual, incremental processes characterised by small steps, occasional progress, and setbacks (Krook & Mackay, 2011). As Mackay (2014) explains, institutional transformation occurs through “bounded agency,” where efforts to advance gender equality are shaped and often constrained by structural barriers and opposition from resistant actors.

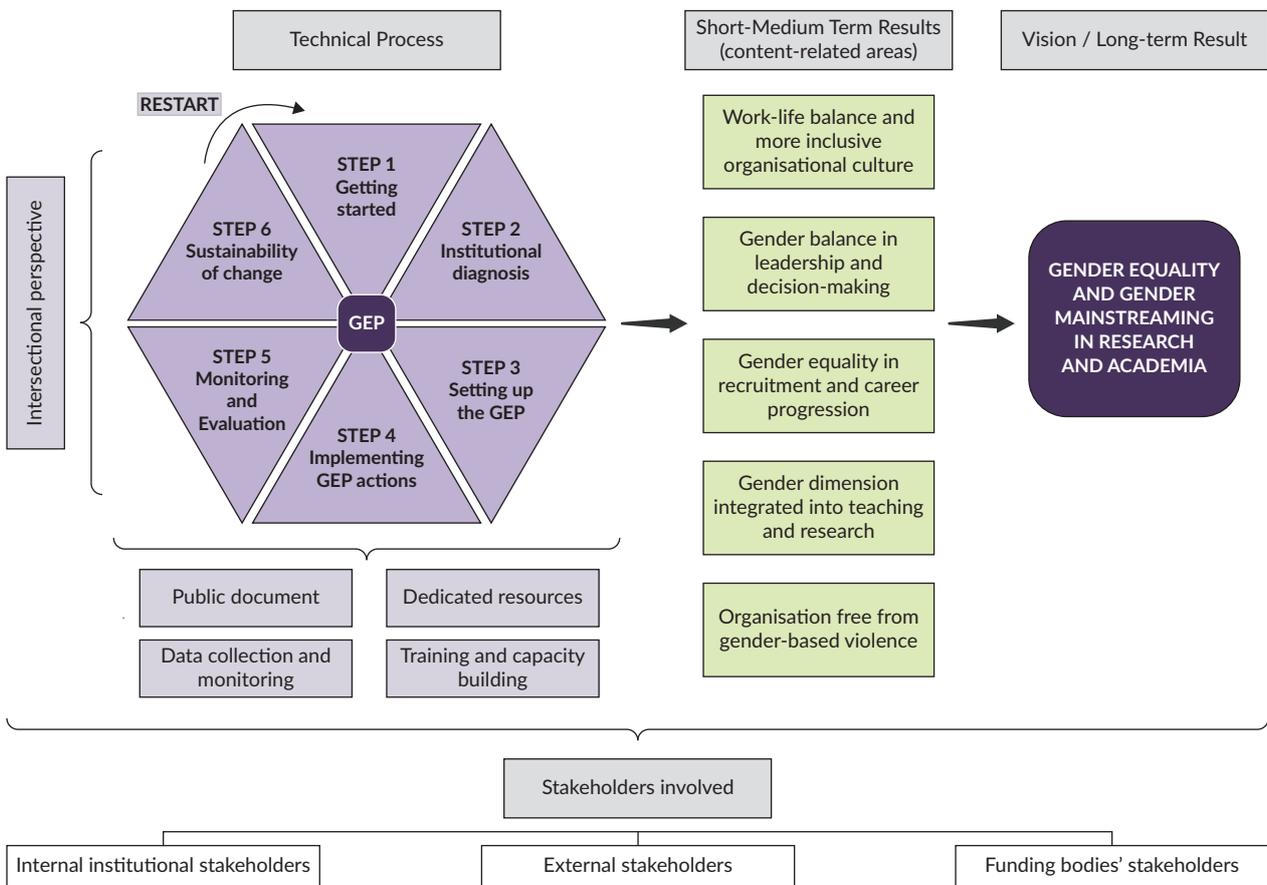


Figure 1. Current baseline depiction of institutional change in European R&I (self-elaborated, inspired by Derbyshire et al., 2015, p. 8).

Academic institutions, much like other political institutions, “sit in the crossroads of social, cultural and economic pressures” (Weimer & Terhi, 2020, p. 1), and are subject to the systemic influence of institutional norms shaped by gender (Lowndes, 2014). Thus, while originally developed to study gender reform in conventional political settings, feminist institutionalism has been increasingly applied to the academic context, where it offers a valuable lens for examining the intersection between gender and institutional transformation (Bencivenga, 2019; Cannito et al., 2023; Clavero & Galligan, 2020; O’Connor & White, 2021b; O’Mullane, 2021; Tildesley et al., 2022). Recent studies have shown how formal policies promoting gender equality are often undermined by informal norms that perpetuate gendered power dynamics, such as biased interpretations of “merit” or exclusionary networking practices (Bencivenga, 2019; O’Connor & Barnard, 2021). Feminist institutionalism has also provided valuable insights into how feminist change agents strategically navigate institutional structures to advocate for transformative change even in highly resistant contexts (Linková & Mergaert, 2021; O’Connor & White, 2021a; Tildesley & Bustelo, 2024; Tildesley et al., 2022).

Applying feminist institutionalism to academia, however, requires a tailored approach, as academic institutions hold their own set of characteristics, and “an isomorphism with political institutions cannot be assumed” (Clavero & Galligan, 2020, p. 662). Their role in knowledge production and epistemic authority introduces unique challenges, as academic value is frequently measured through traditional ideals of academic “merit” and “excellence,” ideals which persistently marginalise women and other underrepresented

groups (Calaza et al., 2021; O'Connor & Barnard, 2021). Gender reform in academic contexts must address a “dual logic,” targeting both organisational and epistemic dimensions that underpin institutional practices (Wroblewski & Palmén, 2022). The epistemic logic, where traditional notions of academic merit and excellence are entrenched, is particularly difficult to transform (Clavero & Galligan, 2020), and while gender equality initiatives often target the organisational logic, practices rooted in the epistemic logic frequently remain untouched (Albenga, 2016; Picardi et al., 2023; Wroblewski & Palmén, 2022).

3.2. Unpacking Complexity

Some scholars describe gender inequality in academia as a “wicked problem” due to its deep-rooted, multifactorial causes, resistance to universal solutions, and contextual dependence (Cacace et al., 2023; Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2020). Institutional change within this framework is non-linear, and outcomes are shaped by interactions among numerous variables, making predictability difficult (Kalpazidou Schmidt & Cacace, 2017).

Kalpazidou Schmidt and Cacace (2019) propose three parameters characterising complexity in GEP implementation. First, a *holistic view of structural change* requires addressing multiple dimensions, combining approaches such as “fixing the women,” “fixing the institution,” and “fixing the knowledge” concomitantly. Second, strategies are developed through a *multidimensional notion of power*, meaning that power relations are considered at interpretive, symbolic, institutional, and operational levels (see also Mergaert et al., 2022). Third, *institutional change is viewed as social change*, placing emphasis on activation mechanisms, mobilising agency, accounting for resistances, and attending to the interaction between agency dynamics and structural circumstances.

This study identifies four additional factors that characterise complexity in GEP implementation in academia. First, the *depth of implemented actions*. True institutional change requires transforming organisational structures, logics, and culture rather than relying on less disruptive measures often chosen due to institutional inertia or resistance (Bustelo, 2023). Scholars classify interventions into two categories: structural change measures (e.g., modifying policies and procedures) and preparatory actions (e.g., awareness-raising and training; Sangiuliano et al., 2019). The balance between these two types of interventions is crucial to achieving transformative changes, as an over-reliance on preparatory actions may indicate resistance to deeper transformations.

Second, *flexibility and adaptability*. Institutional change is inherently non-linear and unpredictable, requiring strategies that adapt to shifting contexts and emergent opportunities. As Mergaert et al. (2022) observe, change depends on relationships and context-specific dynamics, with no guarantee that past successes can be easily replicated. In such a context, rigid approaches are ineffective, and dynamic frameworks become essential for sustainable progress (Bustelo, 2023).

Third, addressing the “*dual logic of academia*” (the organisational and the epistemic) simultaneously (Wroblewski & Palmén, 2022). The complexity lies in reshaping the epistemic logic, which involves not only altering organisational structures but also challenging the foundational principles that govern knowledge production and validation within the broader academic system. As Clavero and Galligan (2021) note, “action aimed at effecting institutional change in academic organisations needs to tackle both epistemic privilege

and discrimination, reset a traditional culture that normalises unequal gendered expectations and behaviors, and distribute epistemic-supporting resources in a gender-just manner” (p. 14).

Finally, *contextual differences* add another layer of complexity to institutional change. GEPs, while framed as transnational models, are political processes influenced by local cultural and organisational factors. When policies are translated into actions, they often undergo adaptation, resulting in variations in meaning and application across contexts (Ní Laoire et al., 2021). Tailoring strategies to these specificities is essential to avoid reducing policy goals to technical solutions that neglect local realities. Nevertheless, maintaining a minimum harmonised understanding is crucial for effectively monitoring progress towards a broader collective goal.

We summarise the key parameters that will frame our analysis of how change processes are received, interpreted, and reshaped by different stakeholders at the GEP planning and design stage: adopting a holistic perspective on institutional change that addresses diverse targets; employing a multidimensional approach to challenge gendered institutional power across various levels; understanding institutional change as social change, requiring simultaneous attention to structural adjustments and agency activation; maintaining a balance between structural change interventions and preparatory actions; embracing non-linearity and unpredictability, ensuring flexible and adaptable strategies; addressing the dual logic of academia by engaging with both organisational structures and epistemic frameworks; and considering the influence of contextual specificities on change initiatives’ design and implementation.

4. Methodology

The empirical data for this research derives from two sources: (a) a case study of the GEARING-Roles project, where the authors were part of the coordination team, and (b) interviews with change agents from other FP7 and H2020 GEP-implementing projects.

For the GEARING-Roles case study, we employed a multi-method approach to data collection. Initially, we developed a document analysis of key project materials, including the GEPs of six implementing partners, project reports, and evaluation documents (26 total). Thematic coding identified patterns related to institutional change definitions, GEP implementation processes, and reporting. Additionally, participant observation (Patton, 2002; Pauly, 2010) was conducted over three years (2020–2022) during 49 follow-up meetings and project events. Finally, semi-structured interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Patton, 2002) were conducted with 10 participants, including GEP coordinators, project coordinators, the technical support partner, and the evaluator.

To complement the GEARING-Roles insights, 16 interviews were conducted with change agents representing other FP7 and H2020 GEP-implementing projects. Respondents were selected based on their roles within the structural change project community, ensuring a diverse representation in terms of geography and institutional type. Priority was given to project coordinators, evaluators, or technical support partners, as their roles provided critical insights into GEP implementation and evaluation in various institutional settings. All interviewees were either academics (with or without gender and institutional change expertise) or equality officers.

As shown in Table 1, a total of 24 participants were interviewed, with only one male, highlighting the gendered dynamics of participation in GEPs in academia. The full sample collectively covered insights from 21 projects. Interviews took place between January 2022 and December 2023, primarily through online video calls, with two being in person. Questions focused on participants' understanding of institutional change, the alignment of their interpretations with those of the European Commission, and the evaluation of specific actions. To ensure confidentiality, interviewees were anonymised using numerical identifiers and group samples (e.g., I1_GR for GEARING-Roles' participants; I11_SP for sister project representatives).

Table 1. Interview respondents' details.

Respondent code	Gender	Role	Experience level in institutional change initiatives
I1_GR	Female	Full professor	Expert
I2_GR	Female	Associate professor	Experienced practitioner
I3_GR	Female	Full professor	Active participant
I4_GR	Female	Full professor	Active participant
I5_GR	Female	Associate professor	Expert
I6_GR	Female	Full professor	Expert
I7_GR	Female	Associate professor	Active participant
I8_GR	Female	R&D analyst	Active participant
I9_SP	Female	Full professor	Experienced practitioner
I10_SP	Female	Research director and senior consultant	Expert
I11_SP	Female	Senior researcher and project manager	Expert
I12_SP	Female	Associate professor	Expert
I13_SP	Female	Diversity and inclusion coordinator	Active participant
I14_SP	Female	Full professor	Active participant
I15_SP	Female	Project manager	Active participant
I16_SP	Female	Director equality, diversity and inclusion, and associate professor	Expert
I17_SP	Female	Senior researcher and project manager	Expert
I18_SP	Female	Senior researcher	Expert
I19_SP	Female	Principal research associate and associate professor	Experienced practitioner
I20_SP	Female	Senior researcher	Experienced practitioner
I21_SP	Female	Senior researcher	Expert
I22_SP	Male	Senior researcher	Expert
I23_SP	Female	Senior researcher	Experienced practitioner
I24_SP	Female	Senior researcher	Expert

Notes: Active participant = regular engagement in equality-related initiatives, contributing to both planning and implementation; experienced practitioner = sustained experience, often leading specific activities and projects; expert = extensive experience, typically in leadership or decision-making roles, designing, implementing, or evaluating major gender equality programmes or policies in various settings; I9_SP and I10_SP were interviewed both as members of GEARING-Roles and as change agents with extensive experience in other sister projects, but to maintain consistency, their acronyms will remain "SP"

Interviews were transcribed and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify key project approaches to institutional change, participants' interpretations of the concept, and their alignment with the definitions set out by the European Commission.

For the scope of this study, as both researchers and change agents committed to transforming the academic system (Haraway, 1988; Silvestre et al., 2020), we position ourselves as feminist critical friends (Campanini, 2024; Chappell & Mackay, 2020) to the change agents involved in this research. We approach the cases analysed from an insider, yet critical, perspective, recognising the complexity and non-linear nature of institutional change while drawing conclusions.

5. GEP-Implementing Projects and the GEARING-Roles Case

Early initiatives funded to implement institutional change actions in academic organisations began under FP7, piloting interventions addressing mainly female career progression, leadership, decision-making, and integrating the gender dimension into research. Over time, these pilot initiatives evolved into more coordinated efforts, eventually taking the form of structured GEPs, reflecting the methodology outlined in the GEAR tool (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2016, 2022).

According to the GEAR tool, a GEP is a strategic framework designed to address gender inequalities through specific actions, targets, and monitoring indicators (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2016). Its aim is to integrate gender equality into an institution's standard practices, transforming its culture and operational systems. Successful GEP implementation ensures that gender equality becomes routine in institutional governance, rendering the plan itself redundant over time (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2022).

Under FP7 and H2020, GEP projects were funded as "coordination and support actions", focusing on activities such as standardisation, awareness-raising, networking, and mutual learning. These projects spanned 3–4 years and involved the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of GEPs. Consortia typically included GEP-implementing partners, coordinators, technical support providers, dissemination leads, and evaluators. Progress was monitored by the European Commission and the European Research Executive Agency (REA) through key performance indicators, reports, and review meetings.

The GEARING-Roles case study project, funded under the H2020 call "SwafS-09-2018-2019-2020—Supporting research organisations to implement gender equality plans," spanned four years (2019–2022), implementing GEPs in five universities and one research funding organisation across six countries (Estonia, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Türkiye, and the UK). While following the GEAR tool methodology, each institution tailored its GEP to its needs, with four institution-wide plans and two at the faculty level.

By the time GEARING-Roles was implemented, 20 EU-funded GEP projects had already been completed or were underway, which provided the project team with a solid knowledge base. Rather than "reinventing the wheel," GEARING-Roles focused on refining and enhancing the existing framework, building on insights and good practices from its predecessors.

6. Interpreting Institutional Change: From Policy to Practice

The empirical findings are structured into four themes. First, we examine how GEP-implementing projects conceptualised institutional change, with a particular focus on the GEARING-Roles case study. Next, we analyse how change agents interpret the concept, regardless of project-level definitions. We then assess whether there is alignment between the definition of institutional change adopted by GEP implementers and that of the European Commission, specifically the REA, which reviews and evaluates project reports. This includes analysing how GEP teams reported “institutional changes” to the Commission and, conversely, how the Commission assessed these reported changes—whether they were acknowledged as institutional changes.

6.1. Approaches to Institutional Change: Project Perspectives

From a project perspective, a recurring theme is the initial absence of a standardised definition of institutional change. This reflects the experimental nature of GEPs in European-funded initiatives, often described as “laboratories” (I23_SP) or spaces for “trial and error” (I13_SP). As part of a learning process, the solidification of more structured methods and definitions typically unfolds during the project’s lifecycle, with initial ideas being adapted in response to new insights and shifting priorities (I10_SP, I19_SP, I21_SP).

Comparing FP7 and early H2020 projects with mid-to-late H2020 initiatives reveals a notable evolution in GEP strategies, marked by a transition from broad, undefined goals to more precise, actionable plans. This transition reflects an iterative learning process, where initial understandings of gender equality itself—often narrowly focused on numerical representation—gradually evolved into more sophisticated, multidimensional approaches to institutional transformation (I12_SP, I13_SP).

Looking at the processes adopted by GEP teams to establish their approaches to institutional change, our findings indicate that, in earlier initiatives, project partners devoted more attention to formal discussions aimed at defining institutional change before initiating actions (I11_SP, I16_SP, I23_SP). This focus stemmed from the absence of precedents to inform their strategies (I14_SP). In turn, with the creation of tools specifically tailored to the European context, notably the 2016 GEAR tool, mid-to-late H2020 projects benefitted from a more structured, pre-established framework. Rather than “reinventing the wheel” (I2_GR), they adapted and refined existing frameworks to suit their specific circumstances, streamlining the implementation of GEPs (I8_GR, I12_SP). While this progression facilitated operational efficiency, some respondents highlighted that heavy reliance on pre-existing frameworks might have constrained deeper discussions on the final goal of institutional change, potentially resulting in measures that, though adhering to general operational guidelines, lacked the critical conceptual foundation necessary to foster more transformative change (I11_SP, I13_SP).

In the GEARING-Roles case specifically, participants highlighted the absence of formal occasions where the GEP teams collectively defined institutional change within the project’s scope. Instead, early discussions focused on the processual elements necessary for active change, with less emphasis on interpreting the concept as part of broader strategic feminist goals (I6_GR, I7_GR). In this vein, I1_GR highlighted a recurring tendency to prioritise short-term solutions or “patches” that address immediate needs, leading to fragmented GEPs and often undermining long-term strategic objectives aligned with the broader feminist agenda:

It's important to distinguish between practical needs and strategic interests. Often, we focus on practical needs, which isn't inherently bad, but it doesn't lead to institutional change....Perhaps we are dedicating too much time to the "meantime," and by applying these patches, we fail to generate structural or institutional change because we are not addressing a broader strategic interest. (I1_GR)

Representatives from sister projects echoed these observations, linking the limited theorisation of institutional change to the intervention-oriented focus of GEP-implementing projects, classified as "coordination and support actions." Predominantly operational, these projects demanded significant time and resources for implementation, leaving little room for research activities and conceptual debates (I12_SP, I23_SP). In this context, it often happens that, "initially, everyone assumes that the others have more or less the same idea, and gradually, you realise that things might be a bit more complicated" (I22_SP), as ideas about gender equality and the meanings of institutional change vary significantly across different contexts (see Ní Laoire et al., 2021).

Respondents from the GEARING-Roles project explained that all GEP teams adhered to the five-step methodology proposed by the GEAR tool, while also employing a context-dependent strategy. This allowed for tailored GEPs that addressed the specific conditions of each implementing institution, recognising substantial variations in national and institutional contexts (I1_GR, I2_GR, I4_GR, I6_GR). This adaptability was facilitated through comprehensive baseline gender analyses conducted at each institution during GEP planning. These analyses, often carried out as participatory gender audits, enabled GEP teams to identify context-specific gender issues and prioritise interventions accordingly. For example, institutions with well-established gender equality structures, such as those engaged with the Athena SWAN Charter, used the analyses to refine existing measures and align them with European provisions. Conversely, institutions with limited prior engagement in gender equality initiatives leveraged the audits to raise awareness of gender disparities and build institutional support for change.

Despite not explicitly establishing a shared definition of institutional change, a foundational approach was, in effect, collectively embraced by all GEARING-Roles GEP teams. This approach was largely shaped by the provisions of European policies and guidelines, especially those delineated in the GEAR tool. As noted by I1_GR, although the European Commission does not provide a precise definition of institutional or structural change, it does specify certain areas of intervention (i.e., GEP dimensions) and processual aspects to be followed (i.e., the five-step methodology). These operational guidelines offered a common framework for the GEP teams while also allowing for flexibility in interpreting what constitutes institutional change in practice for each of them.

This context-sensitivity was also identified in sister projects. Interviewees emphasised that the diversity of organisational contexts and expertise among GEP teams complicated the development of a unified approach to institutional change (I12_SP, I16_SP, I17_SP, I20_SP, I21_SP, I23_SP). They highlighted the existence of a "grey zone" (I17_SP) between the overarching policy framework and the specific interpretations of institutional change in different contexts. Geopolitical, cultural, and historical disparities, combined with varying disciplinary backgrounds and levels of gender expertise within consortia, necessitated flexible and adaptable strategies. For example, I13_SP noted that the presence of equality officers in universities varies dramatically across countries. In northern countries such as Germany, such roles are commonplace, whereas in eastern countries, they are virtually non-existent. This disparity reflects differing national and

organisational frameworks but also underscores the need to advocate for foundational structures in settings where gender equality is less established, thus considerably changing the very meaning of institutional change for each of them in practice:

Thinking of institutional change in all these very diverse institutions, we still, of course, had a common ground, and that's a common ground defined by the European agenda for responsible R&I and the pillars...But then what the outcome is would be hugely different, having in mind huge differences among the particular context....These [cultural] things are usually not quantitatively, easily graspable, but are equally important. (I19_SP)

In the beginning, there was hardly any definition of what a GEP is, what structural change means, what organisational change means....Imagine a room full of 60 people: old physicists, some younger social scientists, women in gender studies, feminists....We had beginners and then we had quite like superstars, from the northern countries especially. It took us at least six or eight months before we were able to sit down and say, "What is gender equality? What has to be in there [the GEPs]? What is structural change? (I13_SP)

The generational learning evident in the transition from earlier FP7 projects to H2020 initiatives reveals an iterative process of refining institutional change strategies and a clear progression towards more structured approaches to GEPs. This evolution reflects both the collective learning achieved and the persistent challenges of navigating contextual diversity. While structured methodologies such as the GEAR tool have facilitated operational consistency, they have also raised concerns about inclusivity and representation within the community of scholars and practitioners engaged. Some respondents expressed concerns about the dominance of a small group of institutions, often from northern and western European countries, which have significantly influenced the initial frameworks for institutional change. This dominance raises questions about the diversity of perspectives contributing to the existing models (I19_SP, I23_SP). As newcomers adopt these frameworks, there is a risk of sidelining institutions and countries less involved in the initial discussions, potentially overlooking their unique interests and challenges (see Anagnostou, 2022).

6.2. Approaches to Institutional Change: Change Agents' Perspectives

Shifting from the perspectives of project consortia to those of individual change agents, this section delves into how these agents define institutional change. The interviewees reveal a multifaceted understanding, highlighting the complexity of crafting a universal definition of institutional change, as change processes may vary significantly depending on contextual factors.

When prompted to share their own interpretations, GEP coordinators from GEARING-Roles primarily framed institutional change in operational terms related to GEP implementation. Most interviewees associated the notion with addressing gender issues across the five intervention areas outlined in the GEAR tool: work-life balance, recruitment and career progression, leadership and decision-making, research and curricula, and gender-based violence (I1_GR, I2_GR, I4_GR, I5_GR). One interviewee emphasised transforming institutional values and culture as central to institutional change (I3_GR), while others highlighted the creation of new structures, such as equality bodies (I6_GR, I7_GR). Notably, one respondent explicitly linked institutional change to "something that is really permanent, that will outlast the project" (I8_GR).

Broadening our scope, change agents representing sister projects offered diverse yet interconnected perspectives. While some aligned with an operational understanding of institutional change, focusing on the requisites for GEP implementation (I9_SP, I15_SP), others engaged with broader conceptual debates. Reflecting on a general interpretation, I10_SP defined institutional change as follows:

[Institutional change consists in] the changing of the procedures, the processes, and the values of the organisation, formally and informally. So, formal and informal values, the ways of dealing with each other, institutional culture as well, so it's rather a broad concept. So, the changes towards gender equality, of course, in all these formal and informal elements of the organisation. (I10_SP)

Complementing this perspective, I11_SP and I24_SP outlined that institutional change should be linked to comprehensive strategies that address the interpretive, symbolic, institutional, and operational dimensions of change. Furthermore, I11_SP expanded the concept, placing it within the broader scope of social change. In this definition, institutional change transcends the confines of organisational structures to both influence and be influenced by wider societal norms and structures:

This notion is so wide that we cannot avoid equating it a bit to the notion of social change, because we are talking about gender, which is a basic structure of human and social identity of people, and it permeates all levels of social life....If people are involved, if change is really structural, this will be social change, so it's much broader. (I11_SP)

These contributions align with feminist institutionalist perspectives, which emphasise institutional change as addressing both the tangible elements of an organisation and the intangible cultural symbols and logics that underpin its functioning (Krook & Mackay, 2011). Nevertheless, while these perspectives offer essential insights for constructing a theoretical framework on institutional change, it is necessary "to make a distinction between a theoretical understanding and a practical understanding" (I10_SP), recognising that "it's a practice-based approach" (I22_SP).

In more practical terms, I12_SP, I20_SP, and I22_SP described institutional change as recognising the shift from seeing gender issues as isolated challenges facing individual women to framing them as broader institutional and systemic concerns. As I17_SP argued, institutional change is "a combination of equal opportunities, positive, and gender mainstreaming actions aimed at transforming the entire operation of research institutions."

Practically, there is a recognition that institutional change in academia holds a twofold objective: on the one hand, altering organisations, and on the other, transforming the broader academic system beyond individual organisational settings (I17_SP, I20_SP, I21_SP, I22_SP). I17_SP explained:

The aim is to stimulate inward and outward change at the same time and to set up synergies with targeted external stakeholders so that, at the same time, there are certain actions in the GEPs that are both favouring internal change and triggering change in the European Commission system. (I17_SP)

These ideas highlight the necessity of addressing the "dual logic" of academia, targeting not only organisational but also epistemic dimensions that underpin academic practices (Wroblewski & Palmén,

2022). In this view, change is not about temporary fixes or surface-level adjustments, but a profound, systemic overhaul aimed at rectifying the embedded inequalities within organisational and systemic logics to ensure that gender inequalities are addressed at their structural roots.

As several respondents emphasised, institutional change should be viewed as lasting, sustainable transformation, enduring alterations that extend beyond transient initiatives or short-term projects (I13_SP, I14_SP, I15_SP, I16_SP, I18_SP). Examples of such enduring changes included consistent monitoring and reporting of gender metrics, dedicated budgets for gender equality, and modifications in strategic documents and organisational procedures. This approach would ensure that progress is not eroded but instead built upon, creating a cumulative effect that fosters continuous improvement (see Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2020; Palmén et al., 2019).

Further developing this understanding, interviewees discussed the introduction of intersectionality into GEPs, which broadens the notion of institutional change to encompass dimensions beyond gender. While some institutions have integrated intersectional practices into their GEPs, the depth of implementation remains inconsistent. Challenges include the conceptual ambiguity of intersectionality, a lack of practical examples, and limited institutional data due to regulatory and privacy limitations (I2_GR, I4_GR, I6_GR). Concerns were raised about whether prioritising intersectionality might dilute the focus on gender or vice versa (I24_SP). Despite these barriers, interviewees emphasised the need for pilot initiatives, capacity building, and explicit guidance from the European Commission to support the practical implementation of intersectionality in institutional change efforts (I13_SP, I20_SP, I23_SP).

In sum, comparing the projects' approaches and change agents' interpretations, two key insights emerge. First, there is a notable lack of in-depth discussion among GEP implementers across project consortia regarding the conceptualisation of the institutional change goal. This has resulted in the absence of a clear, shared definition—a challenge that is further complicated by contextual differences in interpreting the concept. Second, change agents' definitions also vary: some emphasised the operational aspects of institutional change, while others critically reflected on its conceptual foundations. While the absence of a precise definition has allowed GEP implementers to adapt to the unique contexts of different institutions, it has also created uncertainties and inconsistencies in how concrete GEP actions are interpreted and evaluated by the European Commission and the GEP teams themselves, as will be examined in the following section.

6.3. Ambiguities in Reporting and Evaluating Institutional Change

This section examines how GEP teams in both GEARING-Roles and other sister projects reported institutional changes to the European Commission (specifically, REA), focusing on the rationale behind classifying specific actions as indicative of institutional change. This analysis offers insights into how institutional change was conceptualised and operationalised in practice.

6.3.1. The GEARING-Roles Case

Throughout GEARING-Roles, REA provided partners with specific reporting tools to document institutional change actions. These mechanisms included an Excel-based reporting template for the first two reporting

periods (2019 and 2020) and an online questionnaire for the final reporting period in 2021. While these tools were intended to standardise reporting and align institutional change actions with the dimensions of responsible research and innovation (RRI), they also introduced significant challenges.

In the Excel-based format, partners were instructed to document institutional change actions and categorise them under predefined dimensions (“public engagement,” “gender equality,” “science education,” “open access/data,” “ethics,” or the comprehensive “RRI package”). Guidelines provided examples of institutional change actions, emphasising changes to governance or institutional structures that were expected to have meaningful and lasting impacts beyond the project’s duration. However, the open-ended nature of these guidelines left considerable room for interpretation, resulting in diverse approaches to classifying and reporting actions.

Project partners faced ambiguity regarding which activities qualified as institutional changes. For instance, interviewees noted that while the Excel format offered flexibility, it also required teams to rely heavily on individual judgment to interpret the guidelines, which were perceived as insufficiently clear (I6_GR):

We had to fill some tables with this kind of information where there has been some discussion about what can be inserted there and what cannot....Everybody can interpret it a little bit differently....Where some institutions have marked something as institutional change, I wouldn’t necessarily say it is. (I8_GR)

This lack of clarity led to variations in what was reported as institutional change, even when similar actions were implemented across institutions. For example, while most partners addressed gender equality through mentoring programmes, training and capacity building, and awareness-raising activities, not all reported these efforts as institutional changes.

The transition to the online questionnaire in the 2021 reporting period aimed to streamline the process by providing a predetermined list of institutional change action types. This format implicitly constrained partners’ interpretations by narrowing the scope of what could be reported. While the online tool allowed for “other” actions to be added, its structured format discouraged the inclusion of less conventional or indirect initiatives. Consequently, partners reported fewer actions compared to earlier periods, potentially underrepresenting the breadth of their institutional change efforts.

An analysis of the reported institutional change actions in such periods reveals both commonalities and variations across the GEP-implementing institutions. Actions reported by all partners included the development, approval, and implementation of GEPs, and the establishment of gender equality structures and personnel. However, discrepancies emerged in the reporting of other initiatives. For instance, some institutions reported the creation of institutional prizes for gender-related research as an institutional change, while others implementing similar initiatives did not. Similarly, actions such as reviewing recruitment and promotion policies, addressing the gender wage gap, and enhancing mechanisms to prevent sexual harassment were inconsistently reported as institutional changes. One interviewee attributed these variations to differences in interpretation, stating the following:

We would say, “Oh, these people [other partners] have written about this as institutional change,” and until then it would not have occurred to us....We are doing it, but we are not considering it as something that should be put in that report. (I6_GR)

These variations underscore the subjective nature of the reporting process, which relied heavily on individual teams' interpretations of institutional change. Notably, it is important to recognise that the cultural and institutional contexts in which these interpretations occurred play a significant role. What may be perceived as smaller, less significant changes in some institutions could, in fact, be regarded as larger, more important changes in others, particularly in contexts marked by entrenched inequality or where the institution has only recently begun to engage seriously with gender equality issues.

REA provided feedback on the institutional change actions reported by partners, evaluating their alignment with the criteria outlined in the reporting guidelines. This feedback aimed to clarify which actions qualified as institutional changes and to ensure consistency across projects. However, an analysis of REA's feedback reveals further inconsistencies and ambiguities in the evaluation process. For example, REA's feedback emphasised that institutional changes must involve modifications to governance or institutional structures and have a lasting impact. Actions deemed "one-off" activities, such as workshops or events, were excluded from this classification. Despite this, some reported actions that aligned with these criteria were not recognised as institutional changes, while others with less evident structural impacts were accepted. This variability in feedback added to the uncertainty faced by GEP teams, as noted by I5_GR: "It's just such a nebulous concept...trying to capture it with those batteries of indicators doesn't fully reflect what institutional change actually entails."

Another challenge in reporting institutional change was the exclusion of indirect initiatives, such as capacity-building and training activities, from the REA's definition of institutional change. While these activities do not directly modify institutional structures, they play a critical role in fostering cultural and behavioural shifts that underpin sustainable change. One interviewee argued that capacity-building efforts "can lead to institutional change" by shaping attitudes and practices, even if they are not immediately recognised as structural modifications (I7_GR). Respondents argued, for instance, that training sessions on inclusive leadership and unconscious bias, while classified as awareness-raising activities, contribute to long-term institutional change by equipping individuals with the knowledge and skills to challenge gender inequalities within their organisations. Similarly, initiatives to integrate gender perspectives into curricula and research foster systemic change by embedding inclusivity into core institutional functions. However, these contributions were often overlooked in the reporting process due to the narrow focus on changes in formal structures.

The rationale employed by REA to classify reported actions as "institutional changes," "not institutional changes," or "potential institutional changes" (for initiatives requiring further development) remains somewhat ambiguous. The feedback provided lacked detailed explanations for these classifications, leaving GEARING-Roles partners uncertain about how to accurately identify and report concrete actions as indicative of institutional change. This ambiguity had several implications for the GEARING-Roles project: It created disparities in how different GEP teams' efforts were represented, potentially underestimating—and also overestimating—their contributions; hindered the development of a shared understanding of institutional change within the consortium; and highlighted the limitations of the European Commission's reporting tools, which prioritised standardisation yet lacked a clearly defined understanding of what was expected from partners and what qualified as institutional changes.

6.3.2. Sister Project Experiences

Echoing the perceptions of respondents from the GEARING-Roles project, representatives from sister projects also expressed concerns regarding the European Commission's communication of the concept of institutional change, noting a general lack of clear guidelines and a cohesive vision for what institutional change actions should encompass:

I don't think that the European Commission has any clear guidelines for what institutional change entails....I consider them very bureaucratic; it is the box-ticking issue. We have to confirm their language, refer to the gender dimension of research, show that our research teams are gender diverse, and that we have clear objectives and that these objectives can be measured at certain moments in time. But I don't think it's a clear vision of what structural transformation entails. (I9_SP)

Similarly, while interviewees appreciated the Commission's role in funding projects and entrusting experts to define concepts and create resources such as the GEAR tool (I10_SP, I18_SP, I23_SP), many expressed a need for additional support (I9_SP, I11_SP). This sentiment underscores a broader ambiguity among sister project representatives concerning the Commission's expectations for GEPs, particularly regarding report and evaluation processes. These concerns spotlight the challenge of effecting structural changes within the constraints of project timelines and point to a perceived disconnect between the support provided by the Commission and the needs of project implementers:

To be honest, we didn't have any sort of control, because what we reported definitely wasn't institutional change....The project's lifetime was just, I think four or three years....We can't see structural change in that timeframe....I don't think they [European Commission] scrutinise it at all....And because I would've had a lot of criticism on our own work—and that never came from the Commission on a qualitative level—I think we might have been confronted with very well-meaning people who just said, "You're doing something good for women, good for you," and a pat on the back. And that was it. (I15_SP)

I don't want to be rude or anything, but I didn't get any idea that I got help from the European Commission....Of course, in the European Commission, there are a lot of experts, and they have guidelines and reports, etc., and those are very helpful....But when you have a grant agreement, you have to do it with the project officer, and having been in EU projects since 2004, I can see that the project officers now have less and less interest in the topic you're dealing with....There used to be project officers really...interested in the topic, and who could really tell you something....I don't see that as a strong suit of the system right now. (I20_SP)

GEP teams reported changes in ways that lack consistency, often viewing reporting mechanisms as procedural rather than substantive, and their evaluation processes failed to capture the complexity of institutional transformation:

They [GEP implementers] have to report back what they promised at the beginning of the project and if they fulfilled their promises at the end. And the point is: For a critical evaluator, that doesn't relate to transformational or institutional change at all; it just relates to the effectiveness of a project. So, they

report in a very instrumental way and reporting mechanisms don't stimulate [us], per se, [to] have a very good overview of our institution's transformation. (I9_GR)

I17_SP and I18_SP recalled that external experts with potentially varying understandings of what constitutes institutional change are brought in to assess the project's progress, and that their interpretations may be stricter and not fully align with the broader, more inclusive definitions envisioned by project implementers:

I remember that in [project name]—and this came quite late after the project was concluded—we received by the project officer a post-project review where they took the entire table of the changes that we reported in each organisation, and they were marking what they considered structural and what they didn't consider structural. And we came to an understanding that they had a more restrictive definition probably of what was to be considered structural and what was not. (I17_SP)

The challenges in the evaluation process were further elaborated by I12_SP, who noted the following:

There are a number of actors within the European Commission who do have a clear understanding of the structural change approach, and then many, many others who do not. This is completely reflected in everything, from how proposals are evaluated to how follow-ups are conducted. (I12_SP)

I12_SP criticises, for instance, the problematic focus on gender balance within project teams—particularly the perceived issue of insufficient male representation—and the reliance on quantitative KPIs for evaluations, highlighting that “structural change is a matter of process, and it's necessary to define it as such and then look for intermediate results and impact, etc.”

7. Conclusions

This study highlights how inconsistencies in framing institutional change contribute to the uneven and slow progress toward gender equality in academia. A critical issue lies in the lack of clarity surrounding the concept of institutional change, which directly influences the design and execution of GEPs. Our findings confirm that the complexity previously identified in the implementation of GEPs (Kalpazidou Schmidt & Cacace, 2019) extends to the planning and design phases, where translating broad policy objectives into actionable strategies is complicated by the difficulty in defining a clear and shared goal of institutional change.

While European policies offer an operational common basis for GEP implementers, considerable inconsistency remains in how stakeholders interpret institutional change. A fundamental is the difficulty of translating broad, policy-level objectives into targeted, context-specific initiatives. This echoes feminist institutionalist perspectives that view institutions as both structural and cultural entities, where formal and informal rules intersect with broader gendered social norms (Krook & Mackay, 2011). The process of moving from policy to practice involves navigating this dynamic interplay between institutional norms, the agency of those driving change (as well as resistant actors), and the overarching goals of European policies. As discussed elsewhere (e.g., Ní Laoire et al., 2021), despite a unified policy framework, implementation takes on different meanings across contexts, and we argue that definitions do as well.

Further complicating matters, our case study revealed inconsistencies in how the European Commission evaluated and classified GEP actions as institutional change. Divergent interpretations of similar actions by the REA created uncertainty among GEP implementers regarding expected outcomes. Such inconsistencies highlight the uneven prioritisation of gender equality within the Commission itself and underscore the need for greater internal cohesion and sustained efforts to advance the agenda (Mergaert, 2012).

On the one hand, as some respondents noted, the conceptual ambiguity around institutional change often results in fragmented GEPs with a short-term focus, lacking a long-term vision aligned with the broader feminist agenda. While flexibility is essential for tailoring GEPs to local realities, the absence of consistent evaluation criteria and clear goals hampers progress monitoring, benchmarking, and collaboration. On the other hand, imposing fully standardised definitions risks reinforcing the “technicalisation” and consequent depoliticisation of institutional change initiatives. Institutional change is inherently political, shaped by power dynamics, resistance, and negotiation. Overly rigid definitions may reduce GEPs to compliance-driven exercises, stripping them of their transformative potential.

In the European context, where GEP policies are increasingly harmonised yet implemented within vastly different institutional, cultural, and political landscapes, balancing coherence and adaptability is crucial. A shared understanding of institutional change can provide much-needed direction, but it must not translate into a one-size-fits-all approach that disregards local specificities. The challenge lies in developing frameworks that offer clear guidance while allowing institutions the autonomy for meaningful, context-sensitive change. As Kalpazidou Schmidt and Cacace (2019) note, “a difficult balance is indeed to be found between flexibility and adaptation, on the one hand, and the need to outline a path and provide indications for action, on the other” (p. 324). Finding this balance requires both conceptual clarity and mechanisms to prevent institutional change from becoming a depoliticised bureaucratic exercise.

This need raises the question of whether we should “fix the method” by restructuring initiatives to better address the challenges and contextual diversities faced by stakeholders. Instead of large-scale, pan-European projects that bring together highly diverse institutions, a more regionally focused model should be further explored—an approach already being implemented through the WIDERA work programmes. A regional model may allow for more targeted interventions tailored to the specific needs and constraints of institutions within similar socio-political environments; however, this shift must be carefully designed to avoid unintended consequences, such as reinforcing regional divides or excluding institutions that could benefit from transnational collaboration.

To conclude, recognising that institutional change is both a conceptual and practical endeavour, and aligning with this article’s objective of defining institutional change, we contribute to the discourse on GEP-driven transformation in academia by offering a dual approach: a theory-based definition that situates institutional change within existing scholarly debates, and a practice-oriented definition that reflects its operationalisation in real-world contexts. By bridging these perspectives, we aim to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how institutional change unfolds through GEPs, addressing both its theoretical underpinnings and the practical challenges of implementation.

From a theoretical point of view, grounded in feminist institutionalist theory, institutional change towards gender equality in academia can be conceptualised as an incremental process driven by the bounded agency

of change agents and shaped by the dynamic interplay between agency (in its transformative and resistant forms) and institutional structures. This process seeks to transform both formal and informal institutional rules underpinning the dual logic of academia—the organisational and the epistemic—by challenging established gendered power dynamics to gradually reshape the status quo over the long term.

From a practice-oriented perspective, institutional change towards gender equality in academic settings can be understood as a strategic and ongoing process of transforming the very “fabric” of institutions, ultimately leading to substantial changes in their structures, rules, logics, and culture through an intersectional lens. These processes must be at the core of institutional priorities, engaging stakeholders at all institutional layers and addressing inequalities across multiple strategic areas, thereby fixing both organisational features *and* the knowledge production logics. Change-oriented interventions should concomitantly contribute to short-, medium-, and long-term goals, ensuring that they are context-sensitive to meet institutional needs while also remaining aligned with broader feminist strategic objectives. Finally, institutional change strategies must be designed to sustain transformative progress, ensuring that reforms are durable, integrated into the institution’s long-term vision and practices, and capable of influencing the broader academic system.

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Gender Equality Plans and Inclusiveness in the European Research Area

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Abstract

Gender equality is a key objective of the European Research Area. The arsenal of gender equality concepts has expanded considerably over the past decades—from gender mainstreaming in the 1990s to the current inclusion, diversity, and intersectionality approaches. Gender equality plans (GEPs) are key to increasing gender equality. With the launch of Horizon Europe, the European Union’s research and innovation program 2021–2027, the European Commission introduced a new eligibility criterion: To be eligible, any research-performing organization (RPO) applying for funding, except private companies, must have a GEP in place. There is little evidence on the prevalence of GEPs at RPOs, and if they incorporate concepts about inclusiveness, which is increasingly intended. To address this knowledge gap, we present the first results of a unique mixed-method study that combines online survey data ($N = 270$) and web-scraping data ($N = 6,475$). Almost half of the studied organizations (41%) have a GEP. Our results show differences for organization types, i.e., private companies are less likely to have one (6%). Moreover, the intersectionality approach (14%) is less frequently used in GEPs than inclusion (76%) and diversity (80%). Diversity as an approach is significantly more widespread in Northwestern Europe compared to Central Eastern and Southern European countries. Based on our study, we recommend that policymakers develop measures for private companies as well and call for further support to develop intersectional and inclusive approaches of GEPs in RPOs.

Keywords

diversity; European Research Area; gender equality plans; Horizon Europe; inclusion; intersectionality

1. Introduction

Gender equality is a core value of the European Union (EU), and it is enshrined in the EU treaties (European Commission, 2021c, p. 6). The EU is committed to advancing gender equality in all areas, including research and innovation. Not only should education and science be accessible regardless of gender, but everyone should have an opportunity to acquire and contribute to scholarship and scientific knowledge. The prevailing narrative is one of “inclusive excellence,” which holds that diversity in science and research will increase innovation and excellence (Zippel et al., 2016).

Measured by the proportion of women in research (as one possible numerical indicator for gender equality), progress toward greater gender equality is far too slow: The *She Figures 2024* report (European Commission, 2025b), which provides comparable pan-European data on developments toward gender equality in research and innovation, shows that women accounted for around one third of the total population of researchers in the European research landscape (p. 11).

The European Commission’s arsenal of concepts of “gender equality” has expanded considerably over the past decades. A boost to equality policies has been “gender mainstreaming” in the 1990s (Rees, 1998). This approach enabled more far-reaching change towards gender equality in Europe, because it “mainstreams” the systematic analysis of all organizational procedures with respect to gender equality. In recent years, the focus has been broadened to include the concepts of “inclusion” and “intersectionality” (Crenshaw, 1989) into the framework of the European Commission (2020, 2022). Both approaches call for gender equality approaches that include various geographic and sectoral levels and acknowledge the intersection of inequalities.

GEPs are key to achieving institutional change in research and innovation organizations (European Commission, 2012, 2021c). A GEP is defined by the Horizon Europe program as “a set of commitments and actions that aim to promote gender equality in an organization through a process of structural change” (European Commission, 2021b, p. 11). The eligibility criteria require that a GEP include the following: (a) be publicly available; (b) include dedicated resources; (c) establish mechanisms for data collection and monitoring; and (d) implement activities aimed at raising awareness and providing training on gender equality (European Commission, 2021b, p. 9). This study adopts the Horizon Europe definition of GEP due to its practical applicability to both data collection methods (online survey and web scraping) and its alignment with current EU policy frameworks. Furthermore, this standardized definition allows for the comparability of results across the sampled countries. Under Horizon Europe (2021–2027), the European Commission’s research and innovation program, all higher education institutions and research organizations applying for research funding (except private companies) must have a GEP in place (European Commission, 2021a, 2021b). However, knowledge about the prevalence, characteristics, and implementation of GEPs in the European Research Area (ERA) is scarce, and even less is known about the extent to which GEPs adopt an inclusive or intersectional perspective (ERAC Standing Group on Gender in Research and Innovation, 2021; European Commission, 2015, 2025a; European Institute for Gender Equality, 2016; Research Council of Norway, 2016). This contribution addresses this research gap.

The research questions are:

1. How prevalent are GEPs in research-performing organizations (RPOs) across the ERA?

2. What underlying concepts of gender equality, equality, and inequalities are mentioned in the GEPs, and how do they differ by organizational and regional context?
3. What understanding of gender is expressed in the GEPs, and how do organizational characteristics or regional contexts favor gender inclusiveness?

Insights from this study will inform policymakers about reliable data to shape gender equality approaches more precisely and will give input for social scientists about the distribution of gender equality approaches in European research organizations on a large scale. Our main aim is to describe the phenomenon on a broad scale, instead of an in-depth analysis of case studies.

The data collected comprises online survey data and web-scraping data. Using this mixed-method approach, we investigated organizations in 27 EU member states and five associated countries. The data has been gathered in the context of the EU-funded project INSPIRE, which deals with methods for monitoring of GEPs in Europe. This contribution addresses another research gap concerning how these two methodologies make it possible to relate to each other different results and to compare the methodologies for monitoring processes.

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 presents hypotheses based on the literature review and provides an overview of the changes in equality concepts in the European research landscape and the policy background of the European Commission. Section 3 outlines the methods and data of the current study, while Section 4 presents the results. Finally, Section 5 summarizes the findings and provides recommendations.

2. Changes in Equality Policies: From Gender Mainstreaming Toward Inclusive GEPs in the ERA

A first survey study by the European Commission (2015, p. 115) found that 36% of the 200 responding RPOs in the EU-28 had adopted a GEP. However, surveys have the disadvantage of relying on the response rate, which is, on average, very low. On the other side, they provide more in-depth information. Another study by the European Commission used web-scraping techniques to measure the prevalence of gender equality measures in the ERA “by capturing the proportion of research organizations whose websites report that they have taken actions and measures towards gender equality” (European Commission, 2021c, p. 168). The web-scraping data showed that in the majority of ERA countries, “more than 50% of higher education institutions mentioned actions and measures towards gender equality on their websites” (European Commission, 2021c, p. 169). This method has the advantage that it is independent of responsiveness. Its disadvantage is that it requires publicly available information about gender equality activities on the websites. This is the reason why we use a mixed-method approach, which combines the advantages of both approaches and reduces the disadvantages.

In recent decades, the arsenal of “gender equality” approaches has changed considerably in the European context. In the 1990s, the idea of mainstreaming equality (Rees, 1998) boosted the spread of organizational strategies towards gender equality. It declares that every organizational procedure has to be systematically analyzed with regard to gender equality (Danowitz & Bendl, 2010; Rees, 2012; Woodward, 2003). Further, it does not contain a clear set of goals and instruments (Verloo, 2007; Walby, 2005; Woodward, 2003); thus, every organization must spell out its goals for gender equality itself, which makes it time- and cost-intensive. Gender mainstreaming gained attention already in 1994 when the Council of Europe established a Steering

Committee for Equality between Women and Men. Five years later, gender mainstreaming was established as a policy strategy in the EU with the ratification of the Treaty of Amsterdam, and national governments committed to implementing it in public institutions, including universities. Based on this, our first hypothesis is:

H1 (GEP prevalence): “Gender equality plans” are more prevalent than “gender equality and diversity plans” and “diversity, equity, and inclusion plans” in RPOs in the ERA.

In recent decades, “gender mainstreaming” has been joined by three other concepts—“diversity,” “intersectionality,” and “inclusion”—which have been introduced in the field with the aim of supporting equality and challenging the understanding of gender (Danowitz & Bendl, 2010). Although these approaches differ in their origins and focus, they have in common that they are somewhat abstract and are discussed very controversially in academia, social movements, and practice fields (Riegraf et al., 2010).

Diversity management is a human resource strategy that celebrates difference among the workforce, and by doing so, it tries to decrease discriminatory exclusion. Companies and other organizations, therefore, began to develop anti-discriminatory measures focused on different lifestyles and social backgrounds, not only gender inequalities (Dennissen et al., 2020). Diversity management is seen as an organizational response to the anti-discrimination movements in the USA in the early 1980s (Danowitz & Bendl, 2010). Anti-discrimination laws became established in the US-American context, applying to both the public and private sectors. There is also some evidence that there are regional differences in the distribution of the idea of diversity in Europe. In the UK and Ireland, diversity is stronger than only gender equality approaches (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019; Grant & Allweiss, 2014; Xiao et al., 2020). The Athena SWAN Charter, which was introduced in the UK in 2005 and has since been expanded to Ireland and Australia, and recently to the USA and Canada, also boosts the diversity, equality, and inclusion approach (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019; Xiao et al., 2020).

In Europe, the idea of diversity received legal acclamation through the spread of anti-discrimination laws in the EU between 2000 and 2004 (Sauer & Wöhl, 2008; van der Haar & Verloo, 2013). Similar to the USA, European countries have committed to prohibiting by law various grounds of discrimination besides gender and have introduced the diversity approach. However, diversity was only introduced after the gender mainstreaming approach had already become widespread in Europe. In contrast to the US-American path, in the European context, some countries had already established legislation to promote gender equality before this anti-discriminatory legislation came (ERAC Standing Group on Gender in Research and Innovation, 2021). So in many European countries, diversity plays a minor role as an approach in comparison to gender equality, like Germany (Riegraf & Weber, 2017; Zippel et al., 2016), Austria (Wroblewski & Lipinsky, 2018), and Sweden (Husu, 2019).

Based on the literature reviewed above, we propose a second hypothesis:

H2 (regional context): The concept of diversity is more prevalent in countries in Northwestern Europe than in other country clusters.

Our third hypothesis derives from the literature about the fact that anti-discrimination laws apply to both public- and private-sector employers, and that in private companies, diversity and inclusion concepts are more

highlighted instead of intersectionality (Boxenbaum, 2006; Hansen & Seierstad, 2017; McKinsey & Company, 2020; Tandé, 2017):

H3 (organization types): In private companies, diversity- and inclusion-related concepts are more widespread than intersectionality-related ones.

Diversity management is an approach that focuses more on individual differences than structural inequalities (Ely & Thomas, 2001). Accordingly, there has been a great deal of debate as to what differences should be addressed by the concept of diversity and how these differences relate to each other in the scholarly discussion. Overall, there are also some regional specificities in how diversity is used. In the US-American context, diversity in higher education is very much linked to race and ethnicity (Grant & Allweiss, 2014, p. 34). In Spain and the UK, the idea of diversity tends to be related more to support for students and to the notion of disability and learning difficulties (Hardy & Woodcock, 2015; Klein, 2016; Mora et al., 2021), whereas in other European countries it is connected to support for ethnic minorities in academia (Groeneveld & Verbeek, 2012; Weber, 2017). In the UK, it also has a strong emphasis on sexual orientation (Raja et al., 2023).

Our fourth hypothesis addresses the link between the inequality dimensions addressed and the underlying concept of gender equality adopted in GEPs:

H4 (diversity and inclusion approach): If an organization addresses inequalities related to race/ethnicity or disability in its GEP, it is more likely to adopt a diversity or inclusion approach in the GEP.

Intersectionality, the third important concept discussed in the context of gender equality policies, refers to the realization that dimensions of inequality are not simply additive but rather overlap and interact with each other (Crenshaw, 1989). Gallego-Noche et al. (2021) noted that:

The concept of intersectionality has become a springboard for the analysis of power relations that produce inequalities and oppression and has given way for the need for critical inquiry that questions educational practices and political interventions that are incapable of responding to non-hegemonic realities. (p. 83)

In the literature, intersectionality is linked mainly to criticism of the three main systems of oppression: patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism. In contrast, managing diversity has been criticized for its individualized recognition of differences that could lead to the instrumentalization of differences for organizational performance (Groeneveld & Verbeek, 2012). In this way, it matches neoliberal interests and ignores structural and systematic discrimination (Davis, 2008; McCall, 2005). On the other hand, both diversity and intersectionality are concepts that are not directly linked to specific inequalities—not even gender. However, intersectionality is more connected to criticism of power relations, whereas diversity is seen as less powerful in criticizing systemic disadvantages and is easily linked to economic logics and human resources strategies (Davis, 2008; McCall, 2005).

Overall, the literature prompts us to propose the following hypothesis:

H5 (intersectionality): If an organization addresses inequalities based on race/ethnicity or class in its GEP, it is more likely to adopt an intersectionality approach in the GEP.

Inclusion refers to the social right to participate in all areas of society, including education and science. Inclusion is often mentioned together with diversity and equity (Booyesen et al., 2018). It primarily refers to measures in the context of diversity policies that aim to increase and improve the participation of socially marginalized groups. In our article, we focus on gender inclusiveness, which we define as the overcoming of the binary understanding of gender that excludes, for example, LGBTQ+ people. In some national contexts, for example in Germany, legislation has been introduced that acknowledges a third gender identity besides female and male. However, communities also point to the fact that some people prefer to identify as “non-binary” or “trans*” rather than as a third gender. The social acceptance and the legal situation of non-binary, trans, and queer people vary widely across Europe (Strube et al., 2021). This makes it difficult to establish standards for data collection.

Our final hypothesis addresses the question of whether the region in which an organization is located impact the gender inclusiveness of its GEP:

H6 (gender inclusiveness—region): The region in which an organization is located impacts the gender inclusiveness of its GEP.

3. Data and Methods

In this article, we present the findings of a study conducted within the framework of the INSPIRE project. The INSPIRE project investigates the feasibility of monitoring GEPs in RPOs in the ERA. To this end, we devised a set of indicators pertaining to the prevalence, characteristics, implementation, and assessment of the impact of GEPs (Löther et al., 2024a). In this article, we will limit the evaluation to data that provide information about the characteristics of GEPs, and the equality concepts mentioned (gender equality, diversity, intersectionality, and gender inclusiveness).

We used two methods of data collection: an online survey and web scraping. The sample for both methodological approaches was extracted from the CORDIS database of research projects funded under Horizon 2020 (European Union, 2022). The CORDIS Horizon 2020 database is particularly valuable for this study as it: (a) includes a wide range of organizations, such as higher education institutions, research organizations, and private companies; (b) covers organizations from over 30 European countries; (c) allows the assessment of the voluntary adoption of GEPs, as it predates the introduction of the GEP eligibility criterion under Horizon Europe; and (d) represents a closed program, ensuring that the sample remains fixed and unaffected by subsequent changes. While the CORDIS Horizon 2020 database provides high-quality data on research-active institutions, it may not fully represent the broader population of European RPOs. Its focus on organizations involved in EU-funded projects may introduce a potential bias towards more internationally engaged and policy-oriented institutions; accordingly, the findings primarily generalize to these institutions.

Both data collection methods were employed during the same time span to determine the most reliable approach to monitor GEPs (for details, see Löther et al., 2024b). Throughout the article, we analyze the online survey and web scraping data separately, selecting the appropriate source based on the hypothesis being tested (see Table S3 in the Supplementary File).

Our study covers 27 EU member states and five associated countries (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Norway, Switzerland, Serbia, and the UK). The countries are clustered in the four European regions in our analysis: Northwestern, Central Western, Central Eastern, and Southern (see Table S4 in the Supplementary File) (for details on the sampling methodology, see Löther et al., 2024a).

3.1. Online Survey

The aim of the survey is to monitor the prevalence, characteristics, implementation, and impact of GEPs across Europe. For the online survey, a pilot study was conducted from February 28 to March 27, 2024, in which the questionnaire was tested in 83 organizations in Germany, Estonia, Greece, and Ireland. The full survey was conducted from July 4 to August 19, 2024, with a sample of 4,571 organizations. The reduction in the survey sample size compared to the initial sample size was due to challenges encountered during the automated email extraction process (for details, see Löther et al., 2024b). The survey is designed at the supra-institutional level and targets a responsible person(s) from each organization. A hierarchical ranking system is implemented to extract the responsible person's email. This system prioritizes roles, giving preference to gender equality officers, followed by rectors, presidents, and CEOs; then, heads of administration and HR departments; and finally, heads of communication departments. In order to mitigate the low response rate, we translated the online survey—originally in English—into German, Polish, French, and Spanish, and sent two reminders in these languages for both the pilot and full-sample surveys. However, our efforts resulted in only 281 valid responses. Because we do not analyze research funding organizations in this contribution, the final number of responses analyzed is 270.

3.2. Web Scraping

The term “web scraping” refers to the automated process of collecting data from websites, typically using web-scraping software (Luscombe et al., 2022; Maares & Weltefrede, 2012). Our web-scraping approach comprised four steps: (a) selection of a web-scraping tool; (b) selection of appropriate search terms; (c) development of a methodology to reveal the indicator “prevalence”; and (d) development of a methodology to download GEPs (Löther et al., 2024a).

3.2.1. Tool Selection

We also conducted a pilot study for web scraping tools using the same 83 organizations surveyed in the pilot survey. After running a benchmark test on the domains of the pilot sample and carefully assessing the most advantageous tool, we opted to use SerpAPI. This tool met all selection requirements, including scalability, ease of use, no IP blocking, and reliable data extraction (for a comparison of the three web scraping tools tested, SerpAPI, OpenSearchServer, and Scrapy, see Löther et al., 2024a).

3.2.2. Selection of Appropriate Search Terms

We began by developing search terms in English, which we then translated into the 25 languages of the sample countries and validated with experts. Our method of developing search terms focused on terms explicitly associated with GEPs and was tailored to all sample countries by experts. In specific multilingual countries, the language used depended on the location of the targeted organization: in Switzerland, French, Italian, and German are used; in Belgium, French and Dutch; in Luxembourg, German; and in Malta and Ireland, English.

3.2.3. Development of a Methodology to Reveal the Indicator “Prevalence”

In this study, the prevalence of GEPs refers to the presence or absence of a GEP for a given organization. In the web-scraping method, prevalence is determined by the relevant search terms in the organization’s webpages. In contrast, the online survey captures not only the existence of a GEP but also additional details such as the type of plan (Löther et al., 2024a). Therefore, detecting search terms in webpages was essential to estimate the prevalence of GEPs through web scraping. We eliminated duplicated and invalid URLs from the original sample ($N = 6,947$). For the analysis in this article, we excluded research funding organizations from the sample, bringing the total sample size for web scraping to 6,475. We developed a streamlined and comprehensive four-step technique to build a scraper to determine the prevalence of GEPs. This four-step process began with an initial search using English keywords (e.g., “gender equality plan”), followed by a search using local language keywords (e.g., *Gleichstellungsplan* in Germany), an extended search with additional English terms, and finally an extended search with additional local language terms. Our search strategy was iterative, with each step searching for a maximum of 10 results; if none were found, it moved on to the next step. The search process ended when 10 results were found, or all steps were completed. Based on the pilot study of 83 organizations, our web scraping approach for identifying the prevalence of GEPs achieved an accuracy rate of 92%.

3.2.4. Development of a Methodology to Download GEPs

For analyzing the characteristics of the GEPs, it was necessary to detect the correct file and download it; for this, we designed a second script. For reasons of efficiency and resource constraints, we only used English search terms when downloading GEPs via web scraping. The web scraper indicated more documents (7,006 PDFs) than we had organizations in the sample (6,475). In the next step a classification was needed to detect the correct ones. We developed an intermediate classification process called metadata analysis to determine the correct PDFs (i.e., GEPs). The metadata analysis relied on identifying relevant keywords within the file name, initial page, and document metadata (e.g., document title, meta-keywords). We obtained 1,552 PDFs after conducting the metadata analysis. We successfully converted 1,518 PDFs to plain text format (.txt) for text analysis, while 34 corrupted PDFs could not be processed. After further cleaning steps, we had 816 correct files of GEPs.

For the text analysis, we operationalized our indicators by looking for specific search terms within the GEPs and employing standalone and normal string-matching approaches using the regular expression library in Python (i.e., *Regex*). We extracted information for the indicators, including diversity, gender diversity, intersectionality, and inequality dimensions such as race, nationality, religion, class, age, sexual orientation, and disability. Because GEPs, by definition, address gender issues, we did not treat gender as a distinct or separate dimension in our analysis.

3.3. Limitations

The present study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, our text analysis relies on publicly available GEPs obtained through web scraping, which may be outdated in some cases. Second, anti-bot measures implemented by websites can pose challenges to downloading GEPs via web scraping, potentially limiting the dataset. Third, due to methodological constraints, our text analysis of the scraped GEPs was restricted to those published in English. As a result, the downloaded GEPs are in English only, omitting those available only in local languages. In fact, many GEPs were available in English, as we noted during the pilot phase: 31 out of 44 GEPs were in English (see Löther et al., 2024a). While this allowed us to examine GEPs across Europe, it excluded GEPs available only in local languages, which may lead to an underrepresentation of diversity, inclusion, and intersectionality issues in non-Anglophone countries. Additionally, text analysis inherently depends on specific search terms and their capacity to capture relevant content, which may not encompass all relevant aspects.

Although the survey is subject to nonresponse bias, this primarily affects the prevalence estimates of GEPs; the content-related questions remain valid and comparable, as they focus on the substance of the GEPs. However, it is important to note that survey participation depends on the willingness of invitees, and in our case, the response rate was quite low at 6%. The low response rate can be attributed to the low quality of the email addresses (the majority were impersonal) and the field period (summer break season). Due to the project design, we were unable to determine further efforts for email extraction and timing. A further contributing factor was nonresponse bias: The vast majority (95%) of survey respondent organizations reported that they had a GEP or equivalent. This means that organizations that were not engaged with gender equality policies were less likely to respond to the survey. This non-response bias is further supported by the web scraping results, which indicate a much lower GEP prevalence of 41%. This highlights the importance of combining multiple methodological approaches to strengthen the robustness of data and findings.

4. Empirical Results

4.1. Prevalence of GEPs in Europe

In this section, we address our first research question about the prevalence of GEP at organizations in the ERA (Section 3.2.3) and present only our web-scraping data, because the survey data is not reliable for this, as explained in Section 3.3.

Web-scraping data allowed us to assess the prevalence of GEPs across different organization types (see Table 1) and country clusters (see Table 2) in the ERA. The results of the web scraping showed that the prevalence rate of GEPs was 41% ($N = 6,475$).

Table 1. GEP prevalence by organization type based on web-scraping data.

Organization type	N	GEP prevalence by organization type
Higher education sector	1,389	83.15%
Research organizations	2,641	49.67%
Private companies	2,445	6.42%
Total	6,475	40.52%

Table 2. GEP prevalence by country clusters based on web-scraping data.

Country clusters	N	GEP prevalence by country clusters
Central Eastern	1,042	51.91%
Northwestern	1,076	40.42%
Southern	1,719	39.67%
Central Western	2,638	36.61%
Total	6,475	40.52%

The web-scraping data show substantial differences between organizational types (Table 1). GEP prevalence ranged from 6% for private companies ($n = 2,445$) to 83% for higher education institutions ($n = 1,389$). There are also regional differences: Central Eastern countries show a higher prevalence of GEPs (52%) than Central Western (37%). However, this may be due to a sample effect, as the Central Western sample includes a larger number of private companies, which used to have a lower prevalence of GEPs.

The discrepancy between the web scraping data and the survey data on prevalence we attribute to nonresponse bias in the survey, driven by (a) greater willingness to participate among organizations that already have GEPs, (b) capacity constraints in under-resourced organizations, (c) lower response rates among those unfamiliar with gender-equality terminology, and (d) limited engagement from private companies. A 95% prevalence rate was observed in the online survey, coupled with the exceptionally low participation of private companies (only 7 out of 270), which supports this hypothesis.

4.2. Characteristics of the GEPs

Our survey results provided information about the characteristics of GEPs. Among the respondent organizations that have a GEP or equivalent, the majority of them (60%) reported that they had a GEP (focusing primarily on gender equality) and no other equivalent plan, while 22% stated having a “gender equality and diversity plan (including several inequalities but focusing on gender)” and no other equivalent plan, 5% indicated having a “diversity, equity and inclusion plan (dealing with several inequalities without highlighting one)” and no other equivalent plan. Twelve percent of the respondent organizations indicated that they had at least two kinds of these plans. To test whether the distribution of responses varied significantly across the three main types of plans reported, we conducted a chi-square test, the results of which yielded a value of 197.03 with 2 degrees of freedom, which was statistically significant ($p = 0.000$). A chi-square test is appropriate here because it compares the observed and expected frequencies across multiple categorical groups (the three plan types) under the null hypothesis of a uniform distribution. The result indicates that the three types of plans are not distributed uniformly across the dataset. Thus, our survey results suggest that GEPs are more prevalent in Europe compared to “gender equality and diversity plans” and “diversity, equity, and inclusion plans.”

This confirms H1: Plans named GEPs are the most common across the ERA.

4.3. Equality Concepts Mentioned in GEPs

In this section, we analyze which explicit equality concept is mentioned in the GEP: First, the text analysis of the downloaded GEPs ($N = 816$) reveals that “diversity” was the most frequently mentioned equality concept (80%), followed by “inclusion” (76%), and “intersectionality” (14%; see Figure 1). Second, the results of the online survey confirm the dominance of the concept of “diversity,” which was used by the majority of respondent organizations (62%) in their GEPs. By contrast, 34% of respondent organizations claim to use the term “intersectionality.”

Additionally, we investigated potential regional differences to determine whether the diversity concept was more prevalent in the Northwestern country cluster than in other country clusters (H2). As Figure 1 shows, the term “diversity” was more prevalent in the GEPs in the Northwestern country cluster (88%) than in the Central Western (83%), Central Eastern (73%), and Southern (73%) clusters. We used a t -test for unequal variances (also known as Welch’s t -test) to test the significance. We used Welch’s t -test on our 0/1 “diversity” indicator because the mean of a binary variable is its prevalence, so testing for differences in means directly tests for differences in proportions. Welch’s version also handles unequal variances between clusters. The diversity concept was more prevalent in the Northwestern cluster compared with both the Central Eastern clusters and the Southern cluster, with statistically significant differences ($p = 0.0002$ and $p = 0.0003$). However, diversity was not mentioned statistically significantly more often in the Northwestern cluster compared with the Central Western cluster due to insufficient evidence ($p = 0.1137$). Among the country clusters, the Northwestern cluster also had the highest percentage of intersectionality (23%). This suggests that initiatives like Athena SWAN have more strongly spread the “diversity” approach in this region (Xiao et al., 2020).

H2 is partly confirmed by the fact that diversity is more widespread in the Northwestern countries in comparison to Central Eastern and Southern Europe, but not in comparison to Central Western Europe.

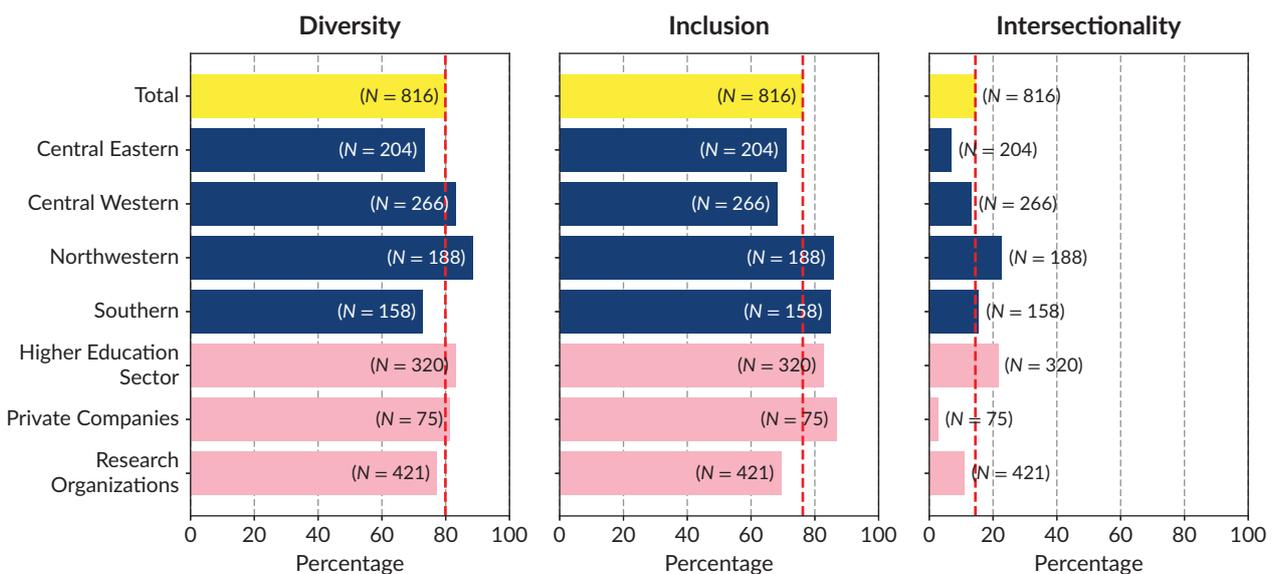


Figure 1. Frequency of mentions of diversity, inclusion, and intersectionality in the GEPs captured via web scraping, by country clusters and organization type.

It is apparent from Figure 1 that the organization type is also a factor for a certain type of equality concept. The concepts of diversity and intersectionality were more prevalent in GEPs of organizations in the higher education sector than in GEPs of other types of organizations. Furthermore, the differences between higher education institutions and other types of organizations were greater for “intersectionality” than for “diversity,” indicating that “intersectionality” is a more academic approach.

This finding supports H3, that private companies were considerably more likely to adopt the concepts of diversity or inclusion than intersectionality. Among organizational types, private companies ranked highest for the concept of inclusion (87%), second highest for diversity (81%), and lowest for intersectionality (3%), indicating that the diversity and inclusion approaches are more pronounced in companies. We conducted McNemar’s non-parametric test to analyze paired nominal data—specifically, to evaluate whether there was a significant difference in proportions between two related groups (McNemar, 1947; Pembury Smith & Ruxton, 2020). The McNemar test is particularly appropriate for this analysis because it is well-suited to examining related data such as information from the same organizations. We examined the following two hypotheses. The first null hypothesis was that the proportion of private companies adopting the diversity approach was equal to the proportion of private companies adopting the intersectionality approach. The second null hypothesis was that the proportion of private companies adopting the inclusion approach was equal to the proportion of private companies adopting the intersectionality approach. We strongly rejected both null hypotheses, as the exact p -values for both tests were 0.0000. These results indicate that private companies were much more likely to adopt diversity or inclusion than an intersectionality approach, highlighting a significant difference in adoption rates. This finding is consistent with studies observing that private sector companies emphasize diversity and inclusion over intersectionality (Boxenbaum, 2006; Hansen & Seierstad, 2017; McKinsey & Company, 2020; Tandé, 2017).

The concepts of diversity and inclusion are significantly more prevalent in private companies than the concept of intersectionality—confirming H3.

4.4. How Inequalities Addressed in GEPs Are Related to Equality Concepts

We examined whether mentioning specific dimensions of inequality in the GEPs influenced the likelihood that those plans also mention diversity, inclusion, and intersectionality to answer our second research question and H4 (diversity and inclusion approach) and H5 (intersectionality). We derived both inequality dimensions and equality concepts from GEPs obtained via web scraping, then used text analysis to determine whether each specific inequality and concept was mentioned. To determine how inequality dimensions mentioned in the GEPs affect equality concepts mentioned in the GEP (i.e., diversity, inclusion, and intersectionality), we constructed a logistic regression model, as indicated below by Equation 1, in which the dependent variables are binary measures of whether an organization mentioned a diversity, inclusion, or intersectionality concept in its GEP. In other words, if an organization mentions the diversity concept, then the first dependent variable will be equal to one; otherwise, it will be zero. If an organization mentioned an inclusion approach, the second dependent variable will be equal to one; otherwise, it will be zero. The third dependent variable is equal to one if the organization mentioned the concept of intersectionality; otherwise, it will be zero. Logistic regression is particularly useful because it models the probability of a binary outcome—the presence or absence of each concept mentioned in a GEP—as a function of mentioned inequalities in the GEP, providing easily interpretable odds ratios that quantify the strength of each predictor. Our constructed model is demonstrated by Equation 1.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{logit}(P(Y = 1 | \chi_i)) = & \\ & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot \text{Race}_i + \beta_2 \cdot \text{Nationality}_i + \beta_3 \cdot \text{Religion}_i + \beta_4 \cdot \text{Class}_i + \beta_5 \cdot \text{Age}_i \\ & + \beta_6 \cdot \text{Sexual Orientation}_i + \beta_7 \cdot \text{Disability}_i + \gamma \cdot \text{Country Fixed Effects}_i + \\ & + \delta \cdot \text{Activity Type Fixed Effects}_i \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

The independent variables are the inequality dimensions extracted from the captured GEPs: race, nationality, religion, class, age, sexual orientation, and disability. All independent variables are binary and constructed in the same way: If the inequality dimension was mentioned in the GEP, then it takes a value of 1; otherwise, it is zero. To reduce potential omitted variable bias, we inserted two fixed effects into the equation. The first fixed effect is γ ; it represents the country fixed effect and captures any particular time-invariant effect that belongs to countries, such as cultural factors, national policies, and legislation. The second fixed effect is δ , which represents an organization-type fixed effect and captures any organization-specific characteristics. In addition, we addressed potential heteroskedasticity in our estimation by employing robust standard errors.

Table 3. Results of the logistic regression to determine how the inequality dimensions affect equality concepts mentioned in the GEPs captured via web scraping and text analysis.

Independent variables	Dependent variables		
	(1) Diversity	(2) Inclusion	(3) Intersectionality
Race/ethnicity	0.823*** (0.288)	0.580** (0.265)	1.123*** (0.302)
Nationality	-0.146 (0.297)	-0.284 (0.281)	0.554* (0.314)
Religion	-0.449 (0.323)	-0.554* (0.292)	-0.726** (0.353)
Class	0.930* (0.478)	0.986*** (0.372)	1.105*** (0.305)
Age	0.598** (0.245)	0.956*** (0.230)	0.0925 (0.312)
Sexual orientation	0.254 (0.320)	0.253 (0.275)	0.516* (0.305)
Disability	0.353 (0.314)	-0.0757 (0.267)	-0.0847 (0.287)
_cons	1.595*** (0.530)	0.224 (0.416)	-1.820*** (0.489)
N	798	811	734
Pseudo R-squared	0.163	0.183	0.207

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; the constant coefficient in the model is represented by _cons; * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Table 3 examines how various inequalities relate to the concept of diversity, inclusion (H4), and intersectionality (H5). Race/ethnicity ($p < 0.01$), class ($p < 0.10$), and age ($p < 0.05$) were positively associated with the concept of diversity. This means that organizations that mentioned race/ethnicity, class, or age in their GEPs had a higher probability of also mentioning “diversity.” Age ($p < 0.01$), class ($p < 0.01$),

and race/ethnicity ($p < 0.05$) were significantly and positively associated with the concept of “inclusion,” whereas religion was significantly ($p < 0.10$) negatively associated.

Race ($p < 0.01$), class ($p < 0.01$), nationality ($p < 0.10$), and sexual orientation ($p < 0.10$) were all positively related to the probability of mentioning intersectionality. In contrast, religion was significantly negatively linked ($p < 0.05$).

As all of the model's independent variables are binary, the logistic regression coefficient represents the log-odds difference between the two categories (e.g., race/ethnicity = 1 vs. race/ethnicity = 0). Using odds ratios, we could quantify the strength of the effect of these inequalities on the likelihood of addressing the concepts. If an organization mentioned race/ethnicity in its GEP, the odds of mentioning diversity were $e^{0.823} \approx 2.27$ times higher compared with organizations that did not mention race/ethnicity, *ceteris paribus*. In other words, addressing race/ethnicity in the GEP raised the odds of addressing diversity by 2.40 compared with organizations that did not mention race/ethnicity. Addressing the dimensions of inequality, class, or race/ethnicity increases the likelihood of adopting a diversity and inclusion approach in the GEP. However, this effect was stronger for diversity than for inclusion. Furthermore, race/ethnicity and class are positively associated with the intersectionality concept, indicating that if an organization addresses race/ethnicity or class in its GEP, it is more likely to adopt an intersectionality approach in the GEP.

These results suggest that explicitly addressing inequality dimensions such as race/ethnicity or class in GEPs increases the likelihood of mentioning diversity, inclusion, and intersectionality. The observed positive association for race/ethnicity is in line with Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality framework, which argues that paying attention to racial categories can shed light on and help address overlapping forms of disadvantage. The results suggest, further, that addressing age-related inequality in GEPs increases the likelihood of adopting a diversity or inclusion approach, and that the recognition of inequalities related to nationality or sexual orientation contributes to the advancement of the concept of intersectionality. Conversely, the negative relationship with religion suggests that organizations that stress religion in their GEPs may be less likely to explicitly incorporate or mention the notion of intersectionality.

Finally, we investigated potential multicollinearity by examining the correlation coefficients between explanatory variables. The highest score was between sexual orientation and religion (0.57), indicating no evidence of multicollinearity. The *R*-squared coefficients were moderate, which is common for models that predict binary outcomes.

Addressing race/ethnicity, class, and age significantly increases the likelihood of adopting “diversity” or “inclusion” labels—disability does not—providing partial support for H4. Likewise, addressing race/ethnicity, class, nationality, and sexual orientation significantly increases the likelihood of adopting an “intersectionality” approach, which confirms H5.

4.5. Gender Inclusiveness in European GEPs

Our third research question is about the usage of a broad understanding of gender in the GEPs. Establishing “inclusive GEPs” (European Commission, 2022) indicates that organizations acknowledge gender as more than a binary category—though it does not necessarily mean they have fully engaged with its deeper

complexities—for example, by using gender-sensitive language in GEPs or offering several gender identity options when collecting data on gender. We use the term “gender inclusiveness” to capture this usage of a broadened understanding of gender in the GEP. In the first step, we investigated the use of terms such as “non-binary,” “trans,” “transgender,” “gender identity,” “all genders,” and “other genders” in the GEPs captured via web scraping. In the second step, we tested whether the geographical location of the organization affected the prevalence of gender inclusiveness in GEPs using online survey data.

Our text analysis revealed that 35% of the GEPs ($N = 816$) contained terms indicating a non-binary understanding of gender. These terms were “non-binary,” “trans,” “transgender,” “gender identity,” “all genders,” and “other genders.” We observed that there is not a direct link to a certain equality approach: An expanded understanding of gender (35%) was more prevalent than the use of the concept of intersectionality (14%); however, it was less common than the concepts of diversity (80%) and inclusion (76%).

In the online survey, we asked the organizations which terms they used to express diverse options for gender. Among the respondents, 57% reported that they used expressions like “non-binary,” “diverse,” “trans,” etc. This discrepancy between the results of the text analysis and the survey data might be explained by the different methodological approaches, the restriction of the text analysis to English GEPs, and the nonresponse bias introduced by the low survey response rate of 6%. In what follows, we refer more to the survey data, as we assume that the survey respondents provided more accurate and detailed data than the text analysis at this point. Publicly available GEPs contain evolving or context-dependent terminology, and thus proper extraction for text analysis can be challenging. Surveys, on the other hand, provide real-time data and more precise insights because respondents frequently have direct knowledge of their organization’s policies that exceed what is publicly available.

The survey data revealed that the type of plan influenced the understanding of gender expressed. As can be seen from Figure 2, organizations that reported having a GEP—a plan designed exclusively to gender equality—were less likely to display a non-binary understanding of gender (52% of those having this kind of plan) than those with a “gender equality and diversity plan” (71% of those having this kind of plan) or a “diversity, equity, or inclusion plan” (82% of those having this kind of plan).

What emerges from the results reported here is that the use of gender-diverse options for gender identity was not very widespread in GEPs of the respondent organizations in our online survey. However, the type of plan did have an impact on the use of more than two gender identity categories: Just over 80% of organizations with a “diversity, equity, or inclusion plan” used gender-diverse options, which is around 10 percentage points higher than the figure for organizations with a “gender equality and diversity plan” and around 30 percentage points higher than the figure for organizations with a GEP. This indicates that gender diversity is more covered by concepts like “diversity” and “inclusion” instead of “gender equality” only.

Most organizations that displayed a non-binary understanding of gender in their GEPs also identified gender identity as an additional category of inequality in their data collection (79% of $n = 52$). However, data on gender identity were collected less frequently (20% of $N = 270$), possibly due to methodological challenges for the organizations. In instances where gender was not collected as binary, this was most often accomplished by offering the response option “no answer” (34% of $n = 230$) or using a third legal term for other genders (34% of $n = 230$; see Figure 3). The term “non-binary” was predominantly employed in data collection undertaken by organizations within the Southern country cluster (35% of $n = 40$).

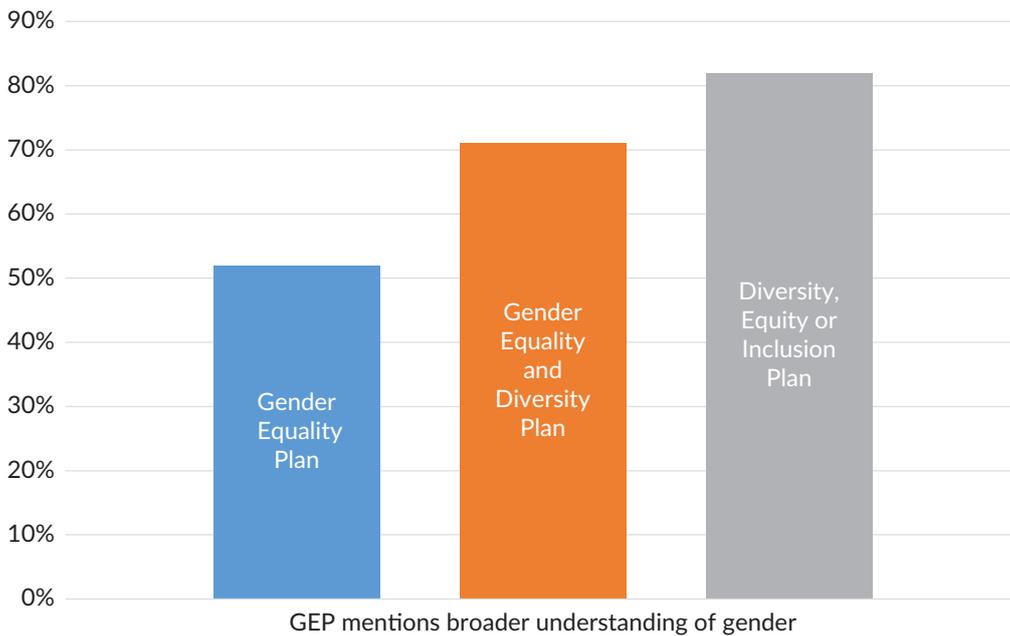


Figure 2. Gender-diverse options for gender identity in different types of plans based on data from the online survey (Q3.1 and Q4.8; see Löther et al., 2025, pp. 134–153). Note: Multiple responses were allowed, indicating that organizations could have more than one plan.

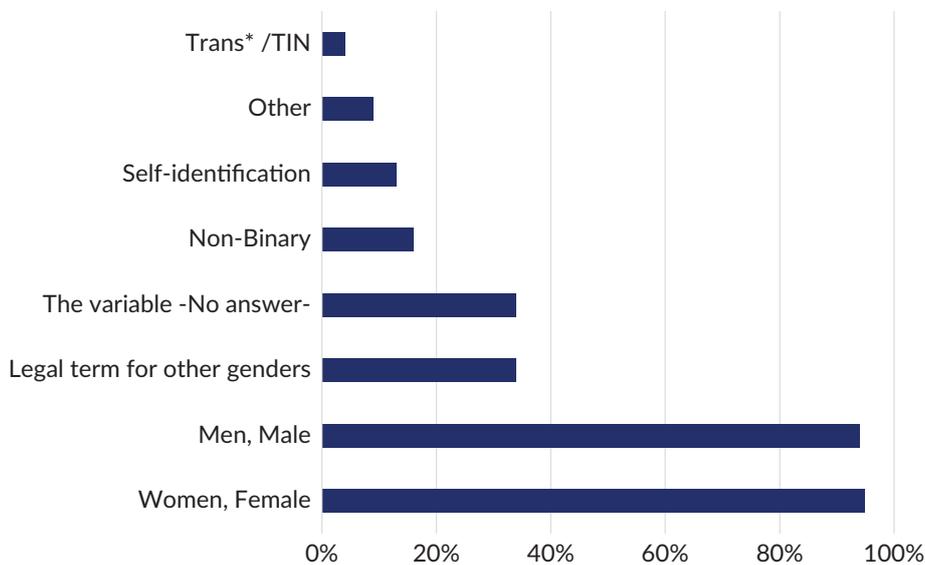


Figure 3. Response options used when collecting data on gender within the framework of GEPs (Q5.10; see Löther et al., 2025, pp. 134–153). Note: TIN = Trans*; Inter*, Non-Binary.

Turning now to the results on the regional distribution of gender inclusiveness (see Table 4), it may be reasonably assumed that social and political discourses that are hostile to a non-binary understanding of gender will impact the frequency with which such an understanding is reflected in GEPs. In response to an open-ended question, two organizations from the Northwestern cluster and one organization from the Central Western cluster reported that the use of non-binary terms was not permitted when collecting data on gender, which may suggest the presence of hostile anti-trans discourse or strong data protection legislation.

Table 4. GEPs mentioning a broader understanding of gender by country cluster, and the time period of the first GEP.

Country cluster	GEP mentions a broader understanding of gender	N	Time period of the first GEP		
			1980–1998	1999–2020	2021–2024
Northwestern	87%	15	26%	40%	33%
Central Western	65%	107	9%	48%	42%
Southern	57.5%	40	0%	27.5%	72.5%
Central Eastern	34%	38	0%	3%	97%
Total	59.5%	200	7%	35%	58%

Note: Q4.4 and Q4.8 (see Löther et al., 2025, pp. 134–153, for the questionnaire).

As Table 4 shows, the survey findings corroborate this assertion for Central Eastern European organizations. While more than half of organizations in the Southern, Central Western, and Northwestern country clusters reported that their GEPs included a broader understanding of gender, only 34% of the organizations in the Central Eastern European clusters did so.

We found considerable differences between the regions in Europe with regard to when they introduced their first GEP. In the Northwestern and Central Western country clusters, many organizations already had their first GEPs in the 1980s and 1990s. In the Southern and Eastern European countries, by contrast, most organizations started putting a GEP in place after the announcement in 2021 of the European Commission (see Table 4; Löther et al., 2024b). This shows the impact of funding bodies and how they can contribute to spreading gender equality measures and instruments. Additionally, the regional differences in the outcomes might be explained by other national and regional equality initiatives, especially the Athena SWAN Award in the UK and Ireland (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019; Xiao et al., 2020), the female leadership program in Ireland (O’Connor & Irvine, 2020), and the German’s Research-Oriented Gender Equality (and, since 2022, also Diversity) Standards by the DFG (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft) and female professorship program in Germany (Riegraf & Weber, 2017; Zippel et al., 2016).

Accordingly, to test our final hypothesis (H6)—that there is no association between the country clusters in which organizations are located and their use of gender-inclusive terms (e.g., “non-binary,” “transgender”) in their GEPs—we used a Pearson chi-squared test of independence. The test result indicates a rejection of the null hypothesis with a p -value of 0.001, which implies a statistically significant relationship between country cluster and whether organizations displayed gender inclusiveness in their GEPs.

This supports H6, which states that the region in which an organization is located impacts the gender inclusiveness of its GEP. Organizations in the Central Western and Northwestern clusters were more likely to update their GEPs to reflect gender inclusiveness than those in the Southern and Central Eastern regions.

5. Conclusion

This mixed-method study is pathbreaking in two ways: First, it provides robust data about the characteristics of GEPs on a wide scale across Europe. Second, it gives the basis for how survey data could be combined with digital data to improve the results. This article aimed to assess the distribution of GEPs in the ERA and to investigate the underlying concepts of equality and the understanding of gender in these GEPs.

First, our results show considerable differences between public and private organizations. Only 41% ($N = 6,475$) of the investigated organizations had a GEP in place. Among organizations in the public higher education sector (83%) and research organizations (50%), the prevalence of GEPs was considerably higher than among private companies (6%). One possible explanation is that for public organizations, the legal framework for achieving gender equality is more binding and stronger than for private companies.

The second major finding was that “diversity” and “inclusion” were more widespread than “intersectionality.” Our results suggest that all three concepts are more present in GEPs in organizations in Northwestern Europe, which might be explained by the Athena SWAN Award and its requirements in this area (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019; Xiao et al., 2020). The fact that intersectionality was less prevalent than diversity and inclusion may be due to its greater complexity and sophistication (Acker, 2012; McCall, 2005). This indicates that there is a need for further support for organizations to develop intersectional approaches.

Third, the logistic regression analysis revealed which inequalities addressed in the GEPs are connected to each concept (“diversity,” “inclusion,” and “intersectionality”). We found that race/ethnicity and class are positively related to diversity, inclusion, and intersectionality. In this regard, all three concepts are connected to the three main oppression systems (Crenshaw, 1989; McCall, 2005). Surprisingly, there is no difference between diversity and intersectionality. This may be explained by the effect that they intercorrelate. Age is positively associated with diversity and inclusion. Here again, it is most likely that this is because of the materials for the Athena SWAN Award that participating organizations have to produce, which suggest age as an inequality dimension and connect diversity with inclusion approaches (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019). Nationality and sexual orientation are positively associated with intersectionality. A striking result is that religion is negatively related to both inclusion and intersectionality. This may indicate that religion as an inequality dimension is more emphasized in conservative country contexts where broader inclusion or more critical intersectional approaches are less embraced or socially acceptable. These findings warrant further exploration.

Finally, we investigated how the inclusiveness of the understanding of gender is expressed in GEPs. Overall, we found that the majority of GEPs understood gender as a binary division between women and men. Distinguishing between different types of GEPs, we found that those named only GEPs were more likely to adhere to a binary understanding of gender, whereas those that add “diversity” or “inclusion” in the title were more open to expressing gender inclusiveness. Many respondents of our survey reported that they collect data about gender relations only with binary response options. However, some organizations offered a third option. A small number of organizations reported that they allowed respondents to self-identify their gender. The legal situation for gender inclusiveness in the ERA varies a lot, and this is reflected in our data. As expected (H6), there were considerable differences between the regions. Organizations located in the Central Eastern country cluster were less likely to express gender inclusiveness.

Our findings have several policy implications. First, policymakers should provide targeted support to private companies to facilitate the adoption of GEPs and to promote a broader understanding of gender that explicitly incorporates intersectionality. Second, capacity-building interventions are needed—especially within newcomer organizations in Southern and Central Eastern European countries—to support them in establishing an accepted approach for a broad understanding of gender and intersectional approaches. Another suggestion would be to provide and make accessible materials that help protect against hostile political actions against trans and non-binary people.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

We made use of ChatGPT and DeepL for language editing.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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

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Abstract

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

Keywords

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

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. Navigating External Pressures and Internal Dynamics in Gendered Institutions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. From Point Zero to the Adoption of the GEP

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. Sexual Harassment in the Academic Context

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

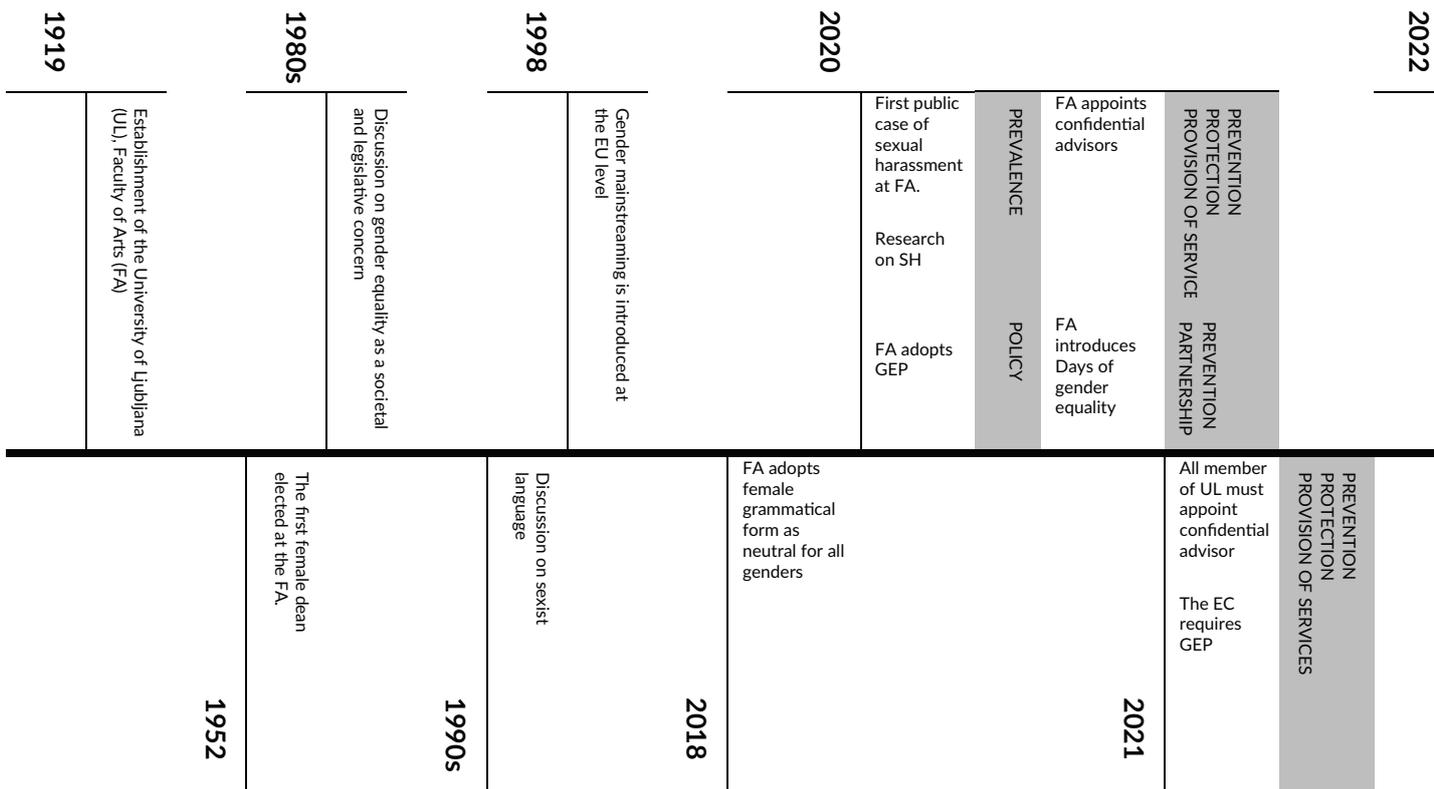


Figure 1. Timeline of events (Faculty of Arts 1919–2023) with the application of the 7P Model.

5. Sustainability and Institutionalization of the GEP

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

6. Discussion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

7. Conclusion

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

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

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Conflict of Interests

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

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

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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.

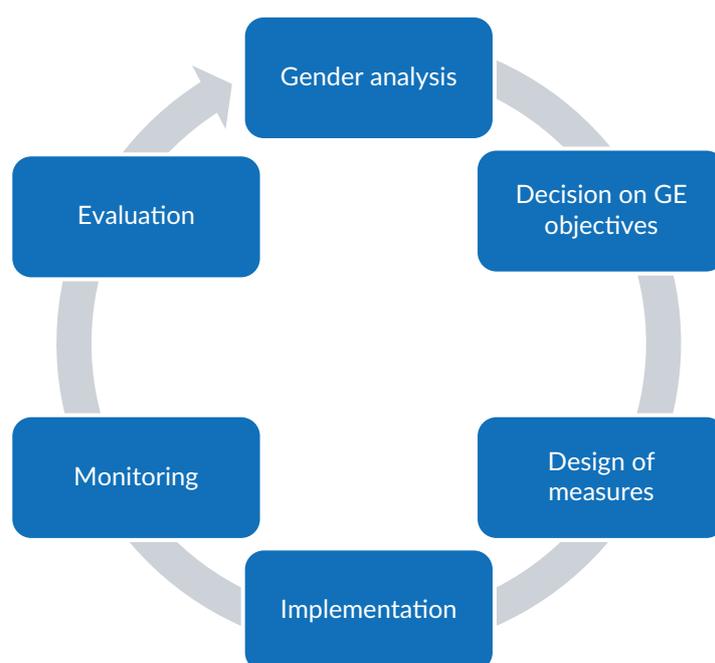


Figure 1. Cycle of GEP development and implementation. Source: own elaboration based on May and Wildavsky (1978).

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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Gender Equality Barriers in Agriculture and Life Sciences in Central European Universities

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Abstract

The European Union aims to foster research excellence, among others, by increasing gender equality (GE) in the European research area. The mandatory introduction of gender equality plans (GEP) mobilised universities to assess, target, and monitor GE in different fields of science. A wide range of barriers have been explored in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), characterised by the low participation of women. However, significant obstacles to GE can emerge in relatively more gender-balanced and, therefore, rarely studied fields, such as agriculture and life sciences (ALS). Experiences can differ in Central and Eastern European countries, characterised by rather traditional gender and family norms. This study explores different stakeholders’ perceptions of the main barriers of GE, with particular attention to ALS. We conducted nine focus groups (82 participants in total) with middle management, academic staff, and students from Czech, Hungarian, and Slovenian universities, aiming to contribute to the revision of their first GEP. Discussions were centred on recruitment, leadership positions, work–life balance, gender-based violence, sexual harassment, organisational culture, integrating the gender dimension into research and teaching, and institutionalisation of GEPs. Findings revealed that women in ALS face partly similar gender-based obstacles to their counterparts in less gender-balanced fields—perceptions of education and career choices, work–life imbalance, and exclusion by recruitment and promotion practices—and also additional ALS-related challenges of laboratory and fieldwork. Findings highlight the need for institutions to carefully address these areas in their state-of-the-art assessments and develop sector-specific, tailor-made GEPs.

Keywords

academia and higher education; agriculture and life sciences; barriers; Central and Eastern Europe; gender equality; Gender Equality Plans; inclusion of women; stakeholders

1. Introduction

Though women outnumber men in higher education on average, significant gender disparities persist within academia regarding not just the underrepresentation of women in certain disciplines—such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM; see European Commission, 2024a)—but also in the unequal distribution of academic opportunities of women (Jebsen et al., 2022). In 2021, women comprised just over one-third of researchers in the European Union, with a greater proportion of female researchers employed under precarious contracts compared to their male counterparts. Moreover, in 2018, women were only half as likely as men to attain full professorships (European Commission, 2024a). Structural barriers that impede women’s advancement contribute to pronounced vertical segregation not only in male-dominated STEM fields but also in more gender-diverse sectors, such as agriculture and life sciences (ALS; see Begeny et al., 2020). This is particularly evident in disciplines that demand extensive fieldwork or laboratory-based research (Retnaningsih et al., 2022).

Promoting gender equality (GE) in higher education and research aligns with SDG 5 of the United Nations (2015) and the Ljubljana Declaration (Council of the European Union, 2021). The implementation of mandatory Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) aims to support this objective. However, addressing GE-related challenges in the context of the increasingly spreading neoliberal governance in universities remains difficult. The adoption of business sector models in research and innovation (R&I)—which prioritise resource allocation towards research intensity and “marketable” areas—combined with funding cuts, has adversely affected GE in academia (Drew & Canavan, 2020; Rosa & Clavero, 2020). These effects are more pronounced in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, where GE receives limited attention within the underfinanced R&I sector. These countries tend to rank lower in EIGE’s Gender Equality Index (EIGE, 2024), potentially exacerbating the structural disadvantages faced by women in higher education (European Commission, 2024a).

By the end of 2025, the initial implementation period of the first GEPs will have concluded in most universities in CEE countries. Following the European Union’s recommendations, the revised GEPs are expected to address GE in complex, strategic, and tailored ways. Meanwhile, there is little empirical research on how and why GE-related barriers emerge in the context of CEE higher education. To respond to this research gap, we conducted nine focus groups with various stakeholder groups (middle management, academic staff, and students) in Czech, Hungarian, and Slovenian universities. We focused on the ALS fields, as food security is among the European Union’s strategic priorities and there is a need to identify the sector-specific barriers. Agricultural higher education could be one of the keys to addressing the agricultural and climate challenges effectively, for which women’s empowerment and the promotion of a more gender-diverse workforce are essential (Fertő & Bojnec, 2025). The novelty lies in examining GE barriers in higher education through the core dimensions of GEPs, situated at the intersections of two contextual factors: ALS specificities and CEE regional setting.

2. Background

2.1. GE Barriers in Academia in ALS

Several studies have illuminated multifaceted obstacles that women university students and researchers encounter in STEM disciplines (Kube et al., 2024; Moss-Racusin et al., 2018; Schmader, 2023). Institutional policies, cultural norms, and educational practices collectively shape their experiences and opportunities, ranging from biased evaluation to discriminatory treatment in areas such as admissions, hiring, and salary negotiations, as well as insufficient mentorship (Corneille et al., 2019; Farra et al., 2025). Additional challenges include persistent discrimination, difficulties in achieving work–life balance (Paksi et al., 2022), exclusionary networks such as the “old boys’ club” (Suresh et al., 2025), toxic academic masculinities (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020), and gender-based violence (GBV; Lipinsky et al., 2022). Structural barriers not only constrain diversity but reinforce prevailing societal stereotypes and biases, thereby impeding women’s advancement and further entrenching their marginalisation within the scientific community (Eaton et al., 2020; Régner et al., 2019). Furthermore, their acceptance and career progress could also be biased in the related agribusiness. In academic research, less attention is given to scientific fields and disciplines with gender parity in terms of numbers, such as ALS. However, vertical segregation and discriminatory practices can persist within them, revealing the limitations of parity-focused analyses in fully capturing the structural and cultural dimensions of gender inequality in academia (Fisher et al., 2020).

Research on recruitment and career progression in ALS indicates that there is usually a relatively high women enrolment at the undergraduate level while women are often well represented at the undergraduate level, their presence markedly declines in high-ranking positions, which is an additional significant barrier to the recruitment and retention of women, maintaining gender disparities (Sheltzer & Smith, 2014). Gender bias in hiring practices is frequently underpinned by misbeliefs regarding women’s competence and leadership potential (Gibbs & Griffin, 2013; Wilson & Kittleston, 2013). Obstacles in job application processes, gender pay gaps, perceptions that women have to work harder to establish their credentials, and discouragement from entering the profession can all play a role when striving for higher academic positions (Foster & Seevers, 2003). Women, particularly in male-dominated disciplines in ALS with physical demands, often experience gendered bias and a less supportive environment, resulting in the perception that these educational fields and labour sectors are more suited to men (Fiantis et al., 2022; Retnaningsih et al., 2022).

Women in top ALS positions are often compelled to assimilate into masculine cultures, which also perpetuates gender inequalities (Kleihauer et al., 2013; Van Veelen & Derks, 2022). A recent cross-national study (Chan et al., 2024) investigating how scientists in the US, Italy, France, and Taiwan have made sense of gender distribution in physics and biology revealed a widespread belief among academics that women’s representation in these examined disciplines is primarily a matter of individual preference. This interpretation complements previous research demonstrating that women are more likely than men to recognize the persistence of structural barriers in science (Cech et al., 2018).

Work–life balance remains a significant challenge for women, often placing them at a systemic disadvantage relative to their male counterparts (Caldarulo et al., 2022; Di et al., 2021). One particularly critical issue is the termination of fixed-term contracts during maternity leave, which disproportionately affects women’s academic careers (Hansmann & Schröter, 2018).

Gendered experiences can occur in—often remote and unsafe—laboratories and fields, too. Scholars highlighted how biases and negative stereotypes (Miller & Roksa, 2020) intertwine with sexism and GBV, including sexual harassment (Chakraverty & Rishi, 2022; Van Houweling et al., 2022). As argued by Aguilar and Baek (2020), sexual harassment among students is frequently underreported, largely due to institutional and departmental power asymmetries.

2.2. The Case of CEE Countries

CEE countries share several historical and social characteristics. State socialism, followed by the transition to liberal market democracy, still has its print on recent societal processes in the region. More recently, movements that advocate for maintaining or returning to traditional social norms, particularly regarding family structures and gender roles, have further contributed to an environment that challenges GE (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Within the EU, CEE countries generally exhibit a wider gender gap. Improvements regarding gender-based discrimination, share of care work, and the narrowing of gender pay gaps tend to be slower than in other EU member states (EIGE, 2024).

The gender gap in R&I is often positively correlated with the knowledge and innovation gap in the less research-intensive countries (European Commission, 2024a). Among the three countries selected for our research, the Gender Equality Index is only slightly below the EU average (71) in Slovenia (70.1), but Czechia (59.9) and Hungary (57.8) are lagging (EIGE, 2024). In 2021, the proportion of women researchers was below the EU average of 33.7% in both Czechia (27.1%) and Hungary (29.3%), while Slovenia slightly exceeded it at 34.4%. Although these rates are higher in higher education, Czechia consistently recorded the lowest share of women in all sectors and in higher education. In Hungary, the prevalence of precarious employment among women researchers was the highest in the EU at 16.2% (European Commission, 2021). Furthermore, Hungary had the second-highest glass ceiling index among EU member states in 2022, indicating substantial structural barriers for women's career advancement in research (European Commission, 2024a). It is noteworthy that while the GEPs are recommended to address GBV, neither Czechia nor Hungary has ratified the Istanbul Convention (European Commission, 2024b).

The limited body of literature on STEM barriers in higher education in CEE countries indicates that beyond masculine culture and practices, the under-representation of women in STEM is “co-constituted at the intersections of public policy, the organisation of research, the organisation of domestic life, and individual subjectivities” (Linková, 2017, p. 61). Factors such as heavy workloads, negative stereotypes, biased evaluations, and instances of mistreatment in engineering higher education significantly contribute to the slow career progression of women, and, to some extent, the postponement of family formation (Paksi et al., 2022). The long tradition of extended parental leaves in Czechia and Hungary, shaped by societal norms and the limited availability of childcare facilities, further complicates the reconciliation of professional and family responsibilities (Hobson et al., 2011; Linková, 2017). In Slovenia, women in STEM higher education encounter challenges including the gender pay gap, sexist remarks, work–life imbalance, and vertical segregation (Parmaxi et al., 2024). Moreover, gendered precarity remains a widespread issue among women academics (Murgia & Poggio, 2019; Tardos & Paksi, 2024). To our knowledge, GE in ALS higher education has not been explored in the three countries discussed above.

3. Research Questions and Methodology

The aim of our study was to support GEP implementation by exploring what hinders progress towards GE in CEE universities, with particular attention on ALS fields. We also wanted to provide universities with empirically based guidelines according to sectoral needs. The research question was: What are the main barriers against GE in the context of effective implementation of GEPs in CEE universities?

We applied a qualitative research design by conducting focus groups to examine the perceptions of different stakeholder groups in the universities. Enablers of GE and recommendations by stakeholders were also assessed, but for the present study, we selected barriers as a central focus and did not detail GE enablers or the progress.

Three CEE universities were selected for this study, each offering academic careers across diverse fields, including ALS and STEM disciplines. All three institutions are committed to improving their GE strategy and revising their first GEPs in alignment with sector-specific and institutional priorities. While the overall women-to-men ratios suggest a relatively balanced gender representation, vertical segregation of women remains evident at two of the universities.

Altogether nine mixed-gender focus groups were conducted with three different stakeholder groups: (a) middle management (heads of departments or institutions, heads of administrative units and laboratories, HR managers), (b) academic staff (teachers and researchers), and (c) students. For recruiting, volunteer sampling was applied within purposive sampling, aiming for maximum heterogeneity within the groups, regarding gender, age, academic age, work profile, level of position/study, academic experience, and parental status. This approach enabled us to include diverse voices and the detailed exploration and understanding of the central themes of our investigation (Creswell, 2014). Due to the low awareness of GE in CEE countries, conducting mixed-gender groups was fruitful in fostering group dynamics. Participants were also motivated by the opportunity to contribute to the effective implementation of their GEPs.

The final sample included 50 women and 32 men participants ($N = 82$): 29 middle managers, 26 teachers and researchers, and 27 students, who did not have specific gender knowledge or competence. Within the student and academic staff groups, almost three-quarters of the participants, and in the middle management groups, half of the participants had an ALS and STEM background. The focus groups were conducted in national languages, which did not allow the inclusion of international students. We provided a “safe and brave” environment for participants by providing venues away from spaces suggesting leadership or dominance, and by applying enabling moderation techniques to ensure that participants would feel safe to express their views.

The in-person discussions lasted 90–120 minutes on average/group and centred on seven topics. The five main GEP pillars recommended by the EU (recruitment, leadership positions, work–life balance, GBV and sexual harassment, and integration of the gender dimension into research and teaching) were chosen. Considering the novelty of the GEPs in CEE R&I, the topic of the institutionalisation of GE and the GEP, and the issue of organisational culture, were explored further.

The research plan was approved by each university's ethics committee and it complied with GDPR. Participants received an information sheet about the project and signed a paper-based informed consent form. Discussions were audio and video recorded, transcribed verbatim, anonymised and coded with NVivo software, and thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To ensure anonymity and support the stakeholders' engagement, no further data is provided about the samples.

In the following section, all direct interview quotes were given a code representing the university (Univ. 1–3), stakeholder groups (students = S, academic staff = AS, middle management = MM), and the participant's gender (F or M).

4. Results

At the beginning of the discussions, participants typically did not perceive GE as a problem at their university. This applied equally to all three participating countries and stakeholder groups. Then, in the later rounds, the participants started to comment on problem areas concerning GE. For example, they referred to the difference between the university's policy and practice, the problem of the "motherhood burden," the inequality between men and women in academic career advancement, the resistance of older men to having women in leadership positions, and sexual harassment. Some participants, including women, voiced their concerns about the fairness of gender quotas, while others seemed to be irritated about the expectation that they should accept gender fluidity and the "free choice of gender identities," instead of giving priority to the biologically determined sex categories. At the same time, being tolerant of how people feel about their gender identity was brought up as a counterargument. Participants acknowledged the importance of gender parity, but they saw it as an overly narrow approach: It is "more than just having 50% women and 50% men" (Univ1/MM/P8/F). At the same time, they stressed that a rigid fixation on gender balance should be discouraged, too.

In the following sections, we will examine the barriers to implementing GE as perceived by major stakeholders more closely.

4.1. GE in Recruitment, Career Progression, and Retention

Regarding gender-related experiences in the recruitment of university students, two themes emerged. In the first round, only enrolment statistics were highlighted, including the gender ratio in university faculties. The low level of women's representation in STEM majors was typically considered "healthy" by male participants, who repeatedly added that the low representation of women in some majors reflects the interests of the students. Many participants, particularly at University 1 and University 2, also raised the issue that negative stereotypes about STEM careers play a large role in women not applying to some courses. Concerning agricultural fields, it was strongly emphasised that the number of students in these fields is already decreasing, which is a challenge for the university and the agricultural sector, regardless of gender.

The second theme was the evaluation of the university recruitment processes, both for study and employment. At University 2, the middle managers and academic staff clearly stated that discrimination cannot occur because evaluations are based on merit, and departments always go for competent staff, regardless of gender. Students at the same university also confirmed that they consider admissions

processes to be relatively unbiased. However, they heard about cases when PhD applicants were asked about their marital status and whether they would have children after enrolment. In one of the student groups, participants often experienced gender-based discrimination, though the types of employment were not discussed. This gender bias in the recruitment procedures for lecturers was also confirmed by a male lecturer at University 2.

Regarding career progression, focus group participants found the issue of gender inequality in ALS less relevant because of equal gender representation. However, when they were asked about their experiences at an individual level, a number of barriers emerged, with participants citing having “children” as the main one. Women were clearly mentioned in this regard, but in one case, it was noted that having young children in the family can also be a challenge for men.

The uncertain nature of contracts also appeared as a major obstacle to the academic progression of women academics. A fixed-term contract, if it expires during maternity leave, can completely stall a career, especially if there is no chance of returning to the university.

International mobility has emerged as a career barrier for women. Though more and more conferences provide childcare, it is very costly and cannot be covered by a mobility grant. A middle manager also observed that women employees prefer to be mobile in countries closer to home to get home as quickly as possible, especially if their partner cannot accompany them abroad. This mainly concerns academic staff who are about to habilitate, as three months’ experience abroad is a criterion for habilitation, a scientific-pedagogical degree widely applied in CEE.

Retaining students or junior lecturers is a priority for universities, but seniors claim they cannot retain them, especially those who want to start a family. The problem is considered systemic and beyond the university’s scope. Students perceived that neither childcare allowances nor starting salaries were enough to enable them to remain in programmes, to become lecturers at the university, or to take out loans.

In the ALS, there are particular difficulties for lecturers or PhD students who take a longer career break. In areas of study requiring laboratory or fieldwork, it is much more challenging to keep colleagues “in the system” because experiments (for example, on plants that have been growing for over a year or in animal husbandry where generation intervals are more than 2–3 years) may be completely ruined during their absence. The increase in incidences of drought due to climate change poses a greater risk, making work unpredictable and unplannable. In some agriculture sectors, such as forestry, women are much less well represented, and it is much more challenging for them to stay in the workforce. Some participants stressed that women have the manual skills and even the stamina in some cases that are required, but they are discouraged from choosing these careers. Support would also be needed, particularly for young mothers, to arrange more flexible laboratory schedules to be able to harmonise work and private life better.

4.2. Gender Balance in Leadership and Decision-Making

Participants had encountered problems with gender parity in leadership at two universities. Both faculty and middle management at University 1 agreed that women’s representation at the top constituted a problem. Moreover, from a historical perspective, another faculty member confirmed: “We haven’t had a woman

chancellor here at the university yet” (Univ1/AS/P9/M). The academic pipeline was identified, namely that most women can be found in lower academic positions; thus, they do not have the credentials to be elected or selected for higher positions. At University 2, participants assessed the representation of women in leadership as better than at other higher education institutions in the country, although the landscape varied among units to a great extent. At University 3 all stakeholder groups consistently and positively evaluated their situation and prided themselves on having women in top management.

Many of the barriers to GE in leadership might overlap with the barriers to career advancement discussed above. The problem of rigid academic hierarchies and rules was also associated with the underlying reasons for less representation of women in top positions: “The composition of scientific boards and expert committees is mostly based on the titles of the participants” (Univ1/MM/P8/F). This historical set-up, which often blocks change and progress, was evaluated as a masculine environment operating in line with masculine principles and values at one university: “Somewhere the masculine setup just prevents women from getting into some positions....They just don’t feel like they’re cut out for it” (Univ1/MM/P1/F).

A second group of factors hindering women’s equal representation at the top was related to gender biases and discrimination. Several women—middle managers at University 1—noted that although they considered themselves suitable for a leadership position, they were either not offered one or did not invest the energy to get another position at all because they thought it was already decided who would get one. A woman academic staff member commented that “somehow,” men ended up the typical winners of academic elections (Univ1/AS/P7/F). Another aspect of gender bias is when women are regarded as less competent in their jobs and potentially questioned as good leaders.

A third group of factors was gender-stereotyped jobs, i.e., the perception of certain positions as suitable only for men or women. A fourth group of factors was related to “motherhood penalty,” which is caused by a career break after childbearing, leading to women being delayed in achieving important milestones in their careers:

Admittedly, if we were to look at who’s a professor, dean, associate professor, or the like, there’s a great difference there....But mostly it’s exactly because most of those women either started their careers and even maybe their PhDs after they had kids. (Univ1/MM/P8/F)

The motherhood penalty is often linked to major problems in managing work–life balance, especially if the mother does not have childcare support. Work–life balance issues might be reinforced by the internal urge women leaders may have to prove themselves, leading them to ‘overachieve’ at work:

When I got into a leadership position, I performed tasks almost manically to avoid someone saying that I couldn’t do what needed to be done by the deadline with three children. I think that often, women colleagues do not give 100%, but 110% because of this. (Univ2/MM/P5/F)

A fifth group of factors hindering GE in leadership was perceived as women’s self-limiting career aspirations, which places the responsibility on women’s individual choices. Middle managers from both University 1 and University 3 voiced that even those women who receive support from their spouses or others choose to stay home with their small children.

4.3. Work–Life Balance and Caring Duties

Gender socialisation in the case of barriers to work–life balance and caring duties appeared to be an overarching theme in the discussions. Part of this involves classic, traditional gender roles such as the caring, nurturing mother and the breadwinner father, although there is legislation that allows fathers to stay home with their newborns in CEE countries as well. Long maternity leave was perceived as a career-slowng factor, especially in fields characterised by knowledge intensity and rapid development.

Biological and reproductive factors were framed as something that highly influences—mostly—women’s opportunities and choices in the sense of the timing of giving birth. In the narratives, participants noted biological determining factors and how they can affect women and men differently in their professional career choices. However, they also emphasised economic factors because, in many cases, due to the gender pay gap, there is no real choice about working arrangements within the family.

The lack of a supporting environment, social network, and services was a main barrier to work–life balance. A lack of capacity in caring facilities or not having one nearby was a major issue, although relevant differences exist between the universities of the three countries. Single motherhood is an even more loaded example that was brought up in multiple focus groups, as this is associated with having restricted familial support. Other obstacles to balancing parenting and professional roles included having smaller kids and/or children with disabilities who have greater needs in societies characterised by insufficient institutional help.

Challenges with working hours made up a major part of the discussions on work–life balance. It was seen as a characteristic of the scientific field that employers accept people only for full-time positions. There is also the danger of needing to be available all the time, as the experiment length requires. However, participants with different professional backgrounds mentioned that the situation with working hours “differs significantly from department to department and faculty to faculty” (Univ1/MM/P3/F). Regarding working hours, a specificity of agricultural studies was said to be internships, as there are some challenging circumstances, such as seasonality and weather conditions, which have to be taken into account:

It is precisely during the summer period, when many people rest, that there is the most work. [For example,] if I have three children, my three children are at home during the summer holidays, and then I can’t be with them because I’m out on fieldwork. (Univ2/AS/P2/F)

Bureaucratic barriers included changing workplace conditions while someone is on maternity leave (e.g., introducing substitutes, defining new career and research achievements) and issues with foreign employees or the student visa issues of family members, which often resulted in them not accepting positions to maintain family cohesion. A key bureaucratic barrier in managing project funds was childcare expenses, which were not eligible costs. Going on research leave, when one could theoretically take children and families, can be challenging financially, geographically, and also in terms of family time.

4.4. Organisational Culture, Awareness-Raising About Gender Biases, Stereotypes, and Sexism

The problem of “toxic masculinity” as a building block of organisational culture was explicitly discussed by participants from University 1. The metaphor used for the organisational culture was a “hunter culture” (Univ1/MM/P5/M), positioning women as prey and/or those who should be squeezed out of prestigious

committees and boards. It was generally agreed that this masculine approach has historical origins, and the new generation is breaking down these norms. Second, an awareness of gender biases and discrimination was addressed among all stakeholder groups related to career advancement and transitioning into leadership positions. While gender biases and discrimination are more generally acknowledged among employees at the workplace, it is important to stress that students can equally suffer from gender bias during their studies due to the asymmetrical relationship between teachers and students. For example, a woman student observed that her professor:

He kept asking the guys questions [so they could achieve] the minimum grade, and then for the rest of us, girls, he [did not have time because he] had to go to lunch. And then he gave us all lower grades. (Univ2/S/P4/F)

Students at this university also challenged the assumption that it was only the older generation of teachers who had a biased approach to women students, as this attitude could be “inherited” from older colleagues.

FG participants acknowledged gender stereotypes in society and at the universities as an important underlying factor hindering GE in its different formats. Moreover, essentialism—interpreting gender differences based on biological differences—could also be identified: “Women have just a lot more of these things as a handicap [compared] to men...after all, these biological things” (Univ1/S/P3/M). Gender stereotypes and cultural differences related to gender roles were particularly accentuated in the case of international students coming from regions with lower levels of GE, such as the Global South. On the other hand, some of these international students face stigmatisation based on their attitude to gender or their origin and, consequently, exclusion from university life.

Sexism, as a part of the organisational culture, was given significant weight in the narratives. Participants mainly from University 1 and University 2 highlighted problems related to sexism: “It exists, and it’s about different innuendos, jokes, and unfair things that are supposed to be funny but are obviously not” (Univ1/AS/P9/M). One men participant explicitly denied the existence of sexist behaviour in their university: “There is no sexism here. I’ve never experienced that” (Univ3/MM/P6/M). In contrast, another man participant from the same university contemplated the fact that, regarding GE, “things have gone too far” (Univ3/MM/P8/M). One difficulty in taking action against sexism is the delicacy of formulating such messages for colleagues or students. Especially students expressed their concerns about retaliation from their professors: “It’s hard to choose words...it’s easy in the pub, where you just say, ‘fuck off’ or something, but to say it politely, that....I’m not comfortable [that is hard]” (Univ1/S/P2/F). Participants opined that covering up for colleagues in such cases was rejected as a form of behaviour.

4.5. Measures Against GBV, Including Sexual Harassment

To understand the main barriers to dealing with GBV, grasping the social context is unavoidable (Fikejzová & Linková, 2025). Participants shared that they have experienced GBV, discrimination, gender stereotypes, and biases in a sexist organisational culture. This includes the objectification of the woman’s body, making comments on how one is dressed, different expectations, or assigned roles: “We don’t have many women among the students, but sometimes what happens is that...they encounter a kind of, I would say...dehumanisation” (Univ1/MM/P8/F).

However, participants reflected on changing social norms along with changing cultural behaviours and the challenges of these transformations. For some, it was challenging to accommodate to new norms because of socialisation processes associated with different generations: “There are quite a few elderly colleagues [who use] phrases that...are no longer accepted among younger people, but they do not want to offend anyone on purpose. (Univ2/AS/P7/M).

Barriers to reporting abuses or asking for help included the challenges of the sensitivity of the topic, the different interpretations (e.g., where to draw the line between intentional or unintentional acts), and the difficulty of articulating the event. Fear of possible further abuse of power, disadvantages, or “vengeance” in the case of reporting was a crucial barrier. Exam situations appeared to be a prominent site of gender-based discrimination. Most students argued that if someone reports GBV or discrimination, it could backfire later in exam situations—as a woman student from University 2 described: “I was told not to say anything because, at the next exam, they will know that I was the one who probably spoke out on this matter and...they won’t let me pass the next exam” (Univ2/S/P4/F). This can also influence further career steps as well. In the academic and social hierarchy, power relations can strongly influence one’s ability to speak out. Furthermore, a “safety net protects” those in power (Univ2/S/P4/F) but not necessarily those who are more vulnerable. Fieldwork, laboratory work, and internship were also mentioned as other sites of potential vulnerability associated with exposure to GBV. Another difficulty arose when a grievance was articulated about misbehaviour: It was an institutional challenge to send away “protected” staff, either because of their expertise or advanced age.

Further emerging themes included the lack of knowledge about legal or psychological services provided by the universities. Participants mentioned not knowing where to report issues, the unclear operation of ethics committees, and the challenges of maintaining their anonymity. Finally, the lack of sufficient training on GBV surfaced as an underlying theme several times in the discussions.

4.6. Integration of the Gender Dimension Into Research and Teaching Content

Integrating the gender dimension into research and teaching content appeared to be the least frequently coded content associated with all FG discussions. The most important barrier regarding this compulsory dimension of GEPs is that stakeholders on all levels (management, faculty, and students) do not understand what this criterion refers to, or there are misconceptions about what is expected. The first misunderstanding about what integrating the gender dimension into research and teaching content means is confusing the latter concept with gender balance and gender-equal representation: “There is not much talk about this topic in [the country]....If there is no problem with gender equality, why should there be any proposals at all?” (Univ3/S/P6/M). Furthermore, a link was made between EU projects and the need to include GE as a horizontal criterion and have diverse project teams: “I can say that there [is] certain content...that simply cannot be included according to the...logic and that we simply include it indirectly because we respect the rules” (Univ3/MM/P1/F). In some cases, the gender dimension was understood as motivating women to choose STEM careers.

4.7. Structures for the Institutionalisation of GE

One of the most important barriers to the development and maintenance of structures for GE in higher education institutions is the lack of economic resources. Without dedicated financial resources for GEP implementation, responsible staff for GE will be constrained to proposing initiatives that do not require any substantial financial resources for their implementation. As a first phase of development, prioritising “quick win” solutions is a viable strategy; nevertheless, achieving sustainable structural change is impossible without allocating human and economic resources. As a manager from University 1 pointed out: “There’s just a lack of finance, and it’s very much an economic issue” (Univ1/MM/P6/M).

Once the GEP is published and the Gender Equality Officer or Working Group is nominated, it may be a significant problem that organisational members are not aware of the implications of these new policies, roles, and initiatives. A participant commented that in their university “there is absolutely no public awareness that we have an Equality Officer...We sat there from three completely different organisational units, and none of us had ever heard of it” (Univ2/AS/P2/F).

5. Discussion

The presented results are part of a broader research design that assessed the status of GE in three CEE universities to support the implementation of their first GEPs. While the project also explored enablers and improvements, this article focuses specifically on barriers to GE, considering the local context and specificities of ALS. Given the consistency in perceived barriers across the institutions, we present the findings in a synthesised manner, following the focus group themes, which consisted of the five thematic areas recommended by the EU, plus two additional areas relevant in the CEE context: general assessment of GE; recruitment; leadership positions; work–life balance; organisational culture; GBV and sexual harassment; integration of the gender dimension into research and teaching; and institutionalisation of GE and the GEP.

Results showed that GE remains a challenge in various CEE higher educational contexts. Participants were often cautious to raise GE-related issues, which is understandable in environments where GE is not embedded in institutional culture. Highly politicised topics, such as gender quotas and gender identity, were mentioned early in discussions but soon avoided, reflecting their controversial status in country contexts (Barát, 2022). It should be noted that the legal recognition of a self-declared gender identity, without undue medical or surgical requirements, and access to changing (binary) gender markers on official documents are possible in Slovenia and Czechia, to a certain extent. In contrast, since 2020, Hungary has banned legal gender recognition altogether, by defining “sex at birth” as a legally unalterable category (Takács et al., 2022, pp. 41–43). At the same time, a notable proportion of participants—primarily male academics and some managerial women—could not identify gender inequalities in their universities, partly because they interpreted GE in terms of the ratio of women to men.

Despite these initial reservations, discussions revealed a wide range of obstacles (Begeny et al., 2020). Although these perceptions do not imply the universal or systemic existence of barriers at the university level, prior research has identified several comparable obstacles in STEM fields (Moss-Racusin et al., 2018), suggesting that, in many cases, gendered patterns emerge from the underlying structures of gendered organisations (Sümer, 2020). In our study, one such recurring pattern related to gender bias and negative

discrimination against women was evident across multiple thematic areas discussed in the focus groups. This included the recruitment of early-career academics, the expiration of fixed-term contracts of young mothers, and leadership positions (Régner et al., 2019).

Gender inequalities were often attributed to biologically determined differences in the interests and competencies between the sexes. Individualist explanations (women's own choice) and essentialist views (women being inherently less or not competent in men-dominated fields) surfaced regularly. Regarding student and faculty recruitment, the essentialist narrative often revolved around perceived deficits in stamina and skills, particularly in male-dominated ALS fields, such as forestry.

Regarding leadership positions, vertical segregation of women represented a complex intersection of structural gender-based barriers. The questioning of women's competence for fulfilling leading positions, the perception that decisions on senior positions are often distributed informally between men colleagues, as well as the discriminatory "mommy track," all hamper women's progression (Van Veelen & Derks, 2022). Meanwhile, several middle managers considered that not taking a managerial position is only due to women's individual choices, and their preference to prioritise family matters over careers, which reflects the dominance of traditional gender and family roles in CEE societies, including the highly gendered nature of caring roles.

Work-life balance emerged as another significant challenge for women, but in some cases for men as well. In the CEE context, part-time employment is generally not a viable option for young mothers, as it adversely affects financial stability and exacerbates job precarity. Paternity leave is also usually not considered for financial reasons; there is a pay gap in favour of men, which is well above the EU average in Czechia and Hungary (Eurostat, 2022). However, traditional societal norms also strongly prescribe maternity leave for families. Although participating universities made significant steps to foster work-life balance, the perceptions of insufficient and ineffective support imply that there is still room for improvement, particularly regarding the retention of women professionals. Specific challenges were highlighted, such as single parenthood—especially of women—or parents of children with disabilities, as well as ALS-related barriers, such as the unpredictability, inflexibility, lack of privacy, and high physical and mental demands of fieldwork, which extend beyond working hours for days and weeks.

The nature of organisational culture is a crucial determinant of whether individuals feel excluded and discriminated against or included and belong to the organisation. Beyond the reported positive experiences, here we highlight only the barriers, such as the perception of the glass ceiling, biased evaluations and unsupportive environments that all explain why more women, even middle managers, perceived toxic masculinity in some cases (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020), and described the organisational management culture regarding promotions metaphorically as a "hunter culture." This was often associated with shifting meritocratic criteria, which appeared to exclude women from various bodies and thus from decision-making based on "objective" metrics. These results and the perceived old boys' club phenomenon are consistent with previous publications about STEM fields (Jebsen et al., 2022). More students observed that biased treatment and sexism towards women students persisted across men's academic generations in the case of the older universities, though students noted that such practices were slowly diminishing. At the same time, gender-specific challenges have been identified between domestic and international student communities.

Regarding GBV, participants primarily used the term to refer to instances of physical sexual harassment and rape, which were typically perceived as a police matter rather than a university's responsibility to prevent or deal with appropriately. This ignorance may stem from the lack of regulation of GBV, or from GBV being addressed solely within ethical regulations. GBV regulations should handle intersectionality (Humbert et al., 2024) and cover all university settings; in the present research, not only examinations but also fieldwork, laboratory work, and internships were identified as sites of potential exposure to GBV.

Participants agreed that there is a lack of competence, experience, and communication skills regarding GBV, particularly in the context of prevention and awareness-raising within academia and broader society. This deficit contributes to underreporting, as affected individuals often fear reprisals, especially in hierarchical relationships between perpetrators and victims (Lipinsky et al., 2022; Phipps, 2020).

The main barrier to integrating the gender dimension into research and teaching content appeared to be participants' lack of awareness or their misconceptions about it. Furthermore, the absence of dedicated resources for institutionalising GE and GEPs—both from the government and the organisation side—undermines the effectiveness of gender budgeting. These findings are unsurprising, as these universities are in the implementation phase of their first GEPs within the CEE context.

6. Conclusion

Despite gender parity in a university, a wide range of STEM-like gender-related barriers could affect GE, which can be further compounded by ALS-specific challenges. Further, barriers can be extrapolated in CEE contexts, where addressing even inequality between women and men is challenging. Exploring GE barriers within their local context is vitally important to the effective implementation of GEPs; meanwhile, several barriers are worth being considered in Western contexts as well.

Childbearing and childcare are still particularly challenging for women, including those in leadership positions. These challenges stem largely from the unequal distribution of care work and the long-standing tradition of long maternity leave in Czechia and Hungary. The introduction of GEPs may shift the discourse away from individualist and essentialist narratives towards recognition of gender-based structural barriers. Meanwhile, financial constraints often compel families to maintain traditional gender roles even when they conflict with personal values.

The solution for the prevention and proper handling of GBV for staff, students, and top management is to institutionalise a strategy against it, as the price of inaction—both social and institutional—is substantial (Mergaert et al., 2023). While the protection of students seems to be more of a focus for the universities, equal attention is needed for academic and non-academic staff as well. GBV is such a sensitive and frequently avoided issue in the CEE context that it would be worth making it a mandatory element in GEPs.

In the future, CEE universities must prioritise GE, as more gender-equal environments promote social diversity, enhance social justice, and contribute to economic development and sustainability through research excellence. Though the internationalisation of higher education hides further gender-based challenges for universities, the organisational diversity approach could also be strengthened through the case of international students. Furthermore, ALS higher education maintains strong connections to the agri-food

and health sectors, and gender-based negative experiences may deter students from pursuing related careers. Nurturing an inclusive academic culture may mitigate declining enrolments in ALS. Yet, enhancing women's empowerment and participation is vital for addressing future challenges in agri-food systems.

Meaningful progress in GE depends on raising awareness, building sensitivity, and institutionalising both GE principles and GEPs. An inclusive and tailor-made GEP needs to consider national, institutional, and sectoral contexts, preferably within an integrated diversity approach, addressing the needs of all stakeholders, while systematically integrating intersectionality.

Universities need to develop efficient internal communication strategies for reaching stakeholders and making GE policies and GEPs (more) visible. Recent CEE gender regimes are also not the topsoil of GE. Gender budgeting is essential, particularly given the precarious and underfunded R&I sector. Without dedicated financial resources, GE officers are often limited to proposing initiatives that require little to no funding, thus constraining the transformative potential of GEPs.

The research has several limitations. The need to protect participant anonymity imposed constraints on the interpretation of some findings. Further, the transferability of focus group results is inherently limited, yet most of the barriers are likely to exist in other ALS or STEM-focused universities.

Though educational and occupational features of ALS disciplines, such as fieldwork, laboratory work, internship, and the considerable number of international students, are globally relevant, barriers can depend on national and institutional contexts. These challenges require targeted and flexible responses from universities. Future research can explore these features more in-depth across different settings, exploring enablers as well. Ultimately, the institutionalisation of GEPs requires continuing regular and systematic assessments from universities.

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The authors used ChatGPT only to improve the academic language of the revised version of their manuscript and format the references.

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An Extended Policy Analysis of Flemish Universities' Intersectional Commitments to Sexually Transgressive Behaviour

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Abstract

The prevention and follow-up of (sexually) transgressive behaviour (STB) are included as priorities in the Gender Charter signed by all Flemish universities and in their GEPs. Moreover, since 2022, testimonies of STB at Flemish universities have garnered significant media attention. Consequently, the universities have faced increased societal and legislative pressure to develop better organisational policies relating to STB. This article interrogates these revised organisational documents by employing an extended policy analysis. The ‘extended’ nature of this analysis relates to the expansive approach we have taken to defining policy: instead of focusing exclusively on organisational policy documents, our analysis locates the use of policy in conjunction with other information sources and organisational commitments, produced for varied audiences. Our analysis has been informed by intersectionality, and special attention was paid to (absence of) language referring to oppression, discrimination, and minoritised identities. The analysis yielded the following results: First, there is a clear division between “aspirational” policy commitments to intersectionality and their operationalisation in “procedural” policy documents; policy discussion on STB is largely identity-neutral; and STB and discrimination are presented as separate forms of transgressive behaviour, while their intersection remains unrecognised. We argue that current procedural policy on STB ignores the unequal distribution of exposure to STB and obscures identity-related experiences, especially intersectional experiences. As a result, the identity-neutrality of STB procedures could frustrate efforts to create a more gender-equal environment, especially for multiply minoritised staff and students.

Keywords

Flemish universities; gender; higher education; intersectionality; policy; sexually transgressive behaviour

1. Introduction

The higher education context is characterised by high rates of sexually transgressive behaviour (STB; Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2018; Bourabain, 2021), as well as by inadequate frameworks of support offered to victims (Cantor et al., 2019; Lipinsky et al., 2022; Naezer et al., 2019). UNISAFE's 2022 survey on gender-based violence in universities and research organisations across Europe found that almost a third of respondents reported having experienced sexual harassment since they started working or studying at their institution (Lipinsky et al., 2022). Further research shows a higher prevalence of sexual victimisation among queer people, trans* people, disabled people, and people of colour in comparison with those with non-minoritised identities (Cantor et al., 2019; Klein & Martin, 2021; National Union of Students & 1752 Group, 2018).

Contemporary research has also highlighted significant flaws in universities' equality-focused policies at universities, arguing that they do little to challenge permissive environments that enable structural and individual discrimination, prejudice, and transgressive behaviour (Hervías Parejo, 2023; Roos et al., 2020). Scholars argue that equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) policies and strategies are often developed outside the core operational functions of universities, meaning they are frequently perceived by university staff as bureaucratic hindrances (Pizarro Milian & Wijesingha, 2023), rather than meaningful tools for change.

Despite this extensive evidence of a persistent gap between policy and practice in university settings, little work has interrogated the assumptions present in university documents that address EDI issues and their relationship to other associated documents and information sources. Drawing on a theoretical framework informed by feminist institutionalism and intersectionality, this article addresses this gap by presenting a focused analysis of organisational policy documents and associated materials including website content. It draws on feminist institutionalism to understand how institutions constrain and enable gendered change (Minto & Mergaert, 2018; Sanders, 2022). Unusually, this article not only draws on intersectionality as part of its theoretical framing but also analyses organisational discourse and policy content relating to intersectionality. The article focuses on universities in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking northern half of Belgium, responding to recent national media coverage of STB incidents and the subsequent failures of the Flemish institutions to provide adequate responses.

With this study, we aim to answer the following research question: What gaps or consistencies exist between the institutional discourse in Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) and Diversity Action Plans (DAPs) and the public-facing discourse on websites regarding STB—and how can these be understood?

To answer this research question, we examine the following sub-questions:

1. (How) do the GEPs and DAPs of Flemish universities incorporate and operationalise intersectionality in their discourse, particularly regarding STB?
2. How do publicly available documents and websites frame the problem of STB and (how) is intersectionality considered in this framing?

2. Context

2.1. Theoretical Background: Feminist Institutionalism and Intersectionality

This study draws on feminist institutionalism, an analytical framework that critically examines how institutions, encompassing formal structures, rules, informal norms, and cultural practices, are inherently gendered and instrumental in reproducing power inequalities (Krook & Mackay, 2011; Mackay et al., 2010). Feminist institutionalism challenges traditional institutionalist perspectives, which often position institutions as neutral spaces governed by universal rules, by exposing the gendered logic underlying institutional operations and interactions (Sanders, 2022; Waylen, 2014). Central to feminist institutionalism is the recognition that institutional policies and practices reinforce gendered hierarchies by privileging masculinised forms of authority and marginalising alternative experiences and voices (Minto & Mergaert, 2018). Chappell (2006) further highlights the concept of the “gendered logic of appropriateness,” underscoring how institutional norms inherently shape acceptable gendered behaviours, thereby maintaining systemic inequalities and constraining genuine institutional change. These insights are particularly pertinent to higher education institutions, where gendered dynamics influence governance, resource allocation, decision-making processes, and responses to both discrimination and STB. Thus, despite formally espousing equality and inclusion, institutions may inadvertently foster environments that enable STB.

Feminist institutionalist scholarship emphasises applying an intersectional lens to fully capture institutional power dynamics. Classic approaches to intersectionality, as articulated by Crenshaw (1989) and Hill Collins (1990), emphasize how systems of oppression such as race, class, and gender interlock to produce structural inequalities, while also attending to the lived experiences of individuals situated at these intersections. Weldon (2006) extends this discussion by conceptualising intersectionality specifically as structural interactions between multiple axes of inequality, shifting the focus from individual identities to systemic patterns. This underscores the complexity of institutional power dynamics and emphasises the need for nuanced approaches in institutional policy formulation. Intersectionality, therefore, critically informs how gender equality policies are both formulated and operationalised within institutions.

2.2. EDI Policies: Efficacy vs Tokenism

Globally, universities have increasingly adopted EDI policies intended to address systemic inequalities and foster inclusive environments. However, feminist institutionalist critiques identify significant limitations in these policies, emphasising performative compliance (Tardos & Paksi, 2021) rather than meaningful structural transformations. Roos et al. (2020) introduce the concept of defensive institutional work, wherein institutions symbolically commit to gender equality while simultaneously employing discursive strategies to resist substantive institutional transformation. Institutions frequently prioritize surface-level metrics such as representation quotas while neglecting deeper structural inequities and accountability mechanisms, leading to symbolic gestures rather than substantive changes (Martinez-Pecino & Durán, 2019; Remnant et al., 2024). Consequently, many EDI efforts remain tokenistic in nature, thereby unintentionally perpetuating inequalities by sidelining marginalised voices in favour of institutional public relations objectives (Mugo & Puplampu, 2022). As a result, EDI policies and strategies have inadvertently reinforced the inequities they seek to dismantle.

2.3. Higher Education, Gender, and Sexual Harassment Policy

These critiques of symbolic institutional commitments carry significant implications for addressing gender inequalities and STB within higher education contexts. Many universities have made gender equality a central focus of their institutional aims, often emphasising equitable representation, pay parity, and the dismantling of systemic barriers faced by women and minoritised genders (Gamage et al., 2020; Timmers et al., 2010). However, despite these stated commitments, universities are failing to meet their gender equality goals (see Hervías Parejo, 2023). Persistent gender disparities remain in leadership, research funding allocation, professional development opportunities, and teaching and pastoral responsibilities, with women and gender minorities disproportionately excluded from positions of power (Bourabain, 2021), suggesting gendered institutionalised norms. This is compounded for women from marginalised racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Bourabain, 2021).

These shortcomings have significant implications for addressing STB on university campuses. Permissive environments for inequality enable the normalisation of power imbalances and inhibit the development of adequate accountability measures. Research shows that sexual harassment and violence are more likely to occur in settings where patriarchal norms and hierarchies remain unchallenged (Ahmed, 2021; Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Hines, 2007; Humbert & Strid, 2024). Institutional failures to provide adequate reporting mechanisms or support services for victims exacerbate the problem, often silencing survivors and fostering a culture of impunity (Bull et al., 2021).

2.4. Flemish Case Studies

This study contributes to literature exploring the in/efficacy of gender policy documents in Flanders (Roos et al., 2020) by providing an intersectional analysis of university policymaking related to STB. Flemish universities make an interesting case study due to an ongoing public debate regarding their mismanagement of reports and complaints of transgressive behaviour, including sexual misconduct. Flemish universities are bound to the Wellbeing Act adopted by the Flemish Parliament, resulting in similarities in the way these institutions organise their reporting procedures, disciplinary proceedings, and support services. However, a state-of-the-art review has indicated that Flemish universities are rarely studied in their own right and existing literature leaves the internal functioning and culture of Flemish universities largely unexamined (Broucker et al., 2018).

In the past decade, Flemish higher education institutions have been met with several waves of national media attention regarding their (in)capacity to deal with transgressive behaviour. Most recently, in 2022, various testimonies of sexual harassment, toxic work environments, and institutional betrayal by Flemish universities were investigated and shared by Flemish news outlets. Particularly influential was the airing of an episode of the documentary series *Pano* (Lefevere et al., 2022) on the topic of power abuse at Flemish universities. This episode portrayed an in-depth investigation of two specific cases of power abuse by two professors, one at Ghent University and one at KU Leuven.

In Belgium, legislation addressing these issues is outlined in the Federal Act of 4 August 1996 on wellbeing of workers in the performance of their work (“Wellbeing Act”), which mandates that all employers in Flanders are responsible for safeguarding the safety and wellbeing of their employees. Students are not

covered by this act unless their training program requires them to participate in a paid internship that takes place on the university campus (thus making them employees temporarily). This act stipulates employers' responsibility for measures that aim to prevent and respond to violence, bullying, and unwanted sexual behaviour at work. Universities' policies on transgressive behaviour take this framework as a starting point. The Act legally establishes "unwanted sexual behaviour" as a matter of social safety that impacts employees' wellbeing in the workplace.

To supplement the Wellbeing Act, the Flemish government issued the Decree Concerning Transgressive Behaviour in Higher Education (Flemish Government, 2023), which applies to both staff and students. This decree details policy measures to be taken by higher education institutions in the prevention and follow-up of transgressive behaviour. However, the decree mostly anchors measures that were already in place, rather than drastically changing the services universities need to provide.

3. Methods

This study employed a qualitative, document-based research design combining elements of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989) with an extended policy analysis (Bacchi, 2009; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). Our approach was guided by a feminist institutionalist framework (Thomson, 2017), which conceptualises policies not as isolated artefacts but as embedded within broader institutional structures, discourses, and practices. We refer to our approach as an extended policy analysis to underscore two methodological choices. First, we define "policy" broadly, including not only formal internal policy documents—such as GEPs and DAPs, but also all publicly available materials produced by universities that communicate institutional commitments to STB and gender equality. Second, we analysed these materials not only for their explicit content but also as sites of discourse, in which institutional identities, values, and problem representations are constructed and negotiated.

The research process consisted of four steps. The first step entailed that the first author assembled the data set by searching for each institution's most recent GEP, DAP, or equivalent, as well as the institution's homepage or dedicated webpages on transgressive behaviour. In addition, all institutions' entire public websites were searched using the keywords "(sexually) transgressive behaviour," "social safety," and "discrimination." Documents were excluded if they were outdated, replaced, or specific to sub-units (e.g., faculties or research centres), as these do not necessarily reflect the institutional-level discourse. Table 1 provides an overview of the included documents.

Second, the first author performed an initial close reading of the selected texts to identify unexpected or recurring themes. GEPs and DAPs were analysed for stated commitments to diversity, equality, and inclusion, and for explicit references to transgressive behaviour. Guided by feminist institutionalist theory, we then traced whether the commitments articulated in these policy documents were echoed in publicly available materials on STB, thereby exploring the discursive consistency between institutional plans and their outward-facing communications. To ensure reliability, the second author double-coded a selection of the website data.

In a third step, we applied critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989) focussing on how universities represent STB, frame institutional responses, and include (or exclude) references to structural inequalities.

Attention was paid to textual strategies, intertextual links between documents, and the (absence of) language referring to oppression, discrimination, and minoritised or vulnerabilised identities. This discourse-analytical approach was further informed by an intersectional lens, allowing us to examine the discursive inclusion or erasure of intersecting axes of inequality. Initial codes and interpretations were compared with existing scholarly literature and revised through iterative discussions among all authors. In this final phase, we developed new interpretations that took into account both the explicit intentions of the policies and their implicit discursive structures.

In a fourth step, initial codes and interpretations were compared with existing scholarly literature and revised through iterative discussions among all authors. In this final phase, we developed new interpretations that accounted for both the explicit intentions of the policies and their implicit discursive structures.

We note a difference in terminology between scientific literature on the topic and the Flemish context. While academic literature often uses the terms “sexual harassment,” “sexual misconduct,” and “sexual violence,” Flemish universities more frequently employ the terms “sexually transgressive behaviour” and “unwanted sexual behaviour.” In our analysis of the data, we will employ the concept of STB to reflect the language used in our empirical context and its inclusive function as an umbrella term. Other terminology is only retained where transcribed verbatim from the specific documents. Citations of texts written in Dutch were translated by the authors.

Table 1. Overview of analysed documents.

Organisation	Documents included	Code	No. of (web)pages	Type of document
KU Leuven (KUL)	Integrated Gender Equality Plan (2021)	KUL-GEP	37	Aspirational
	Charter voor Inclusie	KUL-DAP	1	Aspirational
	Website Sociale Veiligheid en grensoverschrijdend gedrag and all subsites	KUL-WS-1	26	Procedural
	Website Gedragscode sociale veiligheid and all subsites	KUL-WS-2	7	Aspirational
University of Hasselt (UH)	Inclusion Plan (2023)	UH-IEP	44	Aspirational
	Website Meldpunt grensoverschrijdend gedrag and all subsites	UH-WS-1	5	Procedural
	Integriteitscharter	UH-OT-1	40	Aspirational
	Tuchtreglement voor studenten	UH-OT-2	5	Procedural
Ghent University (UG)	Diversity policy and action plan of Ghent University for 2019–2023	UG-IEP	19	Aspirational
	Website Gender Policy	UG-WS-1	1	Aspirational
	Memorie van toelichting bij de Gedragscode van de Universiteit Gent inzake grensoverschrijdend gedrag	UG-OT-1	17	Aspirational
	Gedragscode inzake grensoverschrijdend gedrag (2018)	UG-OT-2	3	Aspirational

Table 1. (Cont.) Overview of analysed documents.

Organisation	Documents included	Code	No. of (web)pages	Type of document
Ghent University (UG)	Reglement tot regeling van de tuchtprocedure, het opleggen van tuchtsancties en het nemen van ordemaatregelen voor studenten van de Universiteit Gent ("Tuchtprocedure voor studenten") (2024)	UG-OT-3	25	Procedural
	Website Grensoverschrijdend gedrag en discriminatie: Trustpunt luistert and all subsites	UG-WS-2	6	Procedural
	Website Veel gestelde vragen bij grensoverschrijdend gedrag	UG-WS-3	7	Procedural
	Website Wegwijzer Tuchtprocedure	UG-WS-4		Procedural
University of Antwerp (UA)	Diversiteitsactieplan personeel (2021)	UA-DAP-1	18	Aspirational
	Actielijst Diversity Action Plan for Staff	UA-DAP-2	8	Aspirational
	Gender aan UAntwerpen (2021)	UA-GEP	59	Aspirational
	Diversiteitsactieplan deel 1 (2018–2024)	UA-DAP-3	1	Aspirational
	Gedragscode '5 omgangsvormen voor een veilige werk- en studieplek'	UA-OT-1	29	Aspirational
	Onderwijs- en examenreglement Academiejaar 2024–2025	UA-OT-2	1	Procedural
	Website 'Grensoverschrijdend gedrag'	UA-WS	24	Procedural
Free University of Brussels (VUB)	Gender Equality Plan (2024–2026)	VUB-GEP	24	Aspirational
	EEN Grenswijs beleid voor ONGEWENST seksueel grensoverschrijdend gedrag binnen de studentengemeenschap (TUSSEN STUDENTEN ONDERLING)	VUB-OT-1	9	Aspirational
	Orde- en tuchtreglement voor studenten (2022)	VUB-OT-2	1	Procedural
	Infographic 'Hoe te reageren wanneer je getuige bent van grensoverschrijdend gedrag'	VUB-OT-3	1	Procedural
	Infographic 'Hoe te reageren bij getuigenissen van seksueel grensoverschrijdend gedrag; first aid praattips'	VUB-OT-4	1	Procedural
	Infographic 'Hoe te reageren wanneer je een vermoeden hebt van grensoverschrijdend gedrag'	VUB-OT-5	12	Procedural
	Equality Action Plan 2021–2024	VUB-DAP	2	Aspirational
	Gedragscode VUB 2019	VUB-OT-6	7	Aspirational
	Website Grensoverschrijdend gedrag and all subsites	VUB-WS-1	1	Procedural
	Website Welzijn personeel	VUB-WS-2	1	Procedural
	Website Welzijn studenten	VUB-WS-3	1	Procedural

Table 1. (Cont.) Overview of analysed documents.

Organisation	Documents included	Code	No. of (web)pages	Type of document
Flemish Interuniversity Council	VLIR-JA Charter Gender in Academia (2019)	VLIR-OT	28	Aspirational
Belgian Federal Government	Wet van 4 augustus 1996 betreffende het welzijn van de werknemers bij de uitvoering van hun werk	BG-OT	65	Procedural
Flemish Government	Decreet over grensoverschrijdend gedrag in het hoger onderwijs (8 december 2023)	FG-OT	3	Procedural

4. Findings

4.1. Theorising Policy Gaps: Distinguishing Aspirational From Procedural Policy

Our main finding is the identification of a gap between different kinds of policy documents in terms of their attention to intersectionality. We hypothesise that this gap can be explained by a difference in the aims of policy documents considered. One set of documents, consisting of the GEPs and DAPs, focuses on detailing steps taken or needed to achieve gender equality, diversity, and inclusion, while the other set of documents focuses on framing transgressive behaviour and describing the resources available to targets of transgressive behaviour. These sets can be understood as distinct kinds of policy: (a) aspirational policy, which aims to express an organisation’s commitments, aspirations, and values; and (b) procedural policy, which aims to describe and/or explain which procedures should be followed under which circumstances.

In the article *The Nonperformativity of Antiracism*, a diversity practitioner interviewed by Sara Ahmed “describes her skill and expertise in terms of writing a ‘wonderful aspirational document’” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 117). Ahmed remarks how “many practitioners and academics have expressed concerns that writing documents or having good policies becomes a substitute for action: as this practitioner goes on to say, ‘you end up doing the document rather than doing the doing’” (pp. 116–117). Thus, these documents, as speech acts, “do not do what they say: they do not, as it were, commit a person, organisation, or state to an action. Instead, they are nonperformatives. They are speech acts that read as if they are performatives, and this “‘reading’ generates its own effect” (p. 104). A related finding emerges from Tardos and Paksi’s analysis of 45 equality plans of Hungarian research performing organisations, which demonstrates that:

Equality plans aim for legal compliance and not institutional social change related to protected groups, thus in most cases cannot be considered a driving force for workplace equality and diversity in the Hungarian RDI [research, development, and innovation] sector. Consequently, equality plans fulfil mainly an external legitimation and legal compliance function. (Tardos & Paksi, 2021, p. 49)

Thus, the aim of aspirational policy can be understood as being *seen to express certain commitments*, and as Ahmed demonstrates, thus avoiding having to demonstrate acting on these commitments.

By contrast, procedural policy documents have a very different aim: to be used. The second set of policy documents included in our analysis are aimed at a variety of audiences, but they share common goals: to inform the reader about what constitutes STB, to provide information about the available procedures, and to clarify the role of different institutional and external actors in these processes. While arguably these documents also aim at compliance with the Wellbeing Act, they serve a purpose that GEPs and DAPs do not: People use them to evaluate whether to file a complaint or report transgressive behaviour. Distinguishing between these two kinds of policy illuminates their discursive differences.

In what follows, we will demonstrate the utility of a distinction between aspirational and procedural policy, and the existence of a gap between both with regard to intersectionality, through our analysis of organisational policy documents of Flemish universities. First, we will examine these institutions' GEPs and DAPs, as examples of aspirational policy, for their commitments to intersectionality. Then, we will examine these universities' procedural policy documents on STB in particular, attempting to trace evidence of the wider organisational commitments found in the aspirational policy.

4.2. Commitments to Intersectionality in Aspirational Policy Documents

The data show how, in their GEPs and DAPs, all the included organisations clearly articulate an overall aspiration to cultivate organisational diversity and inclusion. Diversity is referred to as a reality, an unavoidable feature of today's society that must be embraced. Moreover, diversity is also portrayed as an asset, as something that generates value for the university. While most mentions of diversity and inclusion leave these terms unspecified, some documents do define them, for instance:

Inclusion devotes attention to the different backgrounds and special characteristics of the individuals that make up our society and therefore our university community. These characteristics are not fixed and static; they are elements of a multi-layered identity that can evolve or change over time. This means that, at some point in our lives, each of us finds ourselves in a situation where a non-inclusive environment creates barriers. (KUL-GEP, 2021, p. 4)

This definition of inclusion demonstrates an active recognition of difference and its importance for policymaking. Moreover, it draws on the language of intersectionality when it recognises the multi-layered, dynamic nature of identity.

Importantly, this active recognition of difference and intersectionality translates to a recognition of the need for institutional strategies aimed at protecting or supporting specific disadvantaged demographics within the workforce. One such organisational strategy is the development and support of specific task-based working groups, an example of which is found in KU Leuven's (KUL) working group LGBTQI+:

This working group is tasked with developing an LGBTQI+ policy framework that focuses on: the provision of accurate information, good mental health and feeling comfortable at our university, and preventing, tackling, and rectifying situations of discrimination, harassment, and violence. The WG LGBTQI+ is an example of how, by starting to pay attention to target groups, a more inclusive environment can be created by identifying the specific barriers and removing them. (KUL-GEP, 2021, p. 26)

Another example of a target-group-oriented strategy is found in Ghent University's (UG) initiatives to reactivate networks for employees from underrepresented groups "in which they can exchange experiences and provide input with regard to policy" (UG-IEP, 2019, p. 13) and the organisation of roundtable discussions with students from underrepresented groups, with the same goal. This is interesting, as it implies that the university believes contributing to policy is an outcome, without specifying what policies might be contributed to, or the processes in place regarding the application or procedural elements of said policies.

One university, Hasselt University (UH), recognizes the limitations of its current policy in this regard: target-oriented initiatives, as they are not included in the Inclusion Plan itself, must be developed in "the further distillation of the actions of this plan into project plans and procedures" (UH-IEP, 2023, p. 6). This aligns with Roos et al.'s (2020, p. 467) finding that Flemish university gender documents legitimate what they call non-time-bound gender equality initiatives, containing "expected outcomes" that "are undetermined in time," thus prioritising symbolic gestures over structural changes.

In addition to these institutions' commitment to EDI, three universities' GEPs contain implicit and explicit references to intersectionality as a relevant framework for their policy on gender equality. KUL and UH reference intersectionality to explain the multi-layered nature of identity and the resulting irreducibility of any individual to one defining characteristic. UG takes this one step further:

[Ghent University is] working on an inclusive policy based on intersectionality[.]...We wish to integrate this intersectionality perspective into all policy processes. This means that, within each policy domain, the complexity of the diversity present among students and staff is taken into account. (UG-IEP, 2019, p. 6)

This attention to intersectionality is also evidenced by a recognition of gender equality as one element of a broader commitment to fostering diversity and inclusion. Moreover, all universities' GEPs recognise a broad conception of gender that goes beyond the binary, usually indicated by their use of "m/f/x" or references to gender diversity. However, GEPs are usually written in terms of equality between women and men. This use of a narrow, binary conception of gender is ascribed to the limitations of the data collected by these universities, which draw on people's sex as registered in Belgium's national registry. Despite the recognition of a broad conception of gender, most measures these organisations propose pertain to the inclusion of women, based on sex, into the workforce. Thus, this broad conception of gender remains on the level of commitment (aspirational) and does not translate into actionable measures.

In their GEPs, four of the five universities reference the prevention and follow-up of transgressive behaviour as an agenda item relevant to gender equality at the university. Some institutions explicitly mention STB. Notably, the Free University of Brussels' (VUB) GEP includes an overview of the "measures [they have taken] against gender-based violence, including sexual harassment" (VUB-GEP, 2023, p. 3). In these institutions' DAPs, other kinds of transgressive behaviour are mentioned, such as power abuse or racism, in addition to sexual harassment.

4.3. The Identity-Neutrality of Procedural Policy on STB

All universities framed STB as a kind of transgressive behaviour. This is in accordance with the Wellbeing Act, where "unwanted sexual behaviour" is legally established as transgressive behaviour in the workplace.

Our analysis showed that, in all universities, the procedures that are available to those who wish to report unwanted sexual behaviour are the general procedures for reporting transgressive behaviour. There were no specific protective or supportive measures for those who wished to report unwanted sexual behaviour.

On their public-facing websites, all universities provide a description or definition of transgressive behaviour. However, these descriptions differ in degree of detail and specificity. Common themes in their framing of transgressive behaviour are framing it in terms of: (a) the *behaviour* itself and (b) the *experience* and *perception* of the behaviour. We will take a closer look at each of these in turn.

In their construction of transgressive behaviour, Flemish universities rarely speak in terms of victims and perpetrators. The word “perpetrator” is largely absent. Instead, perpetrators of STB are usually described in terms of their (alleged) behaviour. Often, judgement of their behaviour is suspended by adding qualifiers introducing uncertainty and stressing possible differences in interpretation of the behaviour. For example, they are described as “people who...have possibly crossed a boundary themselves” (KUL-WS-1, 2023). Moreover, when perpetrators are directly addressed by these texts, this is usually in terms of (seeking support for) doubts about their own behaviour.

In strong contrast, victims are constructed in terms of their experiences and perceptions. Their positioning towards transgressive behaviour is often framed as being confronted with transgressive behaviour or experiencing transgressive behaviour. Importantly, the experience of transgressive behaviour is framed as a matter of “perception” (UG-OT-2, 2018, p. 1).

Experiences of victimisation are described in terms of feeling uncomfortable, feeling unsafe, thinking something is not okay, and experiencing behaviour that crosses your personal boundaries. The importance of *subjectivity* is made explicit by all universities in their descriptions of transgressive behaviour. The websites reference the individual and personal nature of boundaries and the resulting subjective nature of transgressive behaviour. This construction of victimhood seems to suggest that victims’ experiences of transgressive behaviour are taken at face value. However, other discursive mechanisms serve to qualify this impression, for example:

When someone’s personal boundaries are crossed, we consider that transgressive. That boundary is subjective per definition. This means that behaviour that is unacceptable to one person, could be acceptable to someone else. (KUL-WS-1, 2023)

This characterisation of transgressive behaviour is ambiguous. In the first sentence, the personal boundary, albeit subjective, is endorsed by the university and thus institutionally backed. However, the following sentence stresses the possibility of differences in the interpretation of behaviour, thus introducing other parties’ subjective perceptions of the behaviour as relevant too, in addition to the perception by the person targeted by the behaviour. Besides this emphasis on the subjective nature of transgressive behaviour, two other relevant factors are introduced. First, several universities recognize the role cultural and societal norms can play in determining which behaviour is acceptable (UH, VUB, University of Antwerp [UA]). Second, UG recognises some boundaries as objective “hard boundaries,” namely those behaviours that are recognised as punishable under Belgian law (UG-WS-3, n.d.)

One notable exception to the construction of victims in terms of experience and perception is found in the framing of sexual violence, as opposed to the more general STB. Two universities speak in terms of victimhood regarding sexual violence. However, the terminology of victimhood also interacts with the abovementioned focus on subjectivity. For example, on their website on STB, UG writes: “This is what you can do when you feel like a victim” (UG-WS-2, n.d.). The only mention of the word perpetrator is also found in the framing of sexual violence: One policy document aimed at regulating sexual behaviour between students consistently invokes the figure of the perpetrator. In the documents included, this term is never used to refer to members of staff.

When it comes to these organisations’ conceptualisation of transgressive behaviour, the absence of identity is notable. As demonstrated above, transgressive behaviour is framed in terms of the transgression of personal boundaries, which are subjective in nature and different for everyone. When factors of identity are mentioned, engagement with them remains superficial. For example, on their webpage about “unwanted sexual behaviour,” UG cites research conducted by one of their researchers on the student population’s experiences with STB. This researcher mentions how “women are victimised far more often: 34% of them has been kissed or touched sexually against their will” (UG-WS-2, n.d.). Despite the heightened risk of exposure to STB faced by minority groups, very few documents take this into account, and when they do, they only refer to women’s heightened risk of exposure to STB.

Another example is found on KUL’s website on STB. This website explains how STB can be a manifestation of gender-based violence: violence in relation to “sex, gender, gender expression or—identity or sexual orientation” (KUL-WS-1, 2023). The website also notes how, in practice, “women or people who do not behave according to the social expectations and norms that belong to a certain gender role” are most often victim of this kind of violence (KUL-WS-1, 2023). Moreover, the website mentions how LGBTQ+ people and men can experience additional barriers in reporting or seeking help for STB. As such, these factors of identity are mentioned as a risk factor for STB that are manifestations of gender-based violence. No further explanation is given on how to distinguish gender-based violence from “gender-neutral” violence, or the implications in terms of reporting it. Thus, this assertion seems to remain at a surface level: No targeted initiatives or policy measures are included that tackle STB as a form of gender-based violence, nor is targeted support offered to minoritised groups who face a higher risk of experiencing this kind of STB, and who experience additional barriers in seeking support for it.

The data show that an identity-neutral approach dominates Flemish universities’ conceptualisation of and policymaking regarding STB. By identity-neutral, we mean that identity-related factors such as race, gender, ability, class, sexuality, among others, are not taken on board in the framing of STB. Some documents make this identity-neutral approach explicit, for example: VUB’s policy for sexual behaviour between students, which includes a proposal to organise a bystander training for students from a “gender—and age-neutral perspective” (VUB-OT-1, 2022, p. 13); or UG’s code of conduct which states that transgressive behaviour is “not linked to particular kinds of interpersonal interactions, categories of students or staff, or gender” (UG-OT-2, 2018, p. 1).

Where identity is largely absent in the framing of STB, it takes front stage in the discursive construction of discrimination. All universities mention discrimination as a kind of transgressive behaviour. UA does not define discrimination on their public-facing website on transgressive behaviour. The other websites define discrimination in terms of facing unequal treatment, disadvantage, or exclusion on the basis of (protected)

personal characteristics. Some universities clarify different types of discrimination, such as direct and indirect discrimination, inciting discrimination, intimidation, the refusal of reasonable adaptations, hate speech, and hate crimes (VUB and KUL). Moreover, these two universities provide definitions of racism, and one provides a definition of sexism. These definitions are borrowed from external expertise centres, which are provided as references.

KUL relates two further kinds of transgressive behaviour: violence and bullying. This in accordance with the Wellbeing Act. None of these documents, however, links STB to discrimination. Another notable, related finding is that not all the considered documents had been translated to English—a considerable number of them, notably those containing information about procedures and support services, were only available in Dutch. This language barrier negatively impacts international staff and students' access to these documents.

4.4. Tracing Inconsistencies Between Public Aspiration and Organisational Procedure

Despite most universities' aspirational commitments to intersectionality, the data show that an intersectional perspective is absent from their framing of transgressive behaviour in general, and STB in particular. The intersection of identity is not recognised, be it explicitly or implicitly, on any of these institutions' websites detailing their approach to transgressive behaviour. This absence of an intersectional perspective in the framing of transgressive behaviour emerges from the data on two levels.

First, neither the intersection of different forms of oppression, nor the consequences of these intersections for experiences of transgressive behaviour, are routinely recognised in the policy documents included in our analysis. On the websites and documents regarding discrimination, protected identity characteristics are listed. However, the interplay of these identities is left unrecognised and unexamined. An illustration of this single-axis approach can be found in the provision of definitions of racism and sexism (VUB-WS-1), while leaving their intersection unrecognised. Through this example, the lack of an intersectional perspective becomes evident: Recognising the intersection of racism and sexism in the lived experiences of women of colour was the foundational example used to demonstrate the need for intersectional theory and practice and remains the most well-known example of intersectionality. One reference to intersectionality is made in VUB's policy on unwanted STB between students. This text mentions how a multicultural society entails the norms and values of superdiversity and intersectionality, also regarding sexuality, and as such cultural differences should be respected (VUB-OT-1). However, what intersectionality means or entails regarding STB is not further explored in this policy document or any other policy document considered.

Second, the intersection of various forms of transgressive behaviour is left largely unrecognised. Rather, STB, violence, bullying, discrimination, and sometimes power abuse, are described as distinct types of transgressive behaviour. In the Wellbeing Act, violence and bullying are recognised as possible expressions of discrimination, while STB is not. Two policy documents refer to the intersection of STB with other forms of discrimination: first, VUB's *grenswijs* policy for sexual behaviour among students mentions "other forms of sexual gender related violence: violence prompted (in part) by, for example, homophobia, transphobia, and racism." Second, an explanatory memorandum to UG's code of conduct refers to "sexual bullying [as] a kind of sexual harassment aimed at the sex of a person, her or his body, sexual orientation, or sexual activity, gender identity or—expression, etc" (UG-OT-1, 2018, p. 12). This document provides examples of homophobic and misogynist slurs as an illustration of sexual bullying.

Despite these examples, and importantly for our analysis, these policy documents do not frame STB as discrimination. While STB is linked to discrimination and inequality at some level by its inclusion in policy documents such as GEPs and DAPs, the websites describing STB and the relevant policy documents do not frame STB in terms of discrimination, nor do they describe the negative impact of sexual harassment on minoritised groups' social inclusion in academia. Interestingly, both UG and KUL recognise transgressive behaviour in general as relevant to inclusion. KUL's code of conduct explicitly foregrounds a culture of inclusion, respect, and social safety and frames respecting others' boundaries and the denouncement of discriminatory behaviour as essential building blocks for such a culture (KUL-WS-2). Moreover, KUL recognises:

Someone in a minority position will be more inclined to question the status quo. We need this perspective to grow as an organisation. As such, it is in our interest to learn to hear these voices and work towards solutions together. (KUL-WS-1, 2023)

In an explanatory memorandum to UG's code of conduct regarding transgressive behaviour, intimidation *with* discrimination is distinguished from intimidation *without* discrimination. Discrimination is framed as an aggravating factor due to its negative impact on the value of diversity. This behaviour is deemed "completely incompatible with UG's commitment regarding diversity, inclusivity, and equal opportunities" (UG-OT-1, 2018, p. 6).

While tackling transgressive behaviour, and STB in particular, is recognised as a policy priority in documents detailing these universities' gender equality and EDI policies, these institutions' procedures on STB rarely frame it in terms of minority groups' heightened exposure or recognise identity-related experiences of STB. Moreover, the data reveal a wide divergence between these documents concerning their attention to intersectionality.

As we have demonstrated, this gap is best understood by distinguishing aspirational from procedural policy. As aspirational policy documents, the purpose of GEPs and DAPs is simply to exist. Procedural policy documents, however, have a different purpose: People use them to draw the institution's attention to transgressive behaviour perpetrated by members of the institution. In a formal way, these documents can be used by those who wish to raise complaints and grievances. As procedural documents, the university can be held accountable for the commitments expressed in these documents, whereas this is not the case for aspirational policy documents. This makes commitments to intersectionality, EDI, and gender equality in aspirational policy a relatively risk-free undertaking, while translating these commitments to procedural policy would entail a far greater level of accountability for the institution to live up to these commitments.

5. Discussion

This study uses a feminist institutionalist approach to critically examine the identity-neutral framing of policies addressing transgressive behaviour in Flemish universities, revealing significant gaps between aspirational commitments to EDI and their operationalisation. The study uses this approach to explore the policy-practice gap explicitly through the analysis of varied forms of organisational documents, highlighting institutional contradictions and assumptions, and how they actively inhibit the organisations from meeting their equality aspirations. By analysing GEPs, DAPs, and publicly available documents related to

STB, this research highlights how intersectionality remains underutilised as a guiding framework in policy development.

The findings underscore the need for universities to shift from broad, generic approaches to nuanced, intersectionally informed strategies that reflect the diverse experiences and vulnerabilities within university communities. These findings resonate strongly with feminist institutionalist critiques that expose how formal commitments to equality are often undermined by informal institutional norms, routines, and power structures (Mackay et al., 2010; Waylen, 2014). In particular, the persistent identity-neutrality observed in these documents illustrates the gendered “logic of appropriateness” (Chappell, 2006), which sustains dominant norms by framing STB as a behavioural aberration rather than a structural issue rooted in institutionalised inequalities.

The policies analysed demonstrate a limited integration of intersectionality, especially in more procedural documents. While the documents frequently reference diversity and inclusion, they often do so in a manner that lacks specificity regarding the compounded vulnerabilities faced by minoritised groups. For instance, gender is commonly treated as a standalone category, with little acknowledgment of how it intersects with race, class, or disability, evidencing what appears to be an institutional inability to adequately engage with intersectional oppressions in a practicable way. Moreover, Flemish universities predominantly take an identity-neutral approach to tackling transgressive behaviour, notably STB: Current organisational procedures on STB ignore the unequal distribution of exposure to STB and also obscure identity-related experiences, especially intersectional experiences. This absence of intersectional specificity not only reflects epistemic blind spots but also aligns with what Roos et al. (2020) describe as “defensive institutional work”—symbolic efforts that allow institutions to appear progressive without disrupting core power hierarchies. In this context, intersectionality is at risk of being co-opted as institutional rhetoric rather than a framework for structural reform.

The institutional assumptions of identity-neutrality in policies and documents relating to STB could frustrate efforts to make Flemish universities more inclusive, especially for multiply-minoritised staff and students. Scholars warn how approaching sexual violence from “an identity-neutral and power-evasive approach” results in ineffective strategies to address and prevent sexual violence (Harris & Linder, 2017, p. xii; see also Colpitts, 2021). Täubers’ study of women academics’ intersectional experiences of policy ineffectiveness in the European context shows that “ineffective policy...contributes to the reproduction of a rather homogenous academic community” (Täuber, 2022, p. 10). These findings stress the fact that sexual harassment is an equity issue (Bull et al., 2020) and must be approached as one.

In addition, we find that publicly available materials frame STB in broad terms, often emphasising procedural compliance with the Wellbeing Act and related decrees. This compliance-driven approach shifts the focus away from recognising and addressing the structural inequalities that underpin STB. The framing tends to prioritise the legal obligations of universities over proactive efforts to foster genuinely inclusive and safe environments (Ahmed, 2012; Tardos & Paksi, 2021).

Finally, a clear divergence exists between the language used in GEPs/DAPs and public-facing documents on STB. The former documents often articulate aspirational commitments to intersectionality, whereas public-facing websites frame STB in an identity-neutral manner. This inconsistency diminishes the perceived

accountability of universities and limits the accessibility of these policies for affected stakeholders, particularly students and staff from minoritised backgrounds. From a discursive institutionalist perspective, such inconsistencies can be read as instances of “discursive decoupling,” where the language of inclusion in strategic documents is not mirrored in practical or procedural texts. This gap reveals the performative nature of EDI work, where language becomes a tool for reputation management rather than a mechanism for structural redress (Ahmed, 2012).

This study presents several methodological and conceptual limitations that warrant careful consideration. The reliance on publicly available documents risks omitting critical insights into internal practices, stakeholder perspectives, and nuanced organisational dynamics, which are essential for a comprehensive understanding of policy design and implementation. Additionally, the geographical scope of the study, centred on Flemish universities, restricts the generalisability of the findings to higher education contexts with differing legislative and cultural frameworks. These limitations underscore the necessity for future research, which could adopt mixed-method approaches and engage with more diverse institutional settings. Such efforts would significantly enhance our understanding of how intersectionality is incorporated into policy frameworks and practices.

However, our study critically exposes the identity-neutral framing of policies addressing STB in Flemish universities, revealing a substantial disconnect between the aspirational commitments to gender equality and their practical operationalisation. This framing fails to account for the heightened vulnerabilities and unique experiences of minoritised groups, thereby undermining the inclusivity and efficacy of these policies.

Bridging this gap demands a deliberate shift toward an intersectional approach to the prevention of and response to STB: one that recognises the specific experiences of minoritised staff members and students, takes them seriously, and develops policy accordingly (Cortina & Areguin, 2021; Harris & Linder, 2017; Täuber, 2022). Importantly, the integration of an intersectional approach in procedural policy does not only concern the framing of STB. While an active recognition of intersectionality and the heightened risk of exposure faced by (multiply) minoritised staff and students is important, it is not enough, as Colpitts (2019) shows. Her analysis of Ontario universities’ sexual violence policies shows that “these...policies may serve to publicly signal institutions’ commitment to addressing sexual violence and construct them as ‘progressive’ for simply referencing intersectionality without necessarily transforming the ways in which sexual violence is institutionally embedded” (p. ii). Thus, like aspirational policy, procedural policy too risks integrating intersectionality in a non-performative way.

This cautionary remark stresses the importance of operationalising intersectionality in policy processes, rather than merely referencing it. Examples of intersectionally-informed strategies include providing cultural competency training for staff and guaranteeing survivors have access to affordable health care (Roskin-Fraze, 2020, p. 21). An intersectional analysis, by emphasising individual and structural dimensions of sexual misconduct, can help policymakers become “cartographers of marginalization” (Iverson, 2017, p. 228). Crucially, this demands that institutions not only revise their policy texts but also challenge the norms, routines, and power dynamics through which such texts are enacted and interpreted. By embedding these considerations within procedural frameworks, universities can enhance accountability, confront systemic inequalities, and foster genuinely inclusive academic environments. Such measures are essential for aligning institutional practices with their professed commitments to equality, diversity, and inclusion.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Correction Statement

This article has been republished with minor corrections to fix spelling, grammar mistakes, and/or typos. These changes have no impact on the scientific content of the article as it was originally published.

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

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Abstract

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

Keywords

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

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. Methods and Materials

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

2.1. Recruitment of Participating Institutions

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

2.2. Study Framework and Main Actors

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

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

2.3. Data Collection and Methods of Analysis

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

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

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

2.3.1. Self-Assessment Reports

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

2.3.2. Semi-Structured Questionnaires

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

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

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

2.3.3. Collection of Observations From the Expert Team

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

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

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

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

3. Results

3.1. Context and Background

3.1.1. Institutional Settings Regarding Gender Equality and GBV

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

3.1.2. Institutional Attitudes Towards Change and Innovation

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

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

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

3.1.3. First Institutional Reactions and Support for Institutional Change

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

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

3.2. Forms and Experiences of Resistance

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

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

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

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

Overall, the findings reveal an interesting dichotomy in the experiencing and reporting of resistance. While a minority of respondents acknowledged encountering resistance, the majority reported experiencing none.

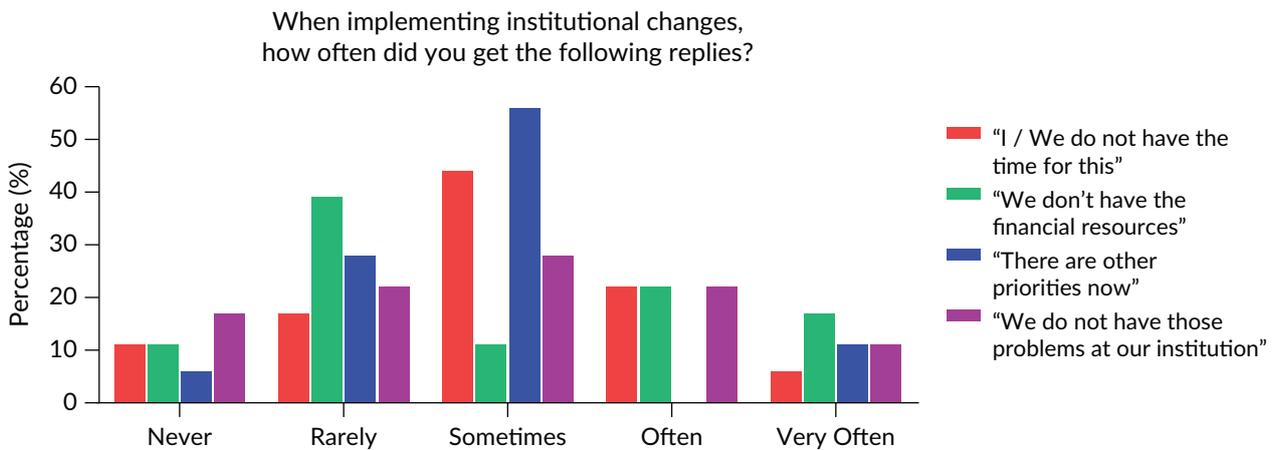


Figure 1. Frequency of common responses encountered during the implementation of institutional changes ($n = 18$ respondents).

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

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

3.3. Patterns of Resistance Across the Institutions

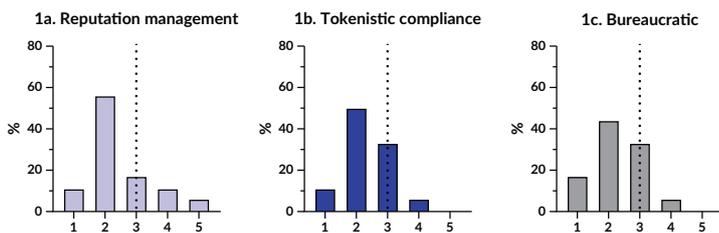
Following the sites and forms of resistance to institutional change outlined in Section 1.1, the prevalence of each type of resistance was assessed through the semi-structured questionnaire completed by members of the implementing teams of the participating institutions, as well as through the observations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

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

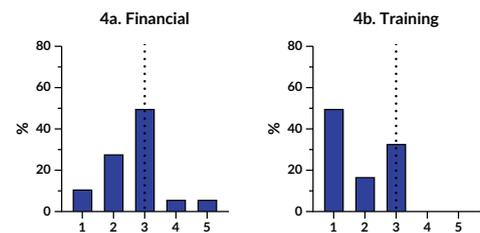
prevalent type of resistance is institutional resistance, including its three subtypes: reputation management resistance, tokenistic compliance, and bureaucratic resistance. Financial resistance, legal resistance, and cognitive dissonance resistance are also identified among the most prevalent subtypes.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

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

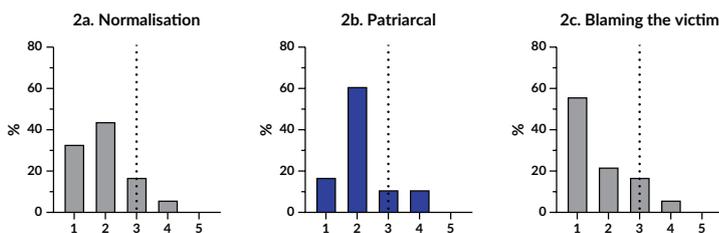
1. Institutional resistance



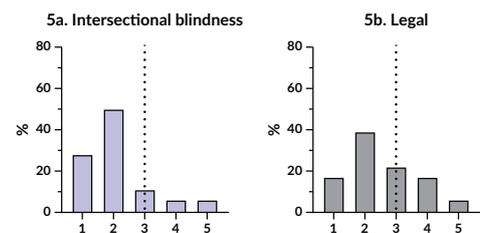
4. Resource-based resistance



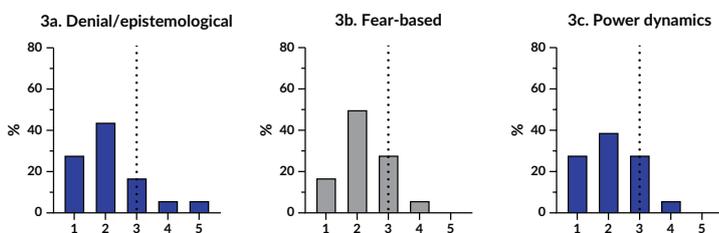
2. Cultural and normative resistance



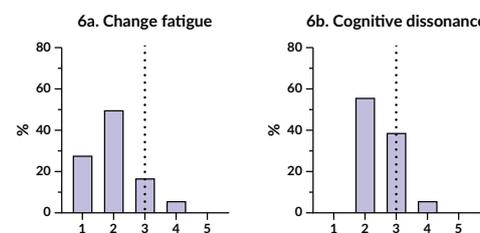
5. Systemic resistance



3. Leadership and faculty resistance



6. Cognitive and psychological resistance



Expert team views: ■ Very prevalent ■ Present ■ Not observed

Figure 2. Experiences of the subtypes of resistance. The graphs show percentages, with 100% representing 18 responses. Likert scale: 1 = not present at all; 2 = slightly present; 3 = moderately present; 4 = significantly present; 5 = very prevalent.

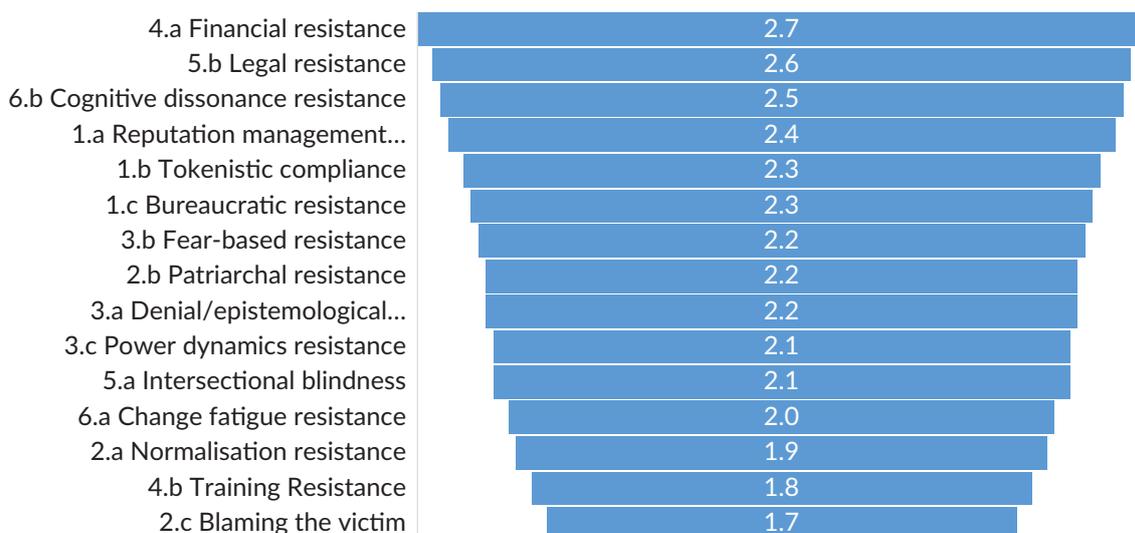


Figure 3. Prevalence of resistance. Weighted averages ($n = 18$) of the perceived frequency of the different subtypes of resistance.

3.3.1. Institutional Resistance

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.3.2. Cultural and Normative Resistance

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

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

3.3.3. Leadership and Faculty Resistance

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

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

3.3.4. Resource-Based Resistance

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

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

3.3.5. Systemic Resistance

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

3.3.6. Cognitive and Psychological Resistance

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

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

4. Discussion and Conclusions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5. Limitations and Future Research

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

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

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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From Plans to Practice: Transformative Gender-in-Teaching Training Programs Through GEPs in Higher Education

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Abstract

Universities play a crucial role in advancing gender equality by implementing gender equality plans (GEPs). A key element of these plans is gender-in-teaching training for educators, which equips them to integrate gender dimensions into their subjects. This initiative benefits students by challenging entrenched gender norms and stereotypes and fostering more inclusive and humanized learning experiences. Particularly in STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), such training is essential in promoting equal opportunities and dismantling biases. To determine effective approaches for designing these transformative programs, action research was conducted across seven online training programs involving over 140 educators from seven Spanish universities. The research identified best practices and challenges educators face when integrating gender perspectives into teaching, along with strategies to overcome these barriers. Effective solutions included defining gender-related activities tailored to individual subjects and providing ongoing, personalized support to educators. The findings emphasize that sustained support through well-structured, online gender-in-teaching programs is vital for authentic curriculum transformation. Personalized content and collaborative approaches enable educators to critically reflect on their teaching practices and implement meaningful changes. These initiatives not only enhance gender sensitivity in education but also contribute to broader societal transformation towards gender equality. This research offers practical insights for institutions looking to bridge policy and practice through GEPs, ensuring lasting impact in higher education and fostering equitable, inclusive learning environments.

Keywords

curricula; gender; GEP; higher education; STEM

1. Introduction

Gender equality plans (GEPs) have emerged as one of the key pillars for achieving equity in educational institutions. The introduction of GEPs in universities and research institutions aims to systematically address gender disparities by implementing specific policies, actions, and commitments (Clavero & Galligan, 2021; Guthridge et al., 2022; Tomlinson, 2011). This is especially relevant in fields where gender imbalances and hegemonic masculinity are most pronounced, such as STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics; see Barros et al., 2018; Costa et al., 2024; Schiebinger, 2021; Zabaniotou et al., 2021). Hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant social norms and practices that reinforce male privilege and maintain gender hierarchies, particularly in male-dominated fields like the STEM disciplines (Cech & Waidzunus, 2021; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In these disciplines, the prevalence of hegemonic masculinity manifests in various ways, including the undervaluation of women's contributions, gendered stereotypes about technical competence, and exclusionary workplace cultures (Faulkner, 2009; Hatmaker, 2013). These dynamics contribute to the persistent underrepresentation of women and marginalized gender groups in STEM education and careers, reinforcing structural barriers that limit participation and retention (Sagebiel & Dahmen, 2006; van den Brink & Benschop, 2012). Although biased gender norms and stereotypes are often unconsciously perpetuated in everyday life, including in academic settings, universities hold significant potential as agents of change, advancing gender equality through education, research, and organizational structures. Addressing these issues through GEPs requires targeted interventions such as gender-inclusive teaching methodologies, mentorship programs, and institutional policies that challenge implicit biases and create more equitable learning and working environments (Reka & Memeti, 2024; Yu et al., 2024). GEPs play a pivotal role in challenging and changing entrenched gender biases that have traditionally excluded women and other minority groups in these fields. Through structural changes and strategic interventions, GEPs offer a comprehensive approach to transforming institutional cultures and promoting inclusive environments (Barros et al., 2018; Costa et al., 2024; Podreka et al., 2020; Schiebinger, 2021; Zabaniotou et al., 2021).

A key component of GEPs is the integration of gender perspectives into the syllabus and curriculum of university subjects offered by the institution (Eschenbach et al., 2005; Knight et al., 2012). This involves a critical review of teaching materials, case studies, and examples to ensure the representation of diverse perspectives and avoid stereotyping. To do so, educators should highlight the contributions of women and marginalized genders in their fields, ensuring visibility and inclusion. In male-dominated disciplines, this could mean including research by women scientists or addressing the gendered impact of technology (Rogošić & Baranović, 2024; Rosenthal, 2021).

Furthermore, by embedding gender equity into their curricula, universities can educate students about gender equality, highlight the contributions of women across disciplines, and provide equitable opportunities for female students (Ellie Bothwell et al., 2022; Mills & Gill, 2009).

In recent years, a growing number of educational institutions have integrated gender-sensitive training into their programs. For instance, in Spain, 85% of public universities have implemented such initiatives (Unidad de Mujeres y Ciencia, 2021).

However, integrating a gender perspective into curricula requires specific methodologies that actively engage academic staff and professors in critically analyzing and restructuring course content. Often, these initiatives are driven by management or specialized teams within the institution, such as the university's equality unit, which can make it challenging to motivate and ensure the active participation of faculty members who may perceive them as external or even imposed (Ruiz-Cantero et al., 2019; Verge et al., 2017). To address this challenge, it is essential to create spaces for reflection and collaboration, such as interactive workshops, discussion groups, and practical activities that foster dialogue about gender biases in educational materials and classroom dynamics. These initiatives should actively involve teachers and encourage them to reflect on the importance of addressing gender in their curricula.

This study critically examines the effectiveness of various activities designed to engage educators in integrating a gender perspective into university curricula. By detailing a range of interactive and reflective strategies, it evaluates their capacity to inspire faculty members to critically examine and revise course content, ensuring inclusivity and representation. The analysis delves into the outcomes of these initiatives, shedding light on their impact in fostering equitable teaching practices and challenging entrenched biases. Beyond identifying successes, the study also uncovers key challenges and resistances in implementing these strategies, offering actionable recommendations to address resistance and enhance engagement. By sharing these findings, the study seeks to identify and promote best practices for building effective strategies that support the implementation of transformative GEPs, ensuring their long-term impact and sustainability in educational institutions.

1.1. Theoretical Framework

GEPs are transformative tools aimed at systematically addressing institutional gender disparities and fostering inclusive environments. By embedding structural and cultural changes, GEPs have the potential to dismantle long-standing biases and promote equitable practices in educational institutions (Podreka et al., 2020). Their implementation has moved beyond policy mandates, focusing on creating actionable strategies that impact daily academic and organizational practices.

Recognizing the critical importance of addressing these systemic inequities, the European Union has mandated the implementation of GEPs in research performing organisations across its member states (European Commission, 2021a). This obligation underscores the urgent need for transformative approaches to gender inclusion and equity, particularly in traditionally male-dominated contexts. These measures aim to accelerate the integration of gender-sensitive practices and foster meaningful change in organizational and academic cultures.

To bridge the gap between policy mandates and tangible outcomes, it is crucial to translate the requirements of GEPs into actionable strategies that directly impact academic and organizational practices. While implementing GEPs establishes a foundation for addressing systemic inequities, their success depends on the commitment of institutions to actively integrate these principles into their daily operations, particularly

in teaching and research. This transition from policy to practice needs a focus on creating environments where gender-sensitive approaches are encouraged and normalized. A critical area for this transformation is the curriculum, which conveys knowledge and shapes the values and norms students internalize (Mills & Gill, 2009). Gender-sensitive curricula are pivotal in advancing educational equity and creating lasting cultural change within institutions by fostering inclusive learning environments and challenging entrenched biases.

Incorporating gender-sensitive practices into teaching and research in STEM disciplines is essential for creating a more inclusive academic environment (Ruiz-Cantero et al., 2019). Such practices involve revising teaching materials, methodologies, and evaluation systems to eliminate biases, incorporating examples of women and marginalized groups' contributions to STEM, and using inclusive language. These changes are not merely symbolic but have the potential to reshape classroom dynamics, foster greater engagement among diverse student groups, and challenge entrenched stereotypes.

Ultimately, by cultivating gender-sensitive curricula and practices, universities can become agents of transformation, addressing the educational system's structural inequities and paving the way for more diverse and inclusive learning and professional environments.

1.1.1. Gender Dimension in Curricula

Several comprehensive guides have been developed to support the integration of the gender dimension in teaching, with the toolkit developed in the framework of the European project GARCIA (Trbovc & Hofman, 2015) being a referential one. This guide emphasizes the educator's role as a model, integrating gender-sensitive content and raising awareness about gender stereotypes, inequalities, and biases. It also addresses teaching methodologies and outcomes. The guide concludes with a checklist for applying a gender-sensitive approach to curricula.

An interesting initiative to further promote the integration of a gender dimension in teaching has been developed by the Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya (Spain), which established a normative framework (AQU Catalunya, 2018). This framework mandates the inclusion of a gender dimension in the accreditation, follow-up, verification, and modification processes of all bachelor's and master's degrees. It demonstrates how gender considerations can be integrated across the four pillars of teaching (AQU Catalunya, 2018): course content, teaching methodology, classroom management, and assessment processes.

Numerous examples in the literature illustrate how to facilitate this transformation (Mas de les Valls & Peña, 2022; Heijden et al., 2017). Two of the most common strategies for integrating a gender dimension into curricula are the inclusion of female role models (Calvo Iglesias, 2020; Epifanio et al., 2021) and the use of non-sexist language and imagery (García-Holgado et al., 2021). Reflections on the learning environment, often incorporating perspectives from both educators and students, are also frequently included (Aguillon et al., 2020; Mas de les Valls et al., 2020). In a male-dominated context, the social relevance of subjects is emphasized as a critical factor in engaging female students (Bixler et al., 2014; Merayo & Ayuso, 2023; Sáinz et al., 2020).

Despite the wealth of available information and legal mandates, the effective inclusion of a gender dimension in curricula still largely depends on the voluntary efforts of individual educators (López Belloso

et al., 2021). To address this, universities must provide educators with clear, field-specific guidelines and practical suggestions. For instance, in engineering, the so-called FTM classification categorizes subjects into three groups: fundamentals, technology, and management (Mas de les Valls & Peña, 2022). The classification assumes that the difficulty of implementing a gender dimension varies by subject type, with “fundamentals” being the most challenging and “management” the easiest. For fundamental subjects, the integration of gender-sensitive activities often involves introducing female role models and promoting the use of inclusive language. In technology subjects, incorporating projects or laboratory experiments that emphasize teamwork can effectively challenge and transform students’ stereotypes and roles. Meanwhile, in management subjects, which are frequently associated with interpersonal skills, gender-sensitive teaching can be explicitly integrated through activities such as debates and role-plays.

Professional development for educators, particularly regarding the integration of a gender dimension into teaching, requires unlearning assumptions and biases (Bali & Caines, 2018). This need is especially critical in engineering, where an ostensibly gender-neutral framework often conceals gender-blind practices and overlooks feminist perspectives in the field (Calvo-Iglesias et al., 2022). Designing transformative gender-in-teaching training programs should encourage educators to critically reassess their gender-biased assumptions, educator-student relationships, and learning outcomes. Reflection on one’s teaching practices is essential for achieving meaningful change. An illustrative example is provided by Carreiro-Otero et al. (2021), where case studies and discussions formed the core of a training program. Moreover, adopting a sustained approach that fosters a community of educators can enhance opportunities for collective reflection and dialogue, increasing awareness and improving learning outcomes (Bali & Caines, 2018).

1.1.2. Syllabus Transformation

The university syllabus is a public document outlining the subject’s objectives, intended learning outcomes, content, and assessment strategies, among other components. It represents the university’s formal commitment to its students.

Ideally, the syllabus should include a statement addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion in the classroom (Wagner et al., 2023). However, to ensure consistency in integrating the gender dimension throughout the document, more comprehensive measures are necessary. In this regard, the Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya mandates that universities incorporate gender-specific learning outcomes where applicable (AQU Catalunya, 2018). Consequently, any substantial transformation of a subject must be reflected in corresponding modifications to its syllabus (Royce et al., 2023; Wagh, 2023).

Furthermore, the syllabus can serve as a tool to analyze the extent to which the gender dimension has been integrated (Arias-Rodríguez et al., 2021; Ross et al., 2023). As such, it becomes a valuable instrument for assessing the progress of gender-sensitive practices within university programs.

1.2. Present Research

The primary aim of this study is to explore and evaluate the implementation of various activities designed to promote gender inclusion within university curricula. Specifically, the study examines the effectiveness, outcomes, and limitations of applying these activities in educator training sessions. The analysis is based on

seven online trainings and seminars (with one-session trainings referred to as seminars) conducted at four public and three private Spanish universities during the 2020–2021 academic year, involving over 140 educators from diverse academic disciplines. Course syllabi were adapted following a participatory action research methodology to tailor the interventions to institutional contexts and needs (MacDonald, 2012). The data gathered during these trainings were subjected to quantitative and qualitative analysis, employing conventional, direct, and summative content analysis approaches as outlined by Hsieh and Shannon (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

The study aims to advance the integration of gender perspectives in higher education by offering evidence-based insights into the outcomes of transformative online gender-in-teaching training. Focused on designing effective training models to foster meaningful change in university teaching, the research addresses the following key questions:

RQ1: What are the best practices for creating a reflective and participatory learning environment in online gender-in-teaching training programs?

RQ2: What are the main challenges and resistances faced by educators?

The present study will assist academic gender policy design bodies and educators in incorporating the gender dimension into university teaching to benefit the student body. By aligning with the objectives of institutional GEP, the study provides actionable insights to support their implementation in teaching practices. Specifically, it contributes to:

1. Enhancing the implementation of GEPs by bridging policy and practice, offering practical tools and evidence-based strategies that help institutions translate GEP commitments into measurable changes in teaching, research, and organizational culture.
2. Identifying key aspects for designing transformative online gender-in-teaching training programs, including effective training structures, durations, and activities.
3. Proposing innovative uses of technology to create participatory, equitable, and transformative online learning environments for educators.
4. Encouraging self-reflection among university educators by addressing resistances and challenges in integrating the gender dimension into their subjects
5. Offering practical guidelines for university educators to transform their courses and syllabi and incorporate a gender perspective.

2. Methodology

Training programs and seminars were designed with a student-centered approach (Wright, 2011), emphasizing participants' intrinsic motivation and tailoring the sessions to their specific needs. The facilitator, who had extensive experience in gender-in-teaching training within the fields of engineering and architecture, adapted the activities to align with the unique context of each session. This adaptation process followed a participatory action research approach (MacDonald, 2012), which involved a three-step cyclical process: (a) designing the training structure, (b) implementing the design while fostering collaboration among participants to co-construct knowledge and gather insights, and (c) analyzing the results and reflecting on them to refine and improve the design for transformative gender-in-teaching training.

All four pillars of teaching activity (AQU Catalunya, 2018)—course content, teaching methodology, classroom management, and assessment processes—were thoroughly analyzed and discussed, drawing on participants' experiences to ensure a comprehensive and context-sensitive exploration of gender-sensitive practices.

2.1. Target Group

The study engaged over 140 university educators from diverse academic disciplines, participating in seven online gender-in-teaching trainings and seminars conducted across four public and three private Spanish universities during the 2020–2021 academic year. These educators represented a mix of STEM and non-STEM fields, with courses explicitly targeting subjects in engineering, architecture, social sciences, arts, and humanities.

Participants were primarily drawn from university teaching staff, with a significant portion involved in teaching innovation projects to embed a gender dimension in curricula. These participants not only contributed to discussions but also actively engaged in collaborative activities such as syllabus transformation, content wall exercises, and assessment wall reviews. Their varied expertise provided valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of integrating gender-sensitive approaches in higher education teaching.

2.2. Training Programs

The study included seven online gender-in-teaching trainings and seminars conducted at Spanish universities during the 2020–2021 academic year. These sessions aimed to equip educators with tools and strategies to incorporate a gender dimension into university curricula. Table 1 summarizes the main characteristics of the different training programs, including their focus, duration, and areas of knowledge addressed. Two of them (no. 1 and no. 5) were focused on the development of teaching guides with gender dimensions. Both courses are part of a long project; indeed, no. 1 was a 5-week training while no. 5 was a seminar focused on the gender dimension in physics and engineering included in a teaching innovation project (the participants had already received similar seminars in other areas of knowledge). Training no. 6 was organized to prepare a team of volunteering educators to reproduce the pilot project experiences held at UPC (Mas de les Valls & Peña, 2022). Also, training no. 2 was organized within a HORIZON 2020 project devoted to supporting the promotion of equality in research and academia. The goal of the course was to prepare the node network, i.e.,

Table 1. Summary of gender-in-teaching training programs: Course type, framework, participant composition, female participation, and areas of knowledge.

ID	Course	Framework	N(N _{STEM})	Female (%)	Area of Knowledge
1	Training	Independent course	22(13)	86%	Mixed
2	Training	HORIZON 2020 project	22*(7)	100%	Mixed
3	Seminar	Teaching innovation day	17(17)	18%	Eng. + Arch.
4	Training	Independent course	20*(20)	5%	Engineering
5	Seminar	Teaching innovation project	24	92%	Mixed
6	Training	Teaching innovation project	29(4)	76%	Mixed
7	Seminar	Teaching innovation day	56(56)	30%	Eng. + Phys.

Notes: N(N_{STEM}) = Number of participants (number of participants belonging to a STEM field); * estimated number of participants according to the number of answers obtained within the Kahoot! activity.

a group of referent educators with the mission to train their mates in gender in teaching, distributed by area of knowledge.

2.3. Activities

In all courses, both trainings and seminars, spaces for debate and exchange of ideas were actively encouraged. This approach facilitated the identification of resistance patterns and enabled the facilitator to optimize strategies for raising participants' awareness of gender issues. Hands-on activities, focused on integrating a gender perspective into teaching practices and curriculum design, were incorporated exclusively in the training sessions, as these provided sufficient time for their implementation. What these activities entailed will be explored in the following.

2.3.1. Ice-Breaking

The objective of the ice-breaking activity—carried out in training programs no. 1, no. 2, no. 4, and no. 6—was to facilitate the sharing of classroom perceptions and personal teaching experiences. To encourage this exchange, a questionnaire was designed with direct and thought-provoking statements, offering limited flexibility in responses. The Kahoot! platform was selected to implement the questions due to its high accessibility, user-friendly interface, and the ability to analyze answers immediately after each question. Each response was treated as correct, ensuring the activity remained non-competitive. Additionally, after every question, participants discussed the reasoning behind their answers, providing an opportunity to reconsider and revise their opinions. These two measures were essential to mitigate potential risks associated with using Kahoot!

2.3.2. Stereotypes

During training no. 2, participants engaged in an activity addressing gender-biased stereotypes. They were divided into four groups according to their areas of expertise: (a) arts and humanities, (b) social sciences, (c) health sciences, and (d) natural and experimental sciences. A shared Google presentation was used, with one slide allocated to each area, enabling all teams to view and compare one another's results. Each slide displayed the percentage of female students enrolled in two bachelor's degree programs relevant to the respective field. Participants were tasked with identifying common stereotypes associated with their area of knowledge and proposing initial ideas—or "seed ideas"—to address and reduce these stereotypes.

2.3.3. Contents Wall

The Contents Wall activity helps educators integrate gender-related content into their courses. Participants are prompted with guiding questions about the gender relevance of their subject and are encouraged to define gender-focused activities, such as highlighting female contributors, designing inclusive projects, or using case studies. Educators collaborate using a digital platform, where they document and refine their ideas collectively.

It is often observed that when educators are asked to incorporate gender-related content into their subjects, they may feel uncertain or overwhelmed, unsure of how to approach the task. However, when prompted with targeted questions—such as the social or gender relevance of their subject, the intended users or target groups

of the knowledge being taught, or the subjectivity inherent in the chosen technologies or methodologies—educators often begin to identify potential opportunities for integrating gender content within their subjects. Furthermore, providing educators with specific guidance based on the FTM classification can make defining gender-focused activities more manageable. This was the primary goal of the Contents Wall activity.

In the Contents Wall included in training programs no. 1 and no. 2, participants were organized into heterogeneous teams according to the FTM classification of their subjects, and they were given access to a digital wall platform (e.g., Padlet or similar alternatives). Each team worked on a distinct section of the shared wall, allowing all participants to view and learn from the contributions of their peers. The sequence of actions was structured as follows:

1. Individual work: Participants wrote a short description of their subject and its context, identified a gender-related activity (e.g., highlighting the contribution of a female figure, designing a teamwork project, preparing a case study, or organizing a role-play), and provided a brief description of the activity.
2. Teamwork in parallel virtual rooms: Participants introduced their subject to their team, responded to team members' questions regarding the social or gender relevance, target groups, and chosen methodology, described the proposed gender activity, and explicitly discussed its gender relevance and potential utility.
3. Group discussion in the main virtual room: Teams reconvened to share their work, discuss insights, and reflect collectively on the proposed activities.

2.3.4. Assessment Wall

The Assessment Wall activity builds upon the Contents Wall by focusing on how to assess gender-related activities effectively. Educators collaboratively review and refine assessment methods for previously identified gender-focused activities. Like the Contents Wall, this process is conducted on a shared digital platform, allowing participants to exchange feedback and improve their evaluation strategies.

Conducted in training no. 1, the Assessment Wall utilized the same technical framework as the Contents Wall. Teams were tasked with identifying appropriate assessment methods for a selected set of gender-focused activities.

2.3.5. Syllabus Transformation

Integral to training programs no. 1 and no. 6, this activity guided participants through revising their course syllabi to explicitly incorporate gender dimensions. A general syllabus template was developed and provided to participants. During each session, the facilitator progressively completed and reviewed the syllabus. Individualized feedback was delivered through the Moodle platform, while team feedback and key points from individual evaluations were shared at the beginning of each session to encourage collaborative learning.

A three-step methodology was developed to guide educators through the process and emphasize the key issues, as illustrated in Figure 1. In the first step, general aspects of the syllabus were addressed, covering three of the four teaching pillars without yet incorporating any gender-focused activities. Once this foundational

step was successfully completed, participants undertook more detailed work: designing and identifying at least one activity that explicitly integrated a gender dimension. This step was closely tied to the outcomes of the Contents Wall activity.

In the third and final step, participants incorporated the designed gender activity into the syllabus, explicitly highlighting its gender-related aspects and specifying its expected learning outcomes. Additionally, the description of the subject at the beginning of the syllabus was revised to reflect its incorporation of a gender dimension.

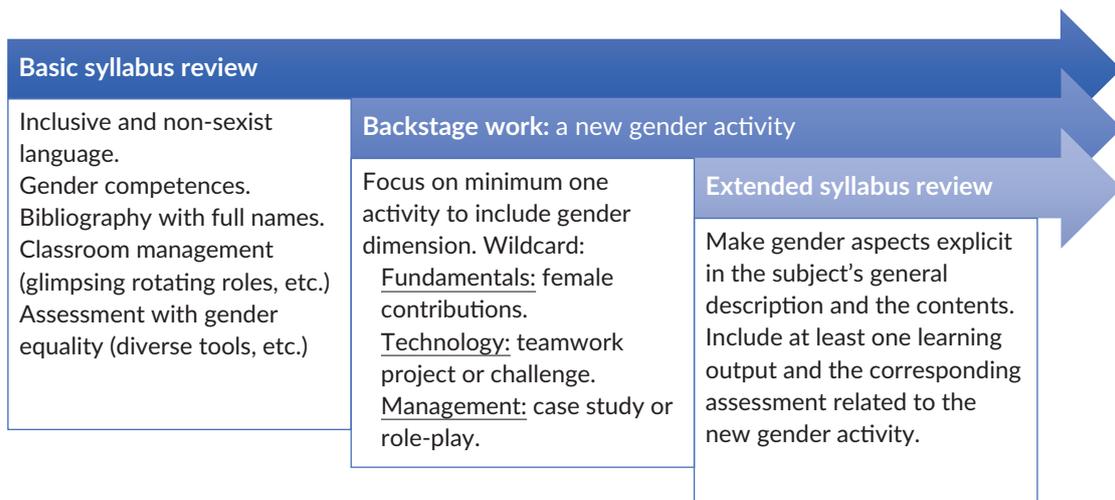


Figure 1. Three-step process for integrating gender dimension into university syllabi.

2.4. Evidence and Indicators

The relationship between the evidence collected and the corresponding indicators is shown in Table 2.

To describe the qualitative analysis, the three distinct approaches described in Hsieh and Shannon (2005) are used: (a) the conventional content analysis, (b) the direct content analysis, and (c) the summative content analysis. Conventional content analysis is an inductive approach that derives categories directly from data, suited for exploring phenomena with limited prior research. Directed content analysis starts with existing theories to guide initial coding, validating, or extending frameworks but with a risk of bias. Summative content analysis combines counting specific words (quantitative) with analyzing their context (qualitative), uncovering patterns in language use but potentially missing broader insights.

The qualitative analysis for both the ice-breaking activity and the stereotypes activity was conducted using the conventional content analysis approach. This was particularly emphasized in the stereotypes activity, where the authors meticulously reviewed the text outcomes multiple times to construct and identify common categories across different areas of knowledge, trying to minimize the effect of any preconceived categories.

For the Contents Wall, the Assessment Wall, and the syllabus activities, qualitative analysis followed a direct content analysis approach. This approach is feasible because, in each of the three activities, participants are required to create a specific output (a teaching activity, an assessment tool, or the syllabus for a course)

Table 2. Evidence and indicators for assessing gender integration in syllabi.

Evidence	Quantitative indicator	Qualitative indicator
Training definition	Number of sessions Number of STEM/non-STEM participants Embodied in a project (Y/N)	Type of training (seminar/training)
Ice-breaking	Answers to the questionnaire	Participants' comments
Stereotypes	–	Quality of the entries Participants' comments
Contents Wall	Number of entries Type of entry (female referents, project, teamwork, role-play, etc.)	Quality of the entries Participants' comments
Assessment Wall	Number of entries	Quality of the entries Participants' comments
Syllabus Transformation	Number of assignments done Number of used gender-related terms Type of subject (fundamental, technology, management)	Quality of the changes according to the subject's gender potential Coherence
Assessment by participants	Number of participants Score (1–10) of expertise before and after the training	Participants' comments

following a structured framework and predefined expectations. Thus, the output can be compared against an ideal solution, which is not fixed but rather adapted to the specific context or course. This ideal solution is built according to the facilitator's background, so some bias is unavoidable.

In contrast, the quantitative analysis of the syllabus required a more extensive summative content analysis. This analysis employed a methodology similar to that used for evaluating students' teaching feedback (Okoye et al., 2020) and included the following components:

1. Identification of gender-related terms (GRTs): After carefully reviewing the syllabi, the most frequently used GRTs were identified, along with their frequency of occurrence in each assignment. A helpful starting point for this analysis was the list of GRT proposed by Arias-Rodríguez et al. (2021). To streamline the analysis, clustering of similar words was employed, as detailed in Section 3.5.
2. Coherence analysis: The coherence of the syllabus's final version was examined qualitatively and quantitatively. The qualitative analysis evaluated the alignment between the syllabus contents and the ideas or proposals discussed individually with participants during the Contents Wall activity. A quantitative analysis of the appearances of GRTs complemented this qualitative assessment. The combined results were used to assess each participant's overall performance.
3. Feasibility analysis: The feasibility of incorporating gender-related content into the subject's curriculum was assessed based on the authors' experience in university teaching and educator training activities.

3. Results

The participant group varied across the trainings regarding gender composition and academic backgrounds. For example, long-term training programs (no. 1, no. 2, no. 5, and no. 6) exhibited higher participation of female educators (up to 100% in some cases), reflecting a broader interest in gender inclusion in mixed academic areas. Conversely, shorter seminars had a more limited percentage of female participants, particularly in highly masculinized fields like engineering.

3.1. Ice-Breaking

The ice-breaking activity was conducted in training programs no. 1, no. 2, no. 4, and no. 6, with participation rates of 77%, 100%, 100%, and 62%, respectively. Women comprised 56% of the participants, and 59% of the total participants were from the STEM field. Within the STEM participants, 59% were men. This aligns with literature (European Commission, 2021b) indicating that STEM remains a male-dominated field. Notably, all the male participants in the courses came from the STEM field, whereas only 36% of the female participants belonged to STEM disciplines.

3.2. Stereotypes

The stereotypes activity is summarized in Table 3, highlighting participants' contributions, which predominantly emphasized skills attributed to women and interests over those attributed to men. Additionally, possibly because all participants were women, the proposed transformative actions heavily focused on re-evaluating and elevating the value of care-related duties. The identified stereotypes align with

Table 3. Overview of participants' contributions on gendered perceptions and proposed actions from the stereotypes activity.

Stereotypes and influencing factors	Transformative seed ideas and actions
Skills: Attributed to women: collaborative, communicative, organized, detail work, emotional intelligence, high academic performance Attributed to men: competitive, powerful	To promote teamwork within a less hierarchical structure To enhance fellowship instead of competition To build confidence in girl's abilities Emotional intelligence can be learned (and included in curricula)
Assumed interests (due to gender-specific socialization and social role expectations): Attributed to women: care-duties Attributed to men: object-oriented (machines)	To put in value care duties and to professionalize them. To remind that family-life balance is a shared responsibility To empower emotional skills in boys
Family culture & historical factors	To enhance gender commitment by the universities and professional bodies To review salaries in feminized professions
Lack of female referents	To increase female visibility and voice To create new female referents
Safer atmosphere in feminized studies	To further include a gender-inclusive language

those documented by Bixler et al. (2014) and Calvo-Iglesias et al. (2022) in the fields of engineering, physics, and mathematics.

3.3. Contents Wall

Seventy percent of enrolled educators actively participated in the Contents Wall activity. The types of gender-related activities selected varied significantly among participants. The most frequently chosen methodology was teamwork projects (39%), which enabled participants to address gendered roles and incorporate gender-specific needs and preferences into their designs. The service-learning project methodology (6%) also emphasized teamwork but was treated separately due to its focus on enhancing care-related duties or addressing the needs of third parties.

Female role models were another commonly chosen approach (29%), especially in subjects where projects or team activities were traditionally avoided. In health sciences, new gender-related content (13%), such as the differentiation of diseases by sex, was included as part of the extended theory. The importance of considering sex as a variable in health sciences has been relatively evident in the last few years. However, when it comes to gender, all disciplines are at a more delayed stage. Despite its significance, gender is rarely included in curricula, as doing so requires not only awareness and willingness but also effort and time to conduct a thorough review of the existing literature to identify whether relevant gender-specific research results are available and can be integrated into the content.

Other popular activities included case studies (26%) and debates (16%). Role-playing was the least selected activity (3%), likely due to participants' limited prior experience with this methodology. It is important to note that a single participant could select more than one gender-related activity.

The Contents Wall activity fostered self-reflection and exposed participants to a wide range of strategies that could be implemented in their classrooms. Overall, the activity was highly productive, although participants expressed a need for additional time to refine their chosen activities more thoroughly.

3.4. Assessment Wall

The Assessment Wall involved reviewing five activities in teams, with each activity receiving an average of 2.6 assessment improvements. Peer suggestions included creating specific reports for the activity, conducting written qualitative analyses, and incorporating gender-related aspects into oral presentations, among other recommendations.

By the fourth week of training, it was notable that participants demonstrated a high level of awareness regarding gender issues and how to integrate them seamlessly into their teaching practices. As a result, they proposed straightforward and effective assessment strategies.

3.5. Syllabus Transformation

Four assignments were required as part of the syllabus transformation activity. Seventy-three percent of the enrolled educators submitted the first assignment. Among these participants, 88%, 53%, and 59% completed

the second, third, and final assignments, respectively. The decline in submission rates is likely attributable to time constraints, as the course was conducted during the first semester.

Following submitting the first assignment and reviewing the subject descriptions, the facilitator categorized the subjects according to their feasibility for integrating gender-related content (low, medium, or high) based on her expertise. Six of the 16 subjects involved in this activity were classified as having high feasibility, three as medium, and seven as low. According to the FTM classification, eight of these subjects fell under the fundamentals category, seven under technology, and one under management.

A detailed review of all the deliverables allowed for the identification of GRTs used in the quantitative analysis. These terms were grouped into six clusters, aligning with the proposal by Arias-Rodríguez et al. (2021). The gender cluster includes the term “gender,” while the sex cluster encompasses “sex” and “sexual.” The person cluster includes terms such as “person” and “personal,” and the user cluster refers specifically to “female user/s.” The equality cluster incorporates terms like “equality,” “equalitarian,” and “equity,” and the woman cluster includes “woman,” “women,” “female researcher/s,” and “female scientist/s.” Lastly, the citizenship cluster includes terms such as “citizenship” and “female citizen/s.” The presence of these terms was only considered relevant when they appeared within the context of gender or sex.

The occurrence of GRTs was calculated across the four deliverables (I, II, III, IV). Figure 2 presents various GRTs, specifically “gender,” “sex,” “person,” “user,” “equality,” “woman,” and “citizenship,” along with the frequency of their appearance in each deliverable. As illustrated in the figure, there is a clear trend indicating an increase in the use of GRT throughout the training. This is particularly evident in deliverables III and IV, where terms such as “gender,” “sex,” and “woman” appear more frequently than in deliverables I and II. There was also a noticeable shift from more general terms (e.g., “person” and “user”) in the earlier deliverables to more specific ones (e.g., “gender”) in the later deliverables. Although participants were not informed that this quantitative analysis would be conducted, the frequency of GRTs usage appears to have been strongly influenced by the facilitator’s emphasis on shifting the teaching focus—from content-centric to

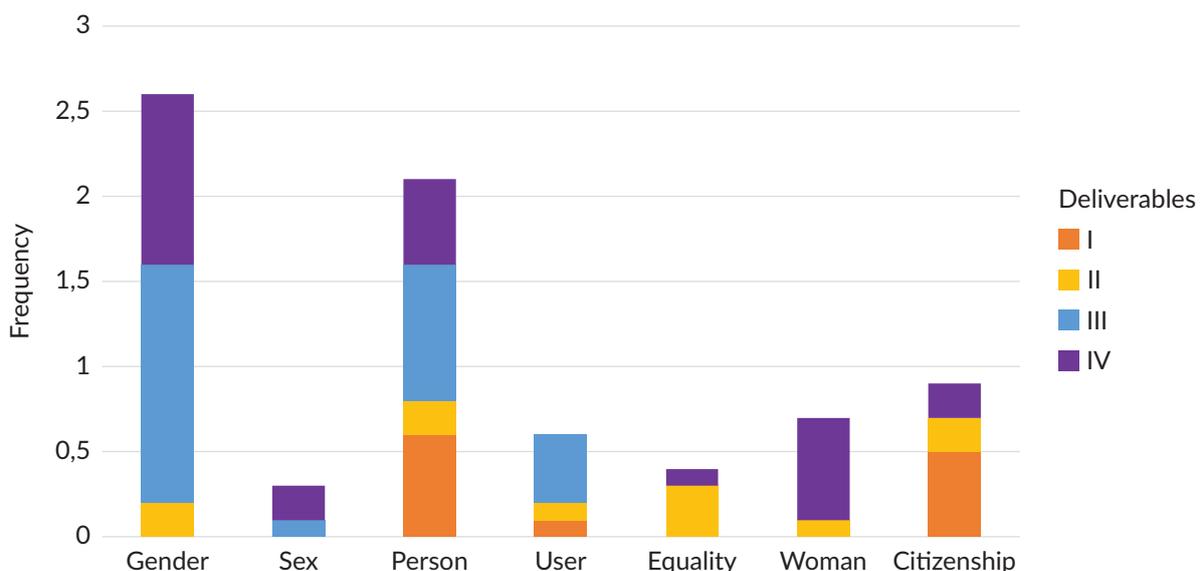


Figure 2. Increase in the frequency of gender-related keywords across syllabus deliverables (I-IV).

people-centric, whether referring to target groups or students. This focus likely accounts for the high occurrence of terms within the “person” cluster. Additionally, the final deliverable (IV) saw the explicit inclusion of female contributions or case studies in the syllabi, which explains the significant appearance of terms in the “woman” cluster.

From a qualitative perspective, the overall performance of each participant was classified into three categories: high, incipient, or stagnant. The results are summarized in Table 4. The term Stagnant refers to cases where participants either discontinued their involvement after the first two deliverables or showed no significant progress in their work. Thirty-one percent of participants were classified as demonstrating a High performance. While this does not imply that the results were exceptional, it reflects a notable improvement, successfully incorporating gender-related elements into their teaching design. Additionally, 31% of participants were categorized as having an Incipient performance, indicating they had introduced a gender-related activity but had not yet consistently modified their syllabus or explicitly integrated a gender dimension. Nonetheless, educators in this group made some progress by adopting inclusive language and/or including female authors in their bibliographies.

Table 4. Summary of participants’ performance in the syllabus analysis activity.

ID	FTM	Feasibility	Contents Wall	Performance
1	T	High	Yes	High
2	T	Low	Yes	Stagnant
3	F	Low	Yes	Stagnant
4	F	Low	Yes	Stagnant
5	F	Low	No	Stagnant
6	T	Medium	Yes	High
7	F	High	No	Incipient
8	M	High	No	Incipient
9	F	Low	Yes	High
10	F	Low	Yes	Incipient
11	F	Low	Yes	High
12	T	Medium	Yes	Incipient
13	T	High	No	Incipient
14	T	High	Yes	Stagnant
15	T	High	Yes	High
16	F	Medium	Yes	Stagnant

It might be expected that subjects with high feasibility would correspond to better performance and thus be classified as high. However, as illustrated in Table 4, the reality is quite different. In fact, 50% of participants working on subjects classified as highly feasible only achieved a Stagnant performance. Generally, active participation in the Contents Wall significantly increases the likelihood of successfully transforming the syllabus.

3.6. Assessment by Participants

After training programs no. 1 and no. 2, participants were asked to rate their gender-in-teaching expertise on a scale from 0 to 10. The participation rates were 81% and 88%, respectively. The average score obtained was 8.22, indicating significant success. In training no. 1, the initial average score was 3.6/10, which increased to 8.1/10 by the end (no initial data was available for training no. 2).

Additionally, when participants were asked if they planned to incorporate new gender-related activities in the near future, all responded affirmatively, demonstrating increased self-confidence following the training.

Feedback from the post-training questionnaire revealed that participants appreciated the progressive approach to revising their syllabi and expressed gratitude for the seamless integration of gender aspects into everyday teaching practices. They valued the flexible and comprehensive treatment of the gender-in-teaching topic and enjoyed the collaborative activities and debates. Participants also highlighted the value of suggested activities between sessions and the feedback provided by both the facilitator and their peers. Many noted that the training had alleviated their initial apprehensions about incorporating gender dimensions into their teaching.

On the other hand, some participants identified limitations. There was a shared concern about the limited time available to attend sessions and work on activities. Several participants suggested that more time was needed to refine activities and develop new ideas. One participant expressed dissatisfaction with the online format of the training, noting that greater progress might have been achieved in an in-person setting.

4. Discussion

This section addresses the RQs posed at the study's outset, analyzing the key findings and insights gained from the training sessions. The discussion reflects on best practices for fostering a reflective and participatory learning environment in online gender-in-teaching training (RQ1) and identifies educators' main challenges and resistances (RQ2). These findings provide essential insights for turning GEPs into effective teaching practices. By identifying strategies that successfully engage educators in integrating gender perspectives, the results highlight practical ways to address gender disparities in higher education. Connecting these practices to the implementation of GEPs supports the creation of more inclusive academic environments and ensures that gender equity becomes embedded in everyday teaching and learning processes.

4.1. RQ1: Best Practices for Creating a Reflective and Participatory Learning Environment in Online Gender-in-Teaching Training Programs

Overall, the proposed activities demonstrated high levels of participation, fostering meaningful exchanges of ideas and experiences while producing significant outputs. The online framework contributed to this success by providing equal accessibility to shared documents and facilitating seamless team communication through parallel virtual rooms. The flexibility of the online environment also allowed the facilitator to move between rooms and provide personalized feedback. Nevertheless, as per the action research methodology, there remain opportunities for improvement.

The ice-breaking activity effectively established a reflective, respectful, and participatory environment. However, aligning with the recommendations of Carreiro-Otero et al. (2021), the formulated questions could be adapted to better match participants' levels of gender awareness, thereby enhancing their engagement and understanding.

The stereotypes activity successfully facilitated the sharing of ideas among participants within the same area of knowledge. Its primary aim was to boost participants' self-confidence in identifying and addressing gender-related needs, empowering them to incorporate a gender perspective into their teaching practices.

The Contents Wall activity was instrumental in generating gender-related activities tailored to each subject. Even experienced participants benefited from refining existing gender activities. Two critical factors contributed to the success of this activity: (a) the open sharing of information among all participants, which supported those facing challenges, and (b) continuous feedback and suggestions for improvement from the facilitator, helping create engaging and transformative gender activities. The online strategy employed—utilizing a shared digital wall while teams worked in separate rooms—proved optimal. For future iterations, allocating more time for this activity would be beneficial. For example, introducing the activity at the end of one session and completing it in the following session could allow participants more time for thoughtful consideration.

The syllabus transformation process outlined in this study also demonstrated success, achieving significant levels of transformation. However, fostering greater exchange among participants would enhance the learning experience. Encouraging participants to share their draft syllabi with peers could create valuable opportunities for collaborative learning. For this activity, additional resources could provide recommendations about how to make the STEM syllabus more inclusive for women (see, e.g., such as Parson, 2016). Additionally, after the training, alongside the final assessment questionnaire, it would be beneficial to provide participants with co-produced materials (e.g., the Contents Wall) and encourage personal reflections.

While this research primarily discusses online training, its findings can be extended to blended learning and face-to-face teaching. The methodologies used—such as interactive workshops, collaborative digital exercises, and syllabus transformation activities—are adaptable to in-person settings. In fact, some participants expressed that in-person formats might even enhance engagement. The key takeaway is that structured, participatory approaches are crucial for integrating gender perspectives, whether online, blended, or fully in-person. Institutions implementing GEPs could benefit from incorporating similar activities in faculty development for all teaching formats.

4.2. RQ2: Main Challenges and Resistances Faced by Educators

Table 5 summarizes the resistances, barriers, and challenges participants encountered during the training sessions. Based on the experiences observed throughout the study, corresponding actions have been proposed to address these challenges.

Table 5. Identified resistances, challenges, and barriers during the training sessions and seminars and proposed actions.

ID	Description	Action
1	Resentment against men (due to personal experiences or cultural heritage). It appears at the very beginning of the training.	Ask participants to focus on building a better future rather than remaining stuck in the past. Therefore, during the course, polite efforts will be made to avoid any references unrelated to teaching. While it is important to identify classroom situations where gender-related issues have arisen, dwelling excessively on these situations should be avoided. Participants will be encouraged to maintain their attention on identifying strategies to implement in their teaching practices, gradually reducing gender biases over time. If done properly, no extra incidents appear.
2	Gender-blinded (unexperienced) participants	Promote discussion on statistical data and examples to raise awareness (Carreiro-Otero et al., 2021). Indicators from the institution's own students and staff can be used, official databases relevant to the field of study can be employed, and existing literature on the state of the art in the area of study can also be utilized.
3	Lack of consensus on how to reach equity in students' participation	Present and discuss different strategies to promote equal participation. Some educators prefer to direct questions more explicitly to female students, but if this approach is perceived as targeting, it can have the opposite effect. Other educators opt to distribute questions among the class and allow students some time to think before responding. This strategy gives students with lower self-efficacy (often female students) the opportunity to prepare their answers and overcome barriers. Another approach involves posing questions to small groups of two or three students. This allows less confident students to discuss and build confidence before presenting their responses to the entire class. Each educator and student is different, the "one size fits all" cannot be applied.
4	"How can I include gender contents in my gender-neutral subject?" (STEM participants)	In STEM disciplines, it is essential to address the concept of the "cult of objectivity," which refers to the tendency to present these fields as entirely objective, neutral, and free from bias. However, critical epistemology and gender studies have highlighted that this apparent objectivity can be influenced by underlying values, social norms, and power structures. Therefore, it is important to incorporate a critical perspective into these trainings, encouraging reflection on how knowledge is constructed and the potential biases embedded in scientific and technical fields. Indicate that STEM subjects are not gender-neutral and behind any technology or strategy one can find users, beneficiaries, or conceptualists (among others), what represents a source of gender-biased concepts and an opportunity to promote gender equality. To support this effort, resources that highlight gender diversity in STEM, such as those by Kube et al. (2024) and Guo et al. (2024), can be provided.

Table 5. (Cont.) Identified resistances, challenges, and barriers during the training sessions and seminars and proposed actions.

ID	Description	Action
5	Fear against students' and mates' resistance when they are unaccustomed to discussing gender-related topics and, in some cases, are even opposed to them	<p>Promote a gradual and natural introduction of gender dimension, while realizing that the subject benefits from it.</p> <p>Sometimes it is easier when the word "gender" is changed to "human" in order to gain acceptance within the non-gender-awareness teaching staff. Indeed, it is much easier to accept the need to consider people in general than to acknowledge the importance of focusing specifically on gender equity. However, when thinking about people, aspects such as how students are treated, the impact of solutions designed within the subject's field of study on the population, or the influence of personal preferences when proposing one solution over another come into play. Once work has begun in this direction, it becomes possible to analyze how gender affects the evaluation of all individuals involved. Studies such as those by Khokhlova and Lamba (2023) and LaPaglia et al. (2022) could be useful for providing examples of gender bias.</p>
6	Difficulties in making gender explicit in the syllabus, despite the subject, include a gender dimension in all four pillars	<p>Provide sustained support on the transformation of the syllabus. It is often easier to start by including an activity where the gender perspective is very evident and explicitly referencing it in the syllabus. It can also be straightforward to incorporate guidelines emphasizing respect in the classroom, making it clear that behaviors disrespecting diversity will not be tolerated. Gradually, the gender perspective can be integrated into learning outcomes and assessments, ultimately leading to a transformation of the course description and objectives. This transformation should not be rushed but approached progressively and thoughtfully.</p>
7	Lack of time	<p>Define minimum participation to reach the training certificate as a pressure measure for the lack of self-regulation scenario (Barak et al., 2016).</p> <p>The university and the administration should define some incentives for educators by putting in value teaching activities in their professional assessment.</p>

A particularly notable observation was the prevalence of gender-blindness among participants from fields such as engineering and ICT. In these disciplines, gender inclusion remains absent in most subjects, reflecting an ongoing gap in understanding how gender perspectives intersect with these fields. STEM educators, in particular, often require additional guidance and support to make the conceptual shift necessary for incorporating a gender dimension into what are often perceived as gender-neutral subjects. For example, Gilbert (2009) provides useful insights into gendering practices in mechanical engineering and materials science. Addressing these challenges will require continued efforts to engage educators in reflective practices, provide targeted resources, and offer ongoing support to build confidence and competence in integrating gender into their teaching practices.

The gender gap in higher education remains a critical issue, shaped by stereotypes (Makarova et al., 2019), systemic and family structures (LaCrosse et al., 2016; Shin et al., 2015; Sinnes & Løken, 2014), and socioeconomic and demographic factors (Giacconi et al., 2024). Mentorship has emerged as a powerful strategy for addressing this gap, as demonstrated by Stout et al. (2011), who highlight its positive effects in

fostering women's STEM identity and commitment. By adopting a multifaceted approach, educators, policymakers, and society at large can promote a more inclusive and equitable landscape.

This research underscores the vital role of integrating gender perspectives into curricula and teaching to advance gender equality within higher education. By identifying effective strategies and addressing key challenges, the study provides practical tools for educators and institutions to address gender mainstreaming in educational practices as an action of the GEP. Embedding gender in curricula not only fosters inclusive learning environments but also challenges entrenched biases, particularly in STEM fields, as shown by Parson (2016). Sharing these findings is essential for promoting the widespread adoption of these practices, encouraging cross-disciplinary collaboration, and ensuring that gender equity becomes a core component of academic culture. Disseminating these insights supports sustainable, actionable change, contributing to more equitable and transformative educational systems.

5. Limitations of the Study

The fact that the same facilitator led all seven training sessions and seminars can be viewed as both an advantage and a limitation. On the positive side, consistency in the facilitation approach enabled comparisons across the different courses, allowing for a deeper understanding of the training's impact and facilitating the identification of trends and patterns. However, it is important to recognize that the facilitator's characteristics and style could have influenced participants' performance. Different facilitators might employ varied approaches and techniques, potentially leading to different outcomes.

Another limitation is that all seven courses were conducted within Spanish universities. Consequently, the findings can only be extrapolated to similar contexts. The cultural and institutional characteristics of Spanish universities may differ from those in other educational systems, potentially affecting the generalizability of the results. To validate these findings in broader contexts, similar studies should be conducted in diverse cultural and educational settings.

In addition, the participants who contributed the most to the study were likely those already interested in or supportive of gender equality initiatives. This self-selection bias may mean the findings do not fully reflect the challenges and resistances faced by educators who are less engaged or resistant to integrating gender perspectives. Future research could explore strategies to specifically engage these less interested educators to better understand and address varying levels of commitment and resistance.

6. Conclusions

A research-action approach was utilized to design, implement, and analyze online synchronous gender-in-teaching courses. The outcomes of this approach led to the development of an improved training structure that leverages technology to facilitate the natural and collaborative integration of the gender dimension into teaching practices, contributing to a gradual transformation in higher education and supporting the implementation of GEPs.

The analysis included four training sessions and three seminars involving over 140 educators. The digital nature of the courses enabled the collection of substantial data gathered both during collaborative

in-session activities and through digital platforms that supported assignments between sessions. Throughout the process, key challenges and resistances were identified, and corresponding actions were proposed to address them. These findings offer actionable insights that help bridge the gap between GEP policy mandates and practical teaching interventions.

The Contents Wall activity emerged as the pivotal synchronous element of the training. When combined with active exchanges among participants and feedback from the facilitator, this activity resulted in the most impactful experiences and the establishment of a connected network of educators committed to integrating gender perspectives.

The analysis revealed that sustained support for educators is essential to achieve genuine subject transformation through coherently incorporating the gender dimension, aligning with the structural changes envisioned by GEPs. This support can be effectively delivered through online gender-in-teaching training courses consisting of weekly sessions, allowing participants time for individual reflection between sessions. As a result of this transformation, students benefit from a more personalized and human-centered learning experience, contributing to the broader goals of gender equality and inclusivity in higher education.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Gender Equality Plan at the University of Ljubljana: The Case of Work–Life Balance

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Abstract

The article addresses the challenges to achieving gender equality in academia, with a particular focus on work–life balance as outlined in the University of Ljubljana’s Gender Equality Plan (2022–2027). Based on a 2022 survey of 820 academic staff members, the study investigates how caregiving responsibilities, institutional practices, and organizational culture affect career advancement and satisfaction with the work environment, particularly concerning gender equality. The findings reveal significant gender differences in caregiving responsibilities, uptake of parental leave, access to leadership positions, and perceptions of institutional support. Women are disproportionately affected by inflexible promotion criteria, such as the mandatory three-month stay at a foreign university or research institution, and report higher instances of career setbacks following parental leave. Regression analyses underscore the role of perceived equal opportunities, supportive leadership, and workplace culture in shaping experiences of gender equality. While the Gender Equality Plan at the University of Ljubljana outlines promising measures, the study highlights a critical gap between policy and practice.

Keywords

academia; career advancement; caregiving; gender equality; institutional practices; work in research; work–life balance

1. Introduction

The issue of gender equality in Slovenian academia has a similar history to that of many universities around the world. Women still face gender stereotypes that prevent them from achieving scientific results like their male colleagues. Universities continue to be gendered organizations where cultural beliefs about the gender differences are built into the very structure of the workplace. Research shows that women in academia face inequalities in the fields of earning, tenure, promotion, and access to resources (Gatta & Roos, 2004). But it is also important to recognize the progress made in recent years. Women have more opportunities to reach higher academic positions, even though the gender gap in higher academic positions persists (see Table 1).

One of the larger areas of gender inequality in science is work–life balance, as it is traditionally associated with entrenched beliefs about what science is and who can do it. There is still a belief that science requires total commitment, and that the ideal scientist has no private life and is not burdened by external demands (Rosa, 2021). Added to this in the present are the characteristics of a flexible, adaptable, multitasking scientist who can manage, raise money, compete in the research market, deal with rapidly changing technologies, do all kinds of work including administrative, travel internationally, stay abroad longer and have a strong impact, i.e., be well recognized in the scientific community to raise the international ranks of the home university. To meet these expectations, scientists must have skills for self-governance, self-optimization, self-marketisation, and be self-sufficient (Bomert & Leinfellner, 2017). Such expectations are increasingly common in academic recruitment, selection, evaluation, and promotion processes (Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2008). The old-fashioned notion of dedication to science has thus taken on whole new dimensions in the age of neoliberal academia. The public image of the scientist and the demands on their performance have implications for work–life balance for all, especially for those who have children, and this is an area explicitly addressed in Horizon Europe’s guidelines for Gender Equality Plans (GEPs; see REA, 2023).

Efforts to reduce gender inequality in science date back to the beginning of the new millennium when the European Commission recognized the need for more determined actions to ensure gender equality in research. The main institutional practices that perpetuate gender discrimination in science and innovation are the lack of transparency in decision-making, errors in the evaluation of merit suitable for a leadership position, unconscious bias in the evaluation of excellence, especially in the process of peer review, gender inequality, which leads to missed opportunities and cognitive errors in knowledge and technology, as well as the persistence of a gender pay gap (European Commission, 2012). Since then, numerous groups and bodies have produced reports and recommendations for concrete measures that should be employed at the EU and the national levels. The result was that already in 2013, 36% of research-performing organizations had introduced GEPs (Rosa et al., 2021, p. 3). None of the Slovenian universities or research institutions were among them.

The main push factor for Slovenian institutions was the fact that, in 2022, the GEP became an eligibility criterion to participate in Horizon Europe. While it may seem like an obligation without real commitment, it was also a key opportunity to plan necessary changes. At the University of Ljubljana (hereafter: UL), a strategic document on gender equality had been proposed but was not accepted by the university management. When UL finally formed the Working Group for the Preparation of the GEP at the UL (hereafter WG GEP UL), it was made up of representatives from the UL member faculties from the social sciences and humanities, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines, and the arts

academies. The members were researchers who had been active in the field of gender equality. The briefly summarized phases of GEP development consisted of gathering background information and knowledge about the GEP process: analysis of EC documents; a review of GEPs at universities in the EU countries, especially GUILD and LEAR members; and interviews with Slovenian institutions that have already adopted GEPs. After this phase, the WG GEP UL reviewed existing data. The UL collects gender-disaggregated data on staff and students, which was important for the creation of a GEP at the university level. In addition, in 2022, the UL (through the University Office for Quality, Analysis, and Reporting) carried out a survey on gender equality among employees and students. The collected data showed that one of the areas that may be a cause of the gender gap (see Table 1) is work–life balance, where women have much more difficulty than men in coping with responsibilities in both areas (University of Ljubljana, 2022a), which is consistent with a 2011 study on gender differences in science in Slovenia (Ule et al., 2016) showing that balancing work and family poses a significant obstacle for women in their careers.

The University of Ljubljana’s Gender Equality Plan (hereafter: GEP UL) was adopted by the Senate of the UL in April 2022. In addition, a new working group to monitor its implementation was established in April 2023. The GEP UL is the first document ever to specifically address gender inequalities at UL. In 2024, the UL also established a Working Group for the Preparation of the Guidelines for Gender Equality in the Field of Work–Life Balance at UL.

There are two conceptually distinct terms used to describe the relationship between the work and private spheres: “work–life balance” and “work–family balance,” with the former increasingly present in the literature and policy documents. Joseph and Sebastian (2019) state that the former concept is broader and refers to the relationship between work and non-work domains (including family, personal life, self-care, friends, society, religion, etc.), the later refers to the relationship between work and family, which mostly includes caregiving responsibilities and housework. Rosa (2024) highlights the differences in national contexts that affect the distinct interpretations of work–life balance, but essentially, it is about how work–life balance can be managed and articulated. In this article, the term “work–life balance” is used for two reasons: first, because the measures of the GEP UL do not pertain exclusively to parents; and second, to better align with the research results presented in the empirical part of the article. Even though most work–life balance problems are experienced by parents, there are also other groups of employees who face obstacles.

The article is based on data from a 2022 survey on gender equality conducted at the UL, using a sample of 820 academic staff members. It focuses on how caregiving responsibilities, along with related institutional practices and organizational culture, impact career advancement and satisfaction with the work environment in terms of gender equality. In the first step, we examined gender differences concerning work–life balance and caregiving responsibilities, satisfaction with work environment in terms of gender equality and career advancement, and availability of leadership positions and barriers to advancement. In the second step, we conducted two multiple linear regression analyses to examine the factors influencing satisfaction with the work environment in terms of gender equality and the perceptions of gender equality in career advancement.

The article is divided into the following main sections. First, the conceptual framework of work–life balance in academia is presented, followed by the related emphases from the GEP UL. Then we present the main research findings and data on work–life balance at the UL. The final part provides some reflections on findings and recommendations for future actions in the context of GEP UL.

2. Conceptualizing Work–Life Balance in Academia

Science was and to a certain extent still is understood as an area outside of everyday life (including caregiving responsibilities), an area of exploration and experimentation in which scientists arrive at scientifically valid findings and provide society with new knowledge and insights. To achieve this, one must be dedicated to science, committed to it, and able to detach oneself from the constraints, expectations, and routines of everyday life. Gatta and Roos (2004) note that the public-private dichotomy is based on the belief that privacy in the scientific sphere is a disruption to the system and an indicator of bad science, as good science requires full engagement. The private and scientific spheres are therefore not complementary but competing spheres. This dichotomous separation is highly gendered as public belongs to men and private to women. One of the main problems arising from this is that greater opportunities for independent and autonomous scientific activity are only available at the higher levels of the scientific hierarchy (Bailyn, 2003), which is male-dominated. This is known as vertical segregation (or leaky pipe phenomenon), and data shows that in most of the EU countries, women are in less favorable positions than men (Macarie & Moldovan, 2015). Higher academic positions also offer stable employment and financial security. This perpetuates a hierarchical system and ensures that these positions are predominantly held by men, who have more time to accumulate merits at the top of the hierarchy due to their reduced family commitments. The gap between the lower and upper ranks is therefore always greater when quantified performance and previous achievements are the criterion (Gvozdanović & Bailey, 2021). This is also relevant for the UL. Table 1 shows the ratio between men and women in lower and upper academic positions.

Table 1. The number of employees by gender, salary groups, and years 2013 and 2023 at UL.

Salary group	Academic title	Gender	2013	%	2023	%
D1—higher education teachers and associate higher education staff	Teaching assistant with doctoral degree	M	469	56.8	425	53.1
		F	356	43.2	375	46.9
	Assistant Professor	M	238	57.3	240	54.8
		F	177	42.7	198	45.2
	Associate professor	M	285	64.8	266	61.4
		F	155	35.2	167	38.6
	Professor	M	443	75.6	543	64.3
		F	143	24.4	294	35.7
H1—Researchers	Researchers	M	584	57.3	808	53.0
		F	436	42.7	716	47.0
J—Professional, administrative, and technical staff		M	607	31.7	600	28.0
		F	1308	68.3	1546	72.0

Source: University of Ljubljana (2023).

Apart from the existence of structural barriers, the presented gender gap can be partly explained by the fact that many women consider themselves not good enough if they are hampered by personal commitments, and in case they have children, they no longer have ambitions to reach better positions in the scientific hierarchy. This self-selection is problematic as it individualizes structural causes of inequalities (Nielsen, 2021). Women also accept this position because they need support in balancing work and family life, especially childcare (Baker, 2008). The research of Russo (2024) shows that the decision about parenthood

for women in academia is complex and complicated, especially for early-career female researchers. Studies show that many women academics decide not to have children as they are aware that this would minimize their chances for an academic career (Wilton & Ross, 2017; Zipora Reuter, 2019). Others postpone motherhood, as once they have children, they struggle to balance work and childcare, with many continuing to work even during maternity leave—a problem observed at UL as well, as shown in the research results. They would rather talk about the work–family conflict than balance. The research on fatherhood in academia discloses that men also experience hardship when they decide to take paternity leave or share caregiving responsibilities with a partner. Men who share parental responsibilities equally report obstacles in reconciling work and family life. Gould and Lovato (2019) report that men rarely ask for support from their academic employer as they do not want to be recognized as seeking help. They do not want to be seen by their departments as less committed to academia or less independent because they have children. Fathers also report that they experience all kinds of judgments about their masculinity and prejudices related to doing “women’s work,” which also affects their academic careers. They are seen as less dominant and not worthy of promotion (Rudman & Mescher, 2013). The result is that much less attention is paid to fathers when it comes to measures to improve work–life balance. This problem is particularly challenging for gay men, where the discrimination is multiple (due to care role and sexual orientation) and often overlooked (Marotte et al., 2011).

The problem of reconciling work and private life is becoming more pressing for everyone, as universities have undergone a significant transformation: from an autonomous scientific institution to a neoliberalized institution with a governance model that combines the rhetoric of the free market with organizational practices of new public management, adapting scientific spaces to the management models of private companies to focus on work-centered organizational cultures and increase competition and production (Bomert & Leinfellner, 2017; Lorenz, 2012). The profound organizational changes that accompany the introduction of the new public management model in universities lead to increasingly stressful work determined by the standards of academic excellence, which is gendered because its consequences are different for men and women (Rosa, 2021). This also changes the image of the scientist, because under these conditions, those who produce a lot are more successful than those who do not, but conduct research thoroughly. The restriction of academic freedom and autonomy and the increasing control and demand for submission to the prescribed sets of organizational rules (Hadley, 2015; e.g., keeping track of work attendance, consistent reporting of performance within the working day, administration and bureaucracy workload, etc.) also affect work–life balance. Drew and Marshall (2021) state that these demands have a particular effect on academic and research staff who have caregiving responsibilities, among whom the majority are women.

Brough et al. (2021) even report on work–life backlash. Women and men do not want to adopt work–life balance policies because of the informal disapproving organizational culture and internalized guilt of enlarging the workload of colleagues who hardly manage their own work. Harassment and discrimination are present to a much greater extent than universities would be willing to admit. The abusive and power-related practices are often hidden in a changed structural environment, caused by the new public management, which promotes hierarchical relations and an individualistic, competitive work culture. Organizational culture has a major impact on professionalism, inclusion, well-being, and job satisfaction (Stefanovska–Petkovska et al., 2019).

Job satisfaction and a democratic, inclusive management attitude increase employee security and creativity, which in science is essential for innovation in scientific explorations. However, an Australian study on the careers of young researchers shows that they are confronted with increased demands, such as time pressure and long working hours: “Intensification of work time has been matched by the extensification of work into non-workplace spaces” (Cannizzo et al., 2019, p. 252). Griffin (2022) described this situation with the concept of work-work balance, which is about balancing different work demands. For researchers at UL, this means working half their time as teachers and half as researchers (50:50 split), participating in many projects with a small number of hours allocated to each, and taking on administrative tasks in addition to research, which is particularly problematic for women. Other studies also come to this conclusion, showing that there are considerable inequalities in the allocation of academic tasks, which are based on a systematic gender bias as women are burdened with more administrative work than their male counterparts (O’Meara et al., 2017).

Rosa (2021) points out that these demands lead to an extension of working hours to evenings and weekends and beyond the eight-hour working day. In addition, the number of workers on precarious temporary contracts, i.e., fixed-term contracts (usually for the duration of project funding or shorter) or part-time contracts, is increasing, further increasing dependence on employers and at the same time leading to subordination, as people risk losing their jobs if they speak up too loudly for their rights or point out irregularities. At the same time, the boundaries between work and private life are blurring as digital technology means the demands of being constantly connected to work are very high (Johnston et al., 2022).

Change is not only taking place in the workplace, but also in the private sphere. The idea of a fulfilling life refers to all the activities in a person’s life around which they develop interests (Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2008). Children are increasingly becoming the focus of men’s lives, not just women’s. Research shows that fatherhood goes hand in hand with the care of the child, so men are taking on more caregiving responsibilities than in the past (Wilton & Ross, 2017), the phenomenon known as active or involved fatherhood, which is increasingly present in Slovenia as well (Rener et al., 2008; Stropnik et al., 2019; Švab & Humer, 2013). However, a significant gender gap persists in the distribution of housework (EIGE, 2024), and Slovenia is no exception. While men are becoming more involved in family work, a predominant pattern of so-called supportive fatherhood emerges, where men primarily assist women, who are responsible for most of the family work (Rener et al., 2008; Švab & Humer, 2013). In addition, there are often dual academic careers where work–life balance is a particular challenge due to flexible working hours, especially in teaching, which is usually a full-time job (Bomert & Leinfellner, 2017; Wilton & Ross, 2017). Nevertheless, concerns about work–life balance increasingly affect all genders and different groups of employees (Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2008).

This is relevant to our study because the work–life balance measures in GEP UL aim to enable women and men who take on caregiving responsibilities to advance to higher academic titles or leadership positions, which is primarily associated with quantifiable performance measures. For UL, this means achieving a certain number of publications in journals with a high impact factor, leading (international and national) research projects, and particularly uninterrupted three-month research or teaching at a foreign university or research institution. The appointment to academic titles in Slovenia is called the habilitation procedure, which is strictly regulated (University of Ljubljana, 2022c).

In the introduction, we briefly outlined the steps that UL took in developing the GEP UL. In what follows, we will outline how GEP UL addresses the issue of work–life balance and then present the results of the research that underpins these measures.

3. The GEP UL (2022–2027)

The GEP UL was adopted in 2022, which systematically addresses the area of gender equality and inequality at the UL. It is stated that:

The University's Gender Equality Plan aims to provide conditions for a working and learning environment that is sensitive to gender and other discrimination or bias, such as unjustified distinctions based on physical disability, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, religion, social status or other characteristics that may result in employees and students being treated less favorably and therefore having less opportunity to succeed and participate in all processes at university and member faculty level. (University of Ljubljana, 2022b, p. 2)

The document includes the following six areas: (a) a culture of gender equality; (b) data; (c) balancing private (family) and work life; (d) gender balance in decision-making and leadership bodies; (e) gender equality in employment and career development; (f) measures against violence in academic spaces, including harassment, sexual harassment, and bullying. Each field consists of objectives and concrete measures, with the responsible actors identified for each measure (university, faculties, employees, students, etc.; see University of Ljubljana, 2022b).

Regarding the work–life balance, GEP UL recognizes that:

Reconciling work and family commitments is an essential element of a good quality of work and life. At the same time, it is an area that constitutes one of the major obstacles to women's careers, as they often take on a large part of caregiving responsibilities in their private life, both concerning their children and other family members. Taking on these responsibilities can hinder women and men alike in meeting the conditions for progression in studies and employment, as well as in engaging in research and obtaining projects. (University of Ljubljana, 2022b, p. 10)

This section of the GEP UL includes the following objectives:

1. To make it easier to balance work commitments with parenthood and/or caring responsibilities for other family members.
2. Consistent compliance with, and awareness of, the legal possibilities for reconciling family and work commitments.
3. Uninterrupted integration into teaching, research, and professional work after returning from parental leave, caring for another family member, or extended absence due to illness.

The issue of work–life balance is also closely related to three other areas of GEP UL, particularly gender equality in employment and career development. Women may face challenges in these areas due to an unequal burden of household responsibilities, especially childcare. This imbalance stems from structurally

rooted gender inequalities, resulting in a gender-asymmetric division of domestic work. Women in academia may particularly face challenges in meeting the requirement of at least three months of work at a university abroad to achieve the title of associate (and later full) professor, especially if they have caregiving responsibilities for dependent children and other relatives. GEP UL strives to address this problem by aiming for more flexible implementation of promotion conditions, a balanced distribution of research resources (especially for visiting academic institutions abroad), and the prevention of overload and burnout (University of Ljubljana, 2022b).

4. Survey on Gender Equality at the UL: Methodology and Sample Characteristics

As previously mentioned, in 2022 the UL conducted a survey on gender equality among employees and students. The questionnaire was developed by the WG GEP UL. In this article, we present data from a sample of academic staff (teaching and research staff), focusing on issues related to work–life balance.

The online survey was carried out from January 13, 2022, to February 10, 2022, among employees and students at the UL with two corresponding separate questionnaires. The final sample of all employees consisted of 1,502 respondents, while the sample of academic staff included in this analysis consisted of 820 respondents. Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample, relevant for further analysis in this article, are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample.

	Gender	
	Male	Female
	% (N)	% (N)
Gender	43.5 (357)	56.5 (463)
Age		
Up to 30	27.2 (97)	25.1 (116)
31–45	36.4 (130)	31.1 (144)
46–60	31.4 (112)	35.2 (163)
61–75	5.0 (18)	8.6 (40)
Workplace		
Teaching	58.3 (208)	58.5 (271)
Research	30.3 (108)	31.7 (147)
Combination of teaching & research	11.5 (41)	9.7 (45)
Faculty by academic field		
Social sciences, humanities, and art academies	27.1 (92)	46.8 (205)
Natural sciences and engineering	72.9 (247)	53.2 (233)
Intimate partnership		
Married	48.0 (108)	40.3 (141)
Cohabitation	20.0 (45)	23.7 (83)
Registered partnership*	4.4 (10)	2.9 (10)
Non-registered partnership*	7.6 (17)	9.4 (33)
Single	13.3 (30)	11.6 (40)
Divorced	0.9 (2)	6.0 (21)
Widow/widower	0.0 (0)	0.6 (2)

Table 2. (Cont.) Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample.

	Gender	
	Male	Female
	% (N)	% (N)
Children		
Yes	56.9 (128)	57.6 (201)
No	43.1 (97)	42.4 (148)
Number of children		
One	19.2 (24)	30.3 (56)
Two	53.6 (67)	56.2 (104)
Three	22.4 (28)	12.4 (23)
Four +	4.8 (6)	1.1 (2)
Dependent children		
One	30.6 (33)	34.4 (52)
Two	46.3 (50)	55.0 (83)
Three	18.5 (20)	9.3 (14)
Four +	4.6 (5)	1.3 (2)

Notes: * The terms used for same-sex couples' status in the survey followed the legislation in force at the time; full legal equality of same-sex couples came into effect on January 31, 2023.

The statistical analysis was done in two steps. First, we looked at gender differences for the selected questions regarding work–family balance, and questions related to satisfaction with the work environment in terms of gender equality, accessibility of leadership positions, and career advancement. In the second step, we conducted two multiple linear regression analyses to explore the factors influencing satisfaction with the work environment in terms of gender equality and the perceptions of gender equality in career advancement.

5. Results

5.1. Gender Differences

5.1.1. Work–Life Balance, Caregiving Responsibilities, and Exercising Parental Rights

Among those respondents who have caregiving responsibilities ($N = 235$), the majority care for children (65.1%), followed by those who care for elderly parents or other relatives (16.1%); those, who care for their partners (9.4%); those who care for children with special needs (4.3%), and those who care for other persons in need (2.1%).

Respondents reported the estimated share of caregiving responsibilities they take on. While 31.9% ($N = 145$) of women and 35.7% ($N = 122$) of men did not take on these responsibilities, approximately one-third (33.8%; $N = 154$) of women reported taking on more than half of these responsibilities in comparison with 6.1% ($N = 21$) of men. On the other hand, only 9.0% ($N = 41$) of women and 18.1% ($N = 42$) of men reported taking on less than half of these responsibilities (Chi-square = 96,480; $df = 4$; $Sig. = 0.000$).

The questionnaire also included questions about exercising the caregiving rights in the last ten years, i.e., parental leave and part-time work due to parenthood. In the past ten years, 10.8% ($N = 49$) of women and

6.5% ($N = 22$) of men have taken parental leave (Chi-square = 4,397; $df = 1$; $Sig. = 0.036$). Part-time work due to parenting responsibilities was predominantly utilized by women (4.9% [$N = 22$] of women and 0.3% [$N = 1$] of men; Chi-square = 14,261; $df = 1$; $Sig. = 0.000$).

Those who took parental leave in the last ten years were also asked about career setbacks related to this leave. Among women, 23.9% ($N = 58$) believed that they always or often experienced career setbacks due to taking parental leave, while 60.7% ($N = 147$) reported that they rarely or never faced setbacks. Among men, 3.3% ($N = 5$) stated that they always or often experienced career setbacks due to parental leave, while 92.1% believed that they rarely or never experienced setbacks (Chi-square = 62,012; $df = 4$; $Sig. = 0.000$).

Regarding the work-life balance, respondents were also asked if the management expects parents to return early from parental leave. There are 80.9% ($N = 195$) of women and 90.3% ($N = 150$) of men who believe this is never or rarely the case (Chi-square = 16,554; $df = 4$; $Sig. = 0.002$).

Another important issue is whether the management, when planning work, adjusts workloads to caregiving responsibilities. Among respondents, 46.7% ($N = 122$) of women and 29.4% ($N = 47$) of men think this never happens or rarely happens, while 35.2% ($N = 92$) of women and 50.6% ($N = 81$) of men believe this happens often or always (Chi-square = 18,857; $df = 4$; $Sig. = 0.001$).

While half of the respondents are not aware if the organization provides support to parents returning from parental leave to facilitate their reintegration into the team and work, there are 74.2% ($N = 152$) of women who think this never happens or rarely happens, compared to 56.7% ($N = 68$) of men who think this never happens (Chi-square = 11,200; $df = 4$; $Sig. = 0.024$).

5.1.2. Satisfaction With the Work Environment in Terms of Gender Equality and Career Advancement

The questionnaire included a question about satisfaction with the work environment as far as gender equality is concerned. Among women, 58.1% ($N = 222$) reported they were very satisfied or satisfied with the work environment in terms of gender equality, in comparison with a higher percentage of men (73.6%; $N = 184$), who shared this view. On the other hand, 21.2% ($N = 81$) of women and 8.0% ($N = 20$) of men were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied (Chi-square = 40,948; $df = 5$; $Sig. = 0.000$).

Respondents were also asked about their opinion regarding the statement that women have equal opportunities and do not need special support in this respect. Among men, 55.2% ($N = 133$) agreed or completely agreed with the statement in comparison with 30.5% ($N = 114$) of women, while 27.8% ($N = 67$) of men, in comparison with 47.3% ($N = 177$) of women, disagree or completely disagree with the statement (Chi-square = 46,826; $df = 4$; $Sig. = 0.000$).

Significant gender differences were also found in the statement that women can advance in their careers within their organization as quickly as men. Only 41.4% ($N = 154$) of women agree or completely agree with the statement in comparison with 77.2% ($N = 186$) of men. On the other hand, 31.6% ($N = 118$) of women and only 9.6% ($N = 23$) of men disagree or completely disagree (Chi-square = 89,987; $df = 4$; $Sig. = 0.000$).

The pattern of gendered division of labor at work as an indicator of gender equality can be traced through the question regarding administrative tasks, more precisely, an assessment about being burdened with these tasks. Men were more likely to strongly agree or agree with the statement that women in their organization are not more burdened with administrative tasks than men (73.0%; $N = 176$), while women were significantly less likely to agree with this statement (39.0%). On the other hand, 32.8% ($N = 123$) of women and only 8.3% ($N = 20$) of men disagree or strongly disagree with it (Chi-square = 90,124; $df = 4$; $Sig. = 0.000$).

Respondents were also asked about whether they felt neglected or hindered at work due to their gender. Among women, 34.2% ($N = 129$) felt that way in comparison with 6.7% ($N = 16$) of men (Chi-square = 62,671; $df = 1$; $Sig. = 0.000$).

5.1.3. Availability of Leadership Positions and Barriers to Advancement

Respondents were asked questions about leadership positions and career advancement, e.g., whether they received an invitation and consequently accepted a leadership position. While most respondents never received such an invitation, a higher percentage of women, 66.6% ($N = 243$), than men, 59.8% ($N = 140$), selected this answer. There are also slight gender differences (22.2% [$N = 81$] of women and 29.5% [$N = 69$] of men) among those who have already received an invitation to apply for a leadership position and accepted it. About the same share of women (11.2%; $N = 41$) and men (10.7%; $N = 25$) either received or rejected it. Gender differences are not statistically significant here (Chi-square = 4,084; $df = 2$; $Sig. = 0.130$).

Respondents were also asked whether they ever wanted to apply for a leadership position. Most men and women never applied (78.9% ($N = 288$) of women and 73.1% ($N = 171$) of men), while there were 16.7% ($N = 61$) of women who had this wish and applied in comparison with 24.4% ($N = 57$) of men, who have already wanted to apply for a leadership position and have done so (Chi-square = 6,149; $df = 2$; $Sig. = 0.046$).

Academic staff were asked about their experiences regarding the mandatory 3-month stay abroad required for habilitation advancement. At UL, it is mandatory to complete at least a three-month stay abroad for the purposes of habilitation for the title of associate professor. Those who could not go abroad were asked whether it was due to family obligations. Among women, 46.8% ($N = 52$) stated that the reason they did not complete a three-month stay abroad for the purpose of habilitation was related to family obligations in comparison with 28.6% of men ($N = 20$; Chi-square = 5,985; $df = 1$; $Sig. = 0.014$).

Respondents were also asked to answer whether their superiors, using various measures, enable them to be successful in their careers despite parenthood. While 42.3% ($N = 80$) of women and 30.8% ($N = 37$) of men believed this never happened or happens rarely, for 27.5% ($N = 52$) of women and 26.7% ($N = 32$) of men this happens occasionally, and for 30.2% ($N = 57$) of women and 42.5% ($N = 51$) of men this happens often or always (Chi-square = 15,499; $df = 4$; $Sig. = 0.004$).

Additionally, respondents were asked whether their family, work, and caregiving responsibilities are perceived at work as an obstacle to meeting the conditions for advancement. Among those who answered that this is never or rarely the case, there are 70.7% ($N = 181$) of women in comparison with 87.8% ($N = 137$) of men, and among those who answered that this is often or always the case, there were 15.6% ($N = 40$) of women in comparison with 5.8% ($N = 9$) of men (Chi-square = 16,622; $df = 4$; $Sig. = 0.002$).

5.2. Regression Models

As data show, despite formal equality policies in higher education institutions, women remain underrepresented in senior academic and leadership positions. Further, data show that women encounter more difficulties in terms of work–life balance, are less satisfied with the work environment, and face higher barriers to career advancement. To more closely examine the factors influencing satisfaction with the work environment in terms of gender equality and the perceptions of gender equality in career advancement, we have conducted two multiple linear regression analyses. In both regressions, we included independent variables measuring five sets of factors: socio-demographic factors, family factors, organizational culture factors, perceived equal opportunities at the workplace factors, and experience of humiliation and harassment at the workplace factors.

5.2.1. Regression 1: Satisfaction With the Work Environment in Terms of Gender Equality

A detailed description of dependent and independent variables for regression 1 is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Dependent and independent variables.

Dependent	Satisfaction with work environment in terms of gender equality	How satisfied are you in general with your work environment (work conditions and atmosphere) in terms of gender equality?
Independent	Socio-demographic factors	Age
		Gender
		Academic field (Natural sciences and engineering or Social sciences and humanities)
	Family	Caregiving responsibilities (How many caregiving responsibilities do you have for children and others?)
		Parenthood (Do you have children?)
	Organizational culture	Communication culture (Leadership ensures an appropriate culture of communication)
		Neglect of one's potential by leadership (I believe I have the abilities and potential that leadership is aware of but deliberately overlooks)
		Perceived Equal opportunities (EO) at the workplace
	Equal opportunities of women to progress (In our organization, women can progress as quickly as men)	
	Equal leadership opportunities, regardless of gender and sexual orientation (In our organization, there are equal opportunities for all to apply for leadership positions, regardless of gender or sexual orientation)	
Experience of humiliation and harassment at the workplace	Ridicule and humiliation (I experience ridicule and humiliation from my supervisor and/or colleagues, which hinders my career path)	
	Bullying, harassment, violence (Have you ever experienced bullying, (sexual) harassment, or (sexual) violence on UL premises?)	

The model is statistically significant (see Table 4), $F(12, 407) = 41.076$, $p < .001$, and explains approximately 55% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.548$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.534$). Variance inflation factors (VIF) ranged from 1.1 to 2.6, indicating no significant multicollinearity issues.

Table 4. Model summary and Anova.

Model summary				
	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
	.740	0.548	0.534	0.75147
ANOVA				
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F
Regression	278.353	12	23.196	41.076
Residual	229.837	407	0.565	
Total	508.190	419		

Regression analysis revealed seven statistically significant predictors (see Table 5), among which three have positive effects and four have negative effects. The most influential positive predictor is communication culture by leadership, followed by the perceived equal opportunities of women to progress as quickly as men, and the perceived view that women need no additional encouragement as they have equal opportunities. The most influential negative predictor is experienced ridicule and humiliation, followed by perception of neglect of one's potential, parenthood, and finally, experience of bullying, harassment, and violence.

Table 5. Predictors.

	Unstand. Coeff.		Standar. Coeff.		Collinearity Statistics		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	2.474	0.284		8.701	0		
Age	0.099	0.055	0.076	1.807	0.072	0.622	1.607
Gender	-0.07	0.086	-0.031	-0.808	0.419	0.777	1.287
Academic field	-0.143	0.079	-0.064	-1.813	0.071	0.899	1.112
Caring responsibilities	0.045	0.044	0.049	1.04	0.299	0.509	1.966
Parenthood	-0.257	0.12	-0.113	-2.13	0.034	0.392	2.553
Communication culture	0.204	0.038	0.231	5.349	0.000	0.594	1.684
Neglect of one's potential by leadership	-0.142	0.039	-0.158	-3.61	0.000	0.578	1.731
Equal opportunities of women, no encouragement needed	0.117	0.04	0.142	2.915	0.004	0.467	2.143
Equal opportunities of women to progress	0.198	0.047	0.224	4.178	0.000	0.386	2.592

Table 5. (Cont.) Predictors.

	Unstand. Coeff.		Standar. Coeff.	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
Equal opportunities for leadership, regardless of gender and sexual orientation	0.023	0.038	0.024	0.608	0.544	0.731	1.368
Ridicule and humiliation	-0.235	0.054	-0.182	-4.401	0.000	0.652	1.535
Bullying, harassment, violence	-0.193	0.092	-0.081	-2.097	0.037	0.737	1.357

None of the predictors in the socio-demographic set of factors are statistically significant, although age and academic field are marginally significant, while gender is highly insignificant. In the family set of factors, caring responsibilities are not significant, while parenthood is, with negative effects on satisfaction with the work environment. In the set of organizational culture predictors, both are statistically significant, with strong positive and negative effects, respectively. In the set of equal opportunities predictors, all are significant, except for the perception of equal opportunities for leadership, regardless of gender and sexual orientation. In the set of experiences of humiliation and harassment at work, both predictors are significant and have negative effects on satisfaction with the work environment in terms of gender equality.

5.2.2. Regression 2: Gender Equality in Career Advancement

A detailed description of dependent and independent variables for regression 2 is presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Dependent and independent variables.

Dependent	Gender equality in career advancement	In our organization, women can progress as quickly as men.
Independent	Socio-demographic factors	Age
		Gender
		Academic field (Natural sciences and engineering or social sciences and humanities)
	Family	Caregiving responsibilities (How many caregiving responsibilities do you have for children and others?)
		Parenthood (Do you have children?)
	Organizational culture	Neglect of one's potential by leadership (I believe I have the abilities and potential that leadership is aware of, but deliberately overlooks)
Satisfaction with work environment in terms of gender equality (How satisfied are you in general with your work environment (work conditions and atmosphere) in terms of gender equality?)		
	Perceived equal opportunities in the workplace	Equal opportunities for women, no encouragement needed (Women have the same opportunities as men and do not need special encouragement)

Table 6. (Cont.) Dependent and independent variables.

Independent	Perceived equal opportunities in the workplace	Women have every opportunity to attain leadership positions (In our organization, women have every opportunity to reach the highest leadership positions)
		Equal leadership opportunities, regardless of gender and sexual orientation (In our organization, there are equal opportunities for all to apply for leadership positions, regardless of gender or sexual orientation)
	Experience of humiliation and harassment at the workplace	Ridicule and humiliation (I experience ridicule and humiliation from my supervisor and/or colleagues, which hinders my career path)
		Bullying, harassment, violence (Have you ever experienced bullying, (sexual) harassment, or (sexual) violence on UL premises?)

The model is statistically significant (see Table 7), $F(12, 417) = 81.965$, $p < .001$, and has a very high correlation between prediction and actual values of the dependent variable ($R = 0.838$). The model explains approximately 70% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.702$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.694$), indicating a very strong explanatory power of the model. VIF ranges from 1.07 to 2.62, indicating no significant multicollinearity issues.

Table 7. Model summary and Anova.

Model summary				
	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
	.838	0.702	0.694	0.690
ANOVA				
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F
Regression	468.690	12	39.058	81.965
Residual	198.707	417	0.477	
Total	667.398	429		

Regression analysis revealed five statistically significant predictors (see Table 8), among which four have positive effects and one has negative effects. The most influential and very strong positive predictor is the belief that women have every opportunity to attain leadership positions, closely followed by the belief that women have equal opportunities and therefore need no additional encouragement. Satisfaction with work environment in terms of gender is a moderate predictor, followed by parenthood. Gender is the single significant negative predictor of the perception of gender equality in career advancement.

In the socio-demographic set of factors, gender is a statistically significant negative predictor, while age and academic field are not relevant predictors. In the family set of factors, caring responsibilities are not significant, while parenthood is, with positive effects on gender equality in career advancement. In the set of organizational culture predictors, satisfaction with the work environment regarding gender equality is a significant positive predictor, while the perception of neglect of one's potential is not significant, though it approaches significance. In the set of equal opportunities factors, the two predictors measuring perceptions of the opportunities of women are strong positive predictors, while the perception of equal opportunities for leadership, regardless of gender and sexual orientation, is not significant. In the set of experiences of

humiliation and harassment at work, none are significant, indicating they do not influence the perception of gender equality in career advancement.

Table 8. Predictors.

	Unstand. Coeff.		Standar. Coeff.	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	2.474	0.284		8.701	0		
Age	-0.053	0.050	-0.036	-1.048	0.295	0.604	1.655
Gender	-0.260	0.077	-0.101	-3.392	0.001	0.805	1.242
Academic field	0.040	0.070	0.016	0.571	0.568	0.933	1.072
Caregiving responsibilities	0.014	0.040	0.014	0.361	0.718	0.497	2.010
Parenthood	0.251	0.110	0.098	2.275	0.023	0.382	2.616
Satisfaction with work environment in terms of gender equality	0.152	0.043	0.135	3.551	0.000	0.497	2.010
Neglect of one's potential by leadership	-0.060	0.034	-0.059	-1.744	0.082	0.623	1.604
Equal opportunities of women, no encouragement needed	0.323	0.033	0.349	9.700	0.000	0.553	1.809
Women have every opportunity to attain a leadership position	0.416	0.040	0.392	10.353	0.000	0.499	2.004
Equal opportunities for leadership, regardless of gender and sexual orientation	0.041	0.035	0.038	1.177	0.240	0.699	1.431
Ridicule and humiliation	0.028	0.050	0.019	0.563	0.573	0.620	1.614
Bullying, harassment, violence	-0.065	0.083	-0.024	-0.783	0.434	0.755	1.324

6. Discussion

This data confirms that work–life balance is a central barrier to gender equality in academia. Women disproportionately take on caregiving responsibilities, which negatively affect their careers. Statistically significant differences in the use of parental leave and part-time work due to caregiving responsibilities highlight persistent structural inequalities. Women also report more barriers to promotion and less access to leadership roles, suggesting that academic structures still align with traditional male career paths, especially at higher hierarchical levels (Galligan et al., 2021; Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2008).

One critical institutional barrier is the habilitation requirement for a mandatory three-month stay abroad. For many women, family commitments prevent meeting this condition, thereby limiting career advancement.

These findings, consistent with other research (Gvozdanović & Bailey, 2021; Rosa, 2021; Wullum, 2021), point to the need for more flexible promotion criteria to support equal opportunities.

The findings show that men are more likely to believe in equal opportunities, yet women report carrying heavier administrative burdens and receiving less support after parental leave. This reflects other studies indicating that academic task allocation is gendered, with women bearing more invisible and undervalued work.

To deepen the analysis, two multiple linear regression models were applied. The first examined satisfaction with the work environment in terms of gender equality. Positive organizational culture emerged as the strongest predictor. Inclusive communication and fair career advancement significantly increased satisfaction. On the other hand, a toxic workplace environment, including perceived neglect of one's potential and experiences of bullying, harassment, and violence, decreases satisfaction with the work environment in terms of gender equality. Parenthood also negatively impacted satisfaction, indicating ongoing challenges for academics with families.

The model's high explanatory power underscores that satisfaction is shaped more by institutional practices and everyday experiences than by demographics alone. Crucially, formal gender equality measures had no statistically significant effect, indicating a disconnect between policy and perceived impact. Personal experiences of marginalization—ridicule, dismissal of competence, and even violence—remain widespread and strongly correlated with dissatisfaction. Parenting remains an often-invisible burden, especially for women, and reflects an inflexible academic system.

Unexpectedly, caregiving and gender did not significantly predict satisfaction. However, gendered differences in caring responsibilities appeared in cross-tabulations. This suggests that while caregiving responsibilities affect career trajectories, they may not directly shape perceptions of organizational fairness. Employees may separate personal work-life balance from institutional gender policies. Alternatively, the influence of caregiving may be indirect, operating through variables such as flexibility, support structures, or experiences of discrimination.

Similarly, the fact that gender did not predict satisfaction was surprising, given prior research. This could reflect the nature of the sample—academics with PhDs and high cultural capital, who may share similar perceptions regardless of gender. Alternatively, the growing formalization of gender equality policies may obscure some gender-based perceptions. Another possibility is that personal experiences—such as being supported or excluded—play a greater role in shaping satisfaction than gender itself.

The second regression model assessed perceptions of gender equality in career advancement. Organizational culture and perceived fairness again emerged as strong positive predictors. Gender, however, was a notable negative predictor: Women were more likely to perceive inequality in promotion opportunities despite formal commitments to fairness. This finding mirrors existing research on the gap between equality rhetoric and actual workplace experiences.

Surprisingly, parenting was a positive predictor. Parents perceived the academic environment as more equitable. One of the explanations is a possible positive selection effect, where individuals who successfully balance parenthood and academic careers generally may hold more optimistic views.

In contrast, caregiving responsibilities, perceived candidacy opportunities, and feeling of being overlooked by leadership did not significantly predict perceptions of equal promotion opportunities. This suggests a more complex dynamic at play.

The lack of a caregiving effect may indicate that caring responsibilities are experienced as personal challenges rather than institutional disadvantages, perhaps reflecting some progress in accommodating family needs. Similarly, perceiving leadership candidacy as equally open does not translate into perceiving equal promotion outcomes. This may point to a situation where policies are formally inclusive, but informal norms, networks, and unspoken organizational practices continue to shape career advancement. The non-significant role of feeling overlooked by leadership is also noteworthy. While a negative experience, it may not always be attributed to gender, or it may be internalized as a personal issue rather than a symptom of systemic inequality. These nuanced findings underscore that individual experiences do not always align with broader perceptions of institutional fairness.

Taken together, these findings highlight the complexity of academic staff perceptions of gender equality within their institutions. They suggest that while structural and cultural factors such as leadership support and policy frameworks play a role, personal experiences and formal policy perceptions do not automatically translate into beliefs about overall gender equality in career advancement. This complexity highlights the need for further qualitative and longitudinal studies to better understand the interplay of personal, cultural, and structural factors.

While the study in this article has some strengths—most notably the large sample size, which allowed for both descriptive and inferential statistics, including the two regression models, which provided a more comprehensive view of gender equality in academia and valuable insights for the implementation of GEP UL—it also has limitations. These include the cross-sectional design, which restricts insight into long-term changes or causality; reliance on self-reported perceptions, which introduces potential subjectivity; a lack of focus on intersectional aspects or differences across academic disciplines; and the unexpected results (e.g., parenthood as a positive predictor of perceived equality), which require cautious interpretation and further qualitative inquiry.

Nevertheless, the results of the study are highly relevant to the implementation of the GEP UL. While initiatives such as flexible habilitation requirements and burnout prevention are included in the plan, their success will depend on consistent and effective implementation. Given the ambitious goals of GEP UL, further research is necessary to evaluate the actual impact of its measures. Monitoring and adjusting based on empirical findings will be key to ensuring that policies translate into tangible improvements.

7. Conclusion

Despite growing awareness and formal commitments, gender inequalities remain evident in caregiving roles, career progression, and institutional support. Women continue to face disproportionate burdens related to care and administrative duties and report more barriers in accessing leadership roles. While the GEP UL includes important measures to address these issues, systemic change is needed with the key steps, which include enabling flexible working conditions, redistributing care responsibilities more equitably, and actively supporting women's academic advancement. Success depends on moving beyond policy declarations to real,

lived institutional commitment. The inclusion of monitoring and responsive adjustment in GEP UL is a promising sign and should be supported by ongoing empirical research and collective action within academic institutions.

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Conflict of Interests

Vesna Leskošek was the head of the Working Group for the Preparation of the GEP UL. She is currently serving as the head of the Working Group for Monitoring the Implementation of the GEP UL, with Alenka Švab as a member (their mandate runs from April 2023 to September 2025). Alenka Švab was also the head of the Working Group for the Preparation of the Guidelines for Gender Equality in the Field of Work–Life Balance at UL.

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Dissecting Discourses in Policy: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Problematizations in Academia

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Abstract

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) related injustices have long drenched higher education institutions (HEIs), prompting ongoing efforts to address them. In Norway, such efforts include Gender Equality Plans (GEPs)/DEI action plans in all HEIs, stipulating how DEI should be incorporated and supported. This article examines the GEP/DEI Plans at UiT The Arctic University of Norway. Applying Carol Bacchi's “what's the problem represented to be” (WPR) approach to the UiT Equality Plans, we genealogically contextualize and dissect the policy discourse to explore its problem representations, underlying assumptions, and policy evolution. Recognizing that policy proposals are not mere governance tools but inhabit meaning beyond the explicitly stated, we regard policy as inseparable from the social, political, and cultural contexts in which it operates. We find that the policy primarily targets women, despite the change of name from GEP to DEI Plan, and frames the overall DEI problem as the underrepresentation of women in professorship/leadership roles. While the fairness approach to equality is prevalent, women in the academy are reinstated as units of resources that must be tapped, whose productivity must be audited and enhanced through affirmative action to utilize all resources. Aligning our findings with the three DEI policy operational frameworks outlined in the research literature, i.e., individual, structural, and cultural, we identify a deficiency in this literature: a lack of emphasis and clarity on the importance of academic content to support DEI. Consequently, we propose a new analytical dimension related to research, teaching, and study content.

Keywords

academia; DEI; HEI; Norway; policy discourse; policy problematization; WPR

1. Introduction

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) issues have long plagued academia. Scholars like Mirza (2006), Ahmed (2012), and Tzanakou (2019) have highlighted the gendered and racialized tendencies in Western universities despite ongoing efforts to address these issues. Over the past three decades, universities have developed and implemented various measures to address these problems (Drange et al., 2023; Nielsen, 2017; Silander et al., 2021; Timmers et al., 2010). However, many of these measures have been criticized for overlooking the issue's complexities, creating new forms of inequalities, and being a box-ticking exercise (Tzanakou, 2019). Despite these criticisms, policy efforts in academia have had a positive impact by fostering environments where solidarity is prioritized and teaching is recognized as a fundamental aspect of academic practice (Suboticki & Sørensen, 2023, p. 440). This article categorizes all these initiatives under the umbrella term "DEI policy" and nuances what such policy entails as we engage in a contextualized policy analysis.

Despite being termed the "DEI action plan," the discourse in European DEI initiatives predominantly focuses on gender inequalities, particularly those concerning women, whilst other critical dimensions of the diversity component, such as ethnicity and belonging, receive insufficient attention. The emphasis on women is evident in the European Commission's She Figures 2024, which highlight how women's representation in top-level positions remains low: only 26% among heads of HEIs, 38% as board members, and 39% as board leaders at the EU level (European Commission, 2025, p. 222). The figures also point to women as underrepresented in grade A positions, equivalent to full professorships, across all academic fields: 38% in humanities, 35% in the social sciences, and 33% in medical and health sciences. Women's representation in STEM fields is even lower, with just 24% in natural sciences and 19% in engineering and technology (p. 222). The primary equality problem is thus represented as the underrepresentation of women in senior academic positions. Consequently, most policy measures both at the state and institutional levels focus on addressing the gender imbalance (Aiston & Fo, 2021; Rosa & Clavero, 2022; Sigurdardottir et al., 2022; Silander et al., 2021). This indicates that the shift from the Gender Equality Plan (GEP), with a focus on women's underrepresentation relative to men, to the wider and more complex DEI policy concept, with an emphasis on the diversity component that comprises much more than gender, is merely rhetorical, as "diversity" still tends to be understood as "women." We bring this observation to our analysis.

In the EU, gender equality is a priority across all areas, particularly in research and innovation. This focus is evident in the EU's framework program for research and innovation (2021–2027; Council of the European Union, 2019) and the Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 (European Commission, 2020). A key objective of the Gender Equality Strategy is to advance towards a gender-equal Europe, where men and women in all their diversities can freely choose their life path, have equal opportunities to succeed, and participate equally in leadership roles. The She Figures 2024 report indicates that, among 36 countries analyzed, research organizations in 13 countries actively implemented action measures at a 50% level (European Commission, 2025, p. 12). Despite these efforts, inequalities in academia persist. This article aims to address academic inequalities by exploring "problem representations" in DEI policy in higher education.

Scholarly work on DEI policy analysis (e.g., Drange et al., 2023; Kalev et al., 2006; Nielsen, 2014, 2017; Timmers et al., 2010) has primarily focused on the measures to address the problem, the implementation strategies, and the efficacy of the measures. However, these analyses often overlook the political dynamics of the policy-making process. They tend to present broad discourses and general policy goals and neglect deconstructing the usually inconsistent elements that frame policies (Suboticki & Sørensen, 2023, p. 430).

Considering that policy proposals are not mere tools of governance but also carry meaning beyond what is explicitly stated, policy should be scrutinized as inseparable from the social, political, and cultural contexts in which it operates. Hence, “context” should be seen as an active participant in the policy-making process and must be included in policy analysis.

In HEIs, context is crucial due to significant changes in the sector over the last 30 to 40 years. HEIs have shifted from independent science and educational institutions, inspired by the Humboldtian ideals of *Bildung* (Connell, 2019), to a market-driven neoliberal sector (Bleiklie, 2018) often described as “academic capitalism” (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). While the neo-liberalization of the HEIs is often criticized for its dehumanizing effects (Burton & Bowman, 2022), the adoption of sophisticated DEI initiatives coincided with these neoliberal transformations. This shift frames DEI as a political and organizational matter that requires attention and solutions (Ferree, 2008, p. 240). Consequently, DEI discourse has increasingly influenced institutional public relations, reshaping the images of universities (Thompson & Zablotsky, 2016, p. 78). Today, internal evaluations and external rankings of institutions are progressively based on DEI standards, compelling universities to perform, gain a competitive edge, and deliver tangible outcomes (Duarte et al., 2023). Some scholars argue that DEI is becoming a strategy for universities to achieve neoliberal objectives by enhancing their competitive advantage (Connell, 2019; Thompson & Zablotsky, 2016). Although these transformations do not encompass all academic aspects, they represent a new governing regime affecting power structures and academic life. While the coincidence of DEI initiatives and neoliberal changes does not imply causality, it underscores the need for contextualized analyses of DEI policies in academia. This article contributes to the field of DEI studies by providing a contextualized policy analysis.

Departing from the historical transformations of the HEI sector, this article employs Carol Bacchi’s “what’s the problem represented to be” (WPR) approach (Bacchi, 1999) to analyze the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Action Plan for 2020–2024 (hereafter referred to “as the Plan”) adopted by UiT The Arctic University of Norway (UiT, 2020a). We challenge conventional views of policy, such as those by Dudley and Vidovich (1995) and Fischer and Miller (2017), who see policy as a response to pre-existing problems, i.e., as proposals to address problems “out there,” and policy analysis as contributions to defining the best solutions. Drawing on Bacchi (2012) and Bacchi and Goodwin (2016), we instead argue that “policy problems” do not objectively exist “out there” but are represented in certain ways in policy, thereby rendering the problem definition inseparable from the problem solution. Thus, it is the problem representations that require scrutiny. We hence interrogate the Plan to uncover how the problem of inequality in academia is represented and analyze the assumptions underlying this representation. Our exploration is guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the “problem of DEI” represented to be in the Plan?
2. What presumptions underlie the problem representations?
3. How did DEI policy develop, and how has it evolved at the university?

In what follows, we outline our application of the WPR approach to the analysis and explore potential frames and levels of operations in DEI policy discourses in European and Norwegian contexts. We then delve into the genealogy of the Plan and analyze the measures of the Plan relative to the frames and levels of operation to extract the problem representations. Finally, we discuss our findings, relating them to existing research literature, and conclude thereafter.

2. WPR and Its Applicability to DEI Policy

The title “dissecting discourses” highlights the centrality of “discourse” in our analysis. The WPR approach is particularly relevant here, as the signature of this critical policy analysis approach is a dissection of taken-for-granted assumptions and presuppositions of policy discourses. Unlike critical discourse analysis, which focuses on language usage (Fairclough, 2013), our understanding of “discourse” in this analysis is Foucauldian, emphasizing the knowledge/power dynamics that define problems and constrain normative debate (Bacchi, 2009; Foucault, 1972). An important distinction between the two is that “discourse analysis” (Fairclough, 2013) examines language and its usage in text, while “analysis of discourses” (Bacchi, 2009; Foucault, 1972) in WPR analysis critically reflects on how problems are constructed and represented in policies as discourses/knowledge. Hence, discourses are “forms of social knowledge that make it difficult to speak outside the terms of reference they establish for thinking about people and social relations” (Bacchi, 2009, p. 35). What we opt for with a WPR analysis is, therefore, to analyze and understand the thinking that underpins problem representations in policy documents and the consequences the problem representations might have. Understanding discourse in this way consequently means that other representations of the problem are possible, that other representations can produce other effects in practice, and that competing discourses might operate concurrently. When doing a comprehensive WPR analysis, the researcher’s job is, therefore, to analyze and understand the dominating discourses/knowledge, how they produce problems, and the effects of these problem representations. To make our policy analysis doable within a limited journal article space, we use selected elements of the WPR approach, namely: problem representations; underlying presumptions; and the emergence and evolution of the DEI policy (genealogy), whereas we only slightly touch upon the effects of the representations.

Following the WPR framework, the way we perceive and think about phenomena determines what we think should be done with them, and policy proposals are made accordingly. Thus, proposed solutions contain an explicit or implicit diagnosis of the problem or representation of the problem, and indicate what needs to be changed and, consequently, how the problem is perceived (Bacchi, 2009). Therefore, the proposed solutions become the starting point for the analysis, with the suggested solutions as clues for the analysis of problem representations.

Using WPR as both theory and methodology, we analyze the UiT GEP to construe the main problem representations of the DEI problem over time, examining the underlying assumptions. We trace the historical development of knowledge dynamics that have established certain discourses as dominant in institutional policy. But before we come to the Norwegian case, we review suggested frameworks and levels of operation in DEI policy discourses as they are described in the literature and then situate DEI policy within a European context.

3. Frames and Levels of Operation in DEI Policy Discourses

Various frames of operation guide the problematization of policy issues and the corresponding measures. “Frames” here refer to the process of stating what the problem is, what and whose needs are addressed, and which solutions are deemed appropriate. Each frame is attached to a theoretical perspective on DEI, adopting a corresponding approach to address the identified problem. These frames do not usually stand

alone but rather complement each other. In academia, the DEI discourse is largely construed in three common frames (see Huisman et al., 2002; Nielsen, 2017; Pitts, 2007; Probert, 2005; Timmers et al., 2010):

1. Fixing the individuals;
2. Creating equal opportunities;
3. Revising the existing organizational culture.

In the “fixing the individuals” framework, the problem is attributed to individuals’ attributes such as ambition, motivation, experience, and merit (Nielsen, 2017, p. 299). Solutions are usually affirmative action measures, skills development, mentorship, and training. In the “creating equal opportunities” framework, measures entail challenging the unequal and biased structural settings that hinder people from excelling. The measures include more balanced DEI evaluation committees and appointing women to certain positions to address the structural barriers to women’s advancement and correct the discriminatory nature of existing hiring processes (Nielsen, 2017, p. 303). The “revising organizational culture” framework tackles restructuring organizational practices, systems, norms, values, and factors that perpetuate inequalities and aims to address the historically male-dominated arrangements within organizations (Nielsen, 2017, p. 300).

Corresponding with the frames of operation, Timmers et al. (2010, pp. 720–722) established three levels of operation:

1. The individual;
2. The structural;
3. The cultural.

At the individual level, the measures focus on integrating women into the university by addressing individual factors and barriers that affect career choices and work orientation. Traditionally, women are stereotypically perceived to lack desirable attributes to execute leadership duties. Consequently, interventions like mentorship and training courses are implemented to address these assumed deficiencies. At the structural level, the barriers concerning the nature of organizational structures are tackled to create an equal structure of opportunities for both men and women. Culturally, the focus is on historical and ideological factors within HEIs, such as values and practices that govern how people should behave in society. Corresponding measures aim at revising organizational culture to address these issues.

In analyzing the UiT’s DEI policy, we utilize the aforementioned framing model to categorize the policy proposals. We begin by exploring DEI policy in a European context, followed by a focus on the Norwegian context, ultimately justifying our selection of the Plan as our empirical material. Through the WPR analysis of the Plan, we identify a set of problem representations, which we then discuss against the general literature on DEI policy in academia.

4. DEI Policy in a European Context

Gender equality is one of the six European research area priorities, resulting in numerous EU-funded research projects with a gender equality approach. To qualify for research grants, HEIs are obliged to have GEPs, and all research funding applications must demonstrate how the ambition of gender equality is

projected in their respective projects. The plans should contain recruitment criteria, career progress, work–life balance, leadership and decision-making, organizational culture, gender in research and educational practice, and gender-related harassment (Rosa & Clavero, 2022, p. 2). This points to what Ahmed (2007) asserts: That the GEPs might become instrumental in gaining research funding rather than serving as strategies for achieving gender equality in practice, thereby nuancing the connection between DEI policy and the neoliberal transformations occurring in academia.

According to the European Commission (2014), GEPs tend to rely on broad forms of categorization that do not capture the complexity and details of what gender equality and diversity might entail. Some research literature supports this critique, for example, Tzanakou and Pearce (2019) argue that institutional actors have been preoccupied with liberal practices, such as mentoring, and training programs geared towards women, with a focus on how effective the gender equality interventions could be in transforming and adjusting organizations to new managerial demands. However, the arrangement of the interventions has mainly been about “fixing women” and has not challenged the structural and cultural barriers (Acker, 1990; Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Moreover, some of the well-written policy documents have been labeled as mere marketing appeals, enabling universities to promote themselves as spaces where differences are celebrated (Ahmed, 2007). “As tools, they look wonderful, yet they obscure and conceal inequalities” (Ahmed, 2007, p. 606). Studies on organizational diversity documents in the UK also show that the documents are often “empty shells” with no definite actions and initiatives (Hoque & Noon, 2004). Unfortunately, the gender equality interventions that have adjusted to the critique from the European Commission and included more complex understandings of gender equality face operationalization and implementation challenges due to the complexity of the interventions (Evans, 2014).

The DEI discourse in contemporary scholarly work (e.g., Rosa & Clavero, 2022; Silander et al., 2021; Suboticki & Sørensen, 2023; Timmers et al., 2010) examines and establishes discrepancies in the general impact and efficiency of DEI policies in attaining gender balance and equality. One example is the efficacy study of DEI policies by Timmers et al. (2010) that established that policy proposals are characterized by inconsistent coordination and inadequate support from lower-level units of the university, plus skepticism and lack of evaluations (p. 731). However, the study also established that there is a positive relationship between policy measures and a reduction of the glass ceiling, and there is an increase in the proportion of women professors attributed to DEI measures (Timmers et al., 2010, p. 719). Hence, the research community is seemingly critical of how DEI measures are implemented, rather than towards the DEI initiatives. DEI policies are steadily discussed, but the critiques doubt the effects of the measures. In Norway, however, the case appears differently.

5. The Case of Norway

Due to the long tradition of pursuing gender equality in Norway in general, but also in the HEI sector, we chose to use Norway as the case for this article. Norway is ranked as the third most gender-equal country in the world (World Economic Forum, 2021, p. 10) and as a Nordic welfare state that has employed the most comprehensive policy approach to address gender inequalities in academia (Husu, 2001). This means that we have situated the study in a “gender-friendly” context and purposely chosen an extreme case for this study. We not only operate within a gender friendly context but also one that has a long history of GEP initiatives and experiences to draw on. In this respect, we note with interest that there are far more male than female

professors in Norway and that men hold a clear majority of management and other key positions in academia (Research Council of Norway, 2019, p. 7). This observation speaks to a scientific curiosity about what the DEI problem might be in this gender friendly society, which the GEP/DEI policies try to solve.

The policy measures are suggested solutions to this hard, explainable problem. To effectuate the efforts, the Norwegian Government established the Committee for Integration Measures—Women in Research in 2004, which changed its name to Committee for Gender Balance in Research in 2010, and in 2014 to its current name Committee for Gender Balance and Diversity in Research (KIF, 2022). This change of name indicates a shift in governmental policy from “women” via “gender balance” to “diversity,” signifying a shift in what the problem of equality in academia is represented to be in Norway. In the introduction to this article, we argued that this shift within the European context was mere rhetoric, as “diversity” tended to still be understood as “women.” In what follows, we dive further into this issue with the Norwegian case, where all HEIs, including the Research Council of Norway, are obliged to have an active knowledge-based policy for DEI and are recommended to seek advice from the KIF committee.

5.1. UiT The Arctic University of Norway Excelling in the DEI Class

In addition to the history of gender equality work at UiT that stretches back to the 1990s, beginning long before it became a requirement from the Norwegian Government, we chose UiT because the policy has been successful based on some core parameters. For example, the proportion of female professors rose from nearly zero percent in the early 1990s to almost 40% in 2019 (Duarte et al., 2020). This represented a leap from last place to the top of the HEI class regarding female professors. However, we do not claim that UiT is the best in class, but that this success is a good place to start our analysis because a success story has more to say about the complexity of the successes and failures.

5.2. The History of UiT Equality Policy

Shortly after its establishment in 1972, UiT earned the nickname “the Red University” due to its attraction of radical students and staff who influenced its teaching and governing. Many staff members were politically left-wing, prioritizing academic freedom institutionally and individually, fostering a participative culture and university democracy. However, this ideal had a clear gendered flip side: women were significantly underrepresented among the professors, despite a rise in female associate professors and societal support for gender equality. The problem was partly systemic, as professorships were limited to government-appointed positions, requiring retirement before new appointments, a system perceived as inflexible and unfair. In the late 1980s, the Labor Party Government initiated reforms, and by 1993, new regulations allowed associate professors to apply for professorships based on merit. This structural reform significantly improved women’s opportunities for obtaining professorships. Although not primarily aimed at women, the reform was influenced by the contemporary gender equality policy, highlighting the previous system’s disadvantage to female academics and the need to increase the number of female professors. The presumption was that the new model would enhance gender balance, as noted by Kyvik et al. (2003, p. 13):

The committee pointed out that women with families are usually less mobile than men in a similar situation and that there were probably many women who had refused to apply for top positions for

such reasons. Promotion based on competence would provide a better opportunity for the individual to take charge of and plan their own career, which the committee believed would be an important equality measure. (authors' translation from Norwegian)

At the time, the equality problem was seen as an amalgamation of structural and individual factors. The proposed solution focused on structural change, allowing professorships to be earned by merit, with the expectation that this would enhance gender equality. However, no measures were suggested to address women's domestic situations or their impact on workplace dynamics. Instead, the approach was to "fix the (university) structure" to create an environment where women would succeed.

When the new promotion model was adopted, many female associate professors were eager to apply for promotion. However, from 1994 to 2004, the increase in female professors fell short of expectations for achieving gender balance. To accelerate progress, the university administration implemented a mentoring program for female associate professors (Kilden, 2004) designed to support women in attaining professorships. This individualized effort proved successful, leading to nearly 40% of female professors by 2019 (Duarte et al., 2020). As of the time of writing this article, the program, known as *Opprykksprosjektet* (the promotion project), continues, even though the percentage of female professors exceeded the 40% goal by 2023 (Prestige Project, 2023). The problem representation remained the same as the previous one, identifying a mix of structural issues and women's disadvantaged positions. However, the solution (mentoring program) marked a shift towards individualized solutions, as structural change alone had not achieved the desired gender equality. Mentoring in this context was framed as an individualized "fixing women" solution, despite the recognition that gender inequality was a structural issue. Thus, an individualized measure was presumed to address a structural problem, suggesting that the institution, rather than the women, was responsible for gender inequality.

Another individualized initiative was an adjunct professor program, designed to improve gender balance at UiT and increase the positions for women. The underlying assumption was that a greater presence of women would enhance research quality by leveraging the capabilities of both genders. At this juncture, gender equality was framed as a matter of human resources, specifically, tapping into "the good brains." This represents a shift in the discourse towards "utility," embracing the "resource argument," where gender equality is seen as a strategy for the University's success. This contrasts with earlier views where gender equality policy addressed "unfairness for women" and "women's disadvantages." Consequently, the new discourse produced women academics as tools for the University's success.

5.3. The Emergence of GEPs at UiT

With the shift from focusing on "women's disadvantage" to "gender equality," which included increased attention to men both in academia and Norwegian society, the University Board adopted its first GEP for 2010–2015 in 2009. This was followed by the 2015–2020 and the 2020–2024 action plan, upon which our analysis is based. However, as we were finalizing the analysis of this article, a new plan for 2024–2026 (UiT, 2024) was adopted, but this plan is not included in our analysis due to timing constraints.

The 2010–2015 GEP aimed to enhance gender equality across levels, from students and employees to administration and leadership. The 2015–2020 GEP focused on creating an "equal and inclusive working

environment,” providing “good arrangements for competence and career development,” and fostering a “culture of excellent management and teamwork” (UiT, 2015). During this period, assumptions about a positive relationship between mixed-gender environments and improved working conditions became prominent. For example:

At the institutional level, each gender should be allocated at least 40 percent of the entry-level positions. (UiT, 2015, p. 2, authors’ translation from Norwegian)

UiT shall strive to provide good role models of both genders for employees and students. (UiT, 2015, p. 3, authors’ translation from Norwegian)

In the 1990s and 2000s, the fairness discourse dominated DEI policy initiatives, framing the equality problem as the unfairness of women’s underrepresentation in scientific and leadership positions, making women the primary focus of the policies. However, the gradual shift towards the utility discourse in the 2010s, evident both at UiT and in broader society, led to a “conflict” between the two discourses. These discourses offered differing problem representations and approaches to discussing the “problem.”

The utility discourse produced gender equality as a tool for achieving objectives other than gender equality as a goal on its own terms. This shift coincides with the growing demands on the HEI sector since the 2000s, to enhance efficiency, increase output, and reduce costs. Like other public sectors in Norway, the HEI sector is expected to adopt New Public Management principles, adhering to neoliberal ideals of optimization, rationalization, and commercialization (Ball, 2012; Poutanen, 2023).

6. Problem Representations in the Plan

The University Board adopted the Plan on February 5, 2020 (UiT, 2020a). Although the KIF committee’s mandate shifted towards gender balance and diversity in 2014, UiT’s DEI policy did not reflect this change until the adoption of the Plan. According to the case presentation to the University Board, the extension of the target group beyond gender was driven by new governmental requirements for all universities and other public institutions to address discrimination across all grounds outlined in the new Equality and Anti-discrimination Act (UiT, 2020b). The Plan was grounded in the university’s commitment to academic freedom and its vision of being a “safe space” where everyone can learn, teach, develop, and express themselves without fearing discrimination, as the Plan states:

No one shall experience discrimination, including based on their ethnicity, nationality, language, religion and life stance, functional ability, sexual orientation, or gender identity. (UiT, 2020a, p. 2)

The goals were:

To prevent sexual harassment, increase the proportion of female professors to forty percent, improve gender balance in study programmes with uneven representation, render visible gender and diversity perspectives in research and teaching, make use of role models to strengthen diversity, and employ disabled people. (UiT, 2020a, p. 2)

The Plan also addresses new requirements from Horizon Europe and the Research Council of Norway, mandating research institutions to maintain an active GEP. While the Plan is essential for external funding, it also emphasizes the goal of fair treatment for all students and employees, suggesting that fairness policies survived the general nonlinearization trends in society. The introduction (p. 2) reveals that both the utility and fairness discourses coexist within the Plan. It is a comprehensive document featuring nine main measures and over sixty sub-measures.

To better understand the suggested policy solutions—and to analyze how these solutions shaped the identification of “policy problems”—we meticulously reviewed the document, identifying and highlighting all proposed solutions. Since a WPR analysis starts with pinpointing solutions to comprehend problem representation, our initial task was to identify all solutions within the document. We then categorized the solutions by topic, resulting in five meaningful categories: recruitment; career development; governance and management; working environment; and research and teaching. In the subsequent analysis phase, we aligned the five categories with the three previously outlined operational levels (see Timmers et al., 2010, pp. 720–722), ultimately consolidating them into four final categories:

1. Individual level: Recruitment and career development;
2. Structural level: Governance and management;
3. Cultural level: Working environment.

At this point, we realized that all policy measures in the above categories pertained to the terms and conditions of work and study for employees and students at the university, rather than the content of their work or studies. We then deduced that the measures related to research and teaching needed a distinct operational category, which we termed “epistemological” as a fourth level:

4. Epistemological level: Research and teaching content.

Unlike the above three levels, the fourth level is not prominently featured in existing research literature. It emerged from our analysis of the measures outlined in the Plan and is, therefore, a main contribution to this field of research.

With these categories of policy measures established, we proceeded to explore how the problem is represented within the Plan and to analyze the underlying assumptions of the representation.

6.1. Individual Level: Recruitment and Career Development

At this level, we focused on identifying measures related to individual capabilities, abilities, competencies, and opportunities for personal growth. The solutions exhibiting these characteristics were linked to the thematic areas of recruitment and career development for employees at the university:

The university shall offer women in academic environments with a low proportion of women and women who have the potential to achieve personal promotion to professor...the opportunity to participate in a promotion project. (UiT, 2020a, p. 3)

Offer competence enhancement measures to women to use in technical and administrative positions who qualify for management positions. (UiT, 2020a, p. 3)

These solutions manifested as initiatives such as promotion routines, mentorship, network building, media training, and writing workshops, all designed to enhance women's competencies for management/leadership roles. The underlying presumption of these policy measures is that women lack certain attributes necessary for those positions, necessitating training to acquire the missing skills. If women possessed these attributes, such measures would be unnecessary. Consequently, the problem is represented as inadequate leadership or professorship capabilities among women. Thus, to promote fairness between men and women, these inadequacies need to be "fixed." In alignment with the fairness approach, the plan further states:

UiT shall have a life-phase policy that facilitates a good balance between careers and family commitments. (UiT, 2020a, p. 3)

During the recruitment of women to faculties/units with a particularly low proportion of women, start packages consisting of grants, post-docs, and/or extra working capital might be used, (UiT, 2020a, p. 3)

These quotes suggest that structural solutions are still being used to fix individual challenges, reflecting a fairness approach like that of the 1980s, as discussed in Section 5.2. We see, though, that the Plan acknowledges the need for "balance between career and family commitment," for both male and female employees, indicating that family responsibilities are shared among genders and are not solely a barrier to women's careers. Because the Plan emphasizes work-life balance and targeted recruitment measures for women, we deduce the problem to be a difficulty of balancing career and family, insufficient effort to recruit women to male-dominated units, and job postings that fail to attract underrepresented genders.

6.2. Structural Level: Governance and Management

Here, we explored measures addressing structural phenomena, including organizational aspects, leadership structures, responsibility distribution, funding, evaluation procedures, and human resource policies. These elements are linked to administrative and management tools and practices:

The work involving equality and diversity shall be included as a theme in governance dialogue with faculties and units. (UiT, 2020a, p. 2)

Develop an overview of indicators that describe the state of work involving diversity and inclusion. (UiT, 2020a, p. 4)

The measures in this category focus on institutional management, implementation, visibility, and DEI evaluation initiatives. The key measures include funding DEI work, engaging faculty and trade unions in DEI work, integrating DEI efforts in the university's annual reports, concretizing activity plans, and reporting activities to the Ministry of Education and Research. Additionally, it involves conducting DEI training workshops for human resources and management and establishing an "equality and diversity committee" with a "broad representation that reflects the committee's areas of work" (UiT, 2020a, p. 2).

At this level, the problem representation is produced as an inadequate organization of DEI work, necessitating the establishment of a new unit for DEI work and a clear distribution of responsibilities among trade unions, management, and leadership at all levels. There is also a lack of knowledge and competencies in DEI issues, highlighting the need for training responsible actors, as well as insufficient funding and the invisibility of DEI work. In essence, the problem is represented as inadequate organizational preparedness to address DEI issues. However, the University Board's adoption of the Plan signals a commitment to resolving the problem through targeted measures. By raising awareness and knowledge of DEI among management and key stakeholders and ensuring that faculty and trade unions are actively involved with sufficient funding, it is presumed that DEI can be realized at the university.

6.3. Cultural Level: Working Environment

At this level, we searched for measures/solutions related to working conditions and study culture for both students and employees:

Make a template for an introductory meeting with new employees that includes information about risk situations, zero tolerance of harassment, and notification procedures. (UiT, 2020a, p. 3)

Create a working environment for students and employees that is safe and inclusive, regardless of gender identity and gender expression. (UiT, 2020a, p. 4)

The quotes highlight situations and risks that students and staff need to be made aware of, emphasizing the university's responsibility in these areas. Concrete measures include offering Norwegian language courses for non-Norwegians, reception programs for international students and employees, and celebrating significant events like International Women's Day, Sami National Day, and the PRIDE parade. These initiatives aim to leverage diversity among students and staff and showcase UiT as an international university. The measures are primarily collective, aiming at transforming the university into a "safe space" for all.

At the cultural level, the problem is represented as an unsafe environment, particularly for the target group of the DEI policy, which requires attention. The problem stems from a lack of awareness and information about risk situations and reporting mechanisms among new employees and students, difficulties in understanding the Norwegian language, and insufficient information on sexual diversity. The underlying assumption is that increasing awareness among new employees and students curbs harassment and encourages victims to report incidents. Additionally, understanding the Norwegian language fosters inclusion, and celebrating important events embraces diversity, including sexual diversity. Collectively, these efforts aim to cultivate a "safe" university culture.

6.4. Epistemological Level: Research and Teaching Content

The residual categories of our analysis, those measures not fitting into the three analytical levels we found in the research literature, were far too important for DEI to be ignored. What and how teachers teach, what and how students learn, is about epistemic diversity and justice. The content of research, teaching, and learning needs more attention in DEI work. We found some measures in the Plan:

Work to strengthen and render visible gender and diversity perspectives in research and teaching. (UiT, 2020a, p. 3)

Focus on the syllabus and reading lists to assess whether various gender perspectives and/or female role models are included in the subjects' academic development. (UiT, 2020a, p. 3)

In these quotes, the Plan highlights solutions such as “strengthening, rendering visible, focusing, assessing, and including” DEI perspectives in teaching and research. These policy solutions suggest a lack of clarity regarding the extent to which DEI perspectives are integrated into the syllabi and reading material, highlighting the need for assessment. Additionally, DEI perspectives are perceived as insufficiently visible in research and teaching, necessitating their increased visibility. An underlying assumption is that their satisfactory inclusion and visibility can lead to equality. However, the Plan does not specify how these included and visible perspectives will translate into equality, nor does it address the consequences of whether DEI perspectives are found lacking in the teaching content. Furthermore, the Plan does not substantiate what “inclusion” encompasses in this context. Thus, the epistemological level appears as a less developed part of the Plan, with unsubstantiated measures.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

This article aimed at exploring what the problem of DEI is represented to be in the GEP/DEI policy of UiT, the presumptions underlying the problem representation, and the policy development and evolution. The discourse in previous studies generally highlights the DEI problem as the underrepresentation of women in professorship/leadership positions and gender imbalances in academic programs due to gender-skewed choices (Nielsen, 2017; Silander et al., 2021; Timmers et al., 2010). The research literature also highlights affirmative action measures such as mentorship, training programs, and role modeling as solutions to attain gender equality. Our findings corroborate previous research, indicating persistent underrepresentation of women at the professorship and leadership levels, with affirmative action as a key remedy. However, our analysis reveals more nuanced problem representations, including inadequate leadership skills among women, career and family balance difficulties, insufficient funding for DEI work, lack of institutional management orientation on DEI work, unattractive recruitment announcements, a language barrier that hinders inclusion of non-Norwegians, insufficient sexual diversity information, DEI invisibility in university annual reports, and no proper overview of the inclusion of DEI perspectives in research and teaching content.

However, there are reasons to question some of the presumptions underlying the problem representations. For example, the strong emphasis on mentoring and leadership training for women indicates an understanding of women in academia as less capable than men, and therefore, necessitating training and nurturing to acquire the missing skills. Consequently, women are portrayed as the problem in the Plan, with solutions being individualized. This, furthermore, creates “capability” as a leadership and professorship attribute that the underrepresented groups (in this case, women) are presumed to lack. By framing the problem this way, leadership success is portrayed as dependent on specific capabilities. Hence, the problem representation produces discursive effects, that is, how we think and talk about phenomena; subjectification effects, that is, who we might be; and real-life effects, that is, how we might live (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, pp. 49, 65, 69).

Comparatively, the Plan does not propose similar measures for men to enhance their “capabilities,” suggesting that men are presumed to possess these skills inherently. This indicates that women’s capabilities are assessed based on their ability to conform to a male-dominated society rather than their individual academic and leadership prowess, thereby reinforcing traditional gender biases. Lipton (2021) notes that “academic women are not simply judged on other meritocratic performance as scholars but rather subjective standards of how well they fit into the masculine culture of the contemporary university” (p. 768). While equipping women with leadership skills is ideally not a bad idea, it becomes problematic if men are not explicitly part of those efforts. Assuming men already possess the necessary leadership skills, we may ask whether there is space, effort, and will to unlearn historical tendencies and integrate the “trained newcomers” (women) into leadership roles. Are men a governable group who will naturally and easily relinquish their “privileges”? This cannot be taken for granted but must be questioned (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 50). Thus, the process of reconciling power dynamics, shifting positions, and altering social relations to achieve gender equality remains inadequately addressed in the policy problem representation. Initiatives aimed at gender equality in academia, focusing on individual women, and grounded in feminist principles and broader understandings of gender inequality, represent substantial effort (De Vries & Van Den Brink, 2016; Magnussen et al., 2022). However, these efforts should be complemented by practices that challenge the subtle reproduction of gendered and other differences.

Our analysis reveals several taken-for-granted issues in how the Plan represents the problem of DEI. Firstly, the Plan construes “gender” as a fixed category, assigning value to either male or female, which overlooks the dynamic nature of gender as involving “relations of power and conflict” (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 65) and ignores its evolution beyond binary definitions. Secondly, the categories “men” and “women” are portrayed as homogenous groups. This approach, described by Bacchi (1999, p. 48) as the “pluralist model,” can obscure injustices within sub-groups, leaving critical questions unaddressed (Bacchi, 1999, p. 94). For instance, a woman of color facing oppression in university spaces may experience sexual or racial discrimination, or both (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149), necessitating an intersectional analysis to fully comprehend her situation. Similarly, representing men as a single group conceals the reality that, despite being perceived as more privileged than women, men do not always enjoy privilege in all social contexts, and such representations can obscure the costs associated with perceived privilege (Magnussen, 2019, p. 133). Therefore, discrimination and inequalities in academia are complex and multifaceted, reflecting the diverse nature of individuals, which cannot be understood in a unidirectional manner (Losleben & Musubika, 2023).

In examining approaches to equality within the Plan’s genealogical history, both fairness and utility approaches have been evident. However, the utility approach has gained prominence in neoliberal times as public universities increasingly adopt market logic to accommodate new priorities (Bleiklie, 2018; Connell, 2019). These priorities include accountability for public resources, return on investment, performance-driven systems, excellence, competitiveness (Poutanen, 2023, pp. 625–626), political visibility, and the growing importance of research for economic prosperity (Bleiklie, 2018, p. 1). We see that the simultaneous presence of DEI initiatives and neoliberal changes suggests mutual influence. For instance, to align with neoliberal trends, universities spectacularly showcase performativity and productivity to secure more research grants and attract students. Additionally, local and international university rankings increasingly incorporate DEI standards, pressuring universities to double their DEI efforts, gain a competitive edge, and deliver tangible outcomes (Duarte et al., 2023). But for universities to secure more research grants, they must explicitly demonstrate how DEI perspectives are integrated into both the content of research

projects and the representation of human resources within research teams (Duarte et al., 2023, p. 2). However, this performativity logic tends to drive policy efforts, values, and purposes towards policy proposals that facilitate such ambition, potentially hindering the fundamental goal of advancing DEI (Ahmed, 2007; Tzanakou, 2019). Connell (2019) and Thompson and Zablotsky (2016) suggest that some universities may manipulate DEI strategies to fulfill neoliberal objectives, focusing less on practical DEI implementation. While we do not assert this occurs at UiT, our analysis indicates that the Plan's emphasis on utilizing all talents and maximizing "good brains" reflects neoliberal tendencies. Briefly, this focus also protrudes through the new DEI plan for UiT (2024), underscoring the "maximization effect" of resources and talent in contemporary times.

While previous research identifies three levels of operation in DEI policy—individual, structural, and cultural (Nielsen, 2017; Timmers et al., 2010)—our analysis introduces a fourth level, the epistemological level, which focuses on the content of research and teaching. While the existing levels address DEI perspectives in terms and conditions of the operation of work and study, our dimension addresses DEI in study and research material. The methods and content of teaching and learning influence educational outcomes; thus, addressing both epistemic and human diversity in DEI policy and university practices is crucial for enacting and achieving equality. Unfortunately, the problem representation in the Plan lacks a comprehensive overview of the extent to which DEI perspectives are included in the syllabi and reading materials, despite highlighting the need to assess the extent of their inclusion in study content. With this finding, we contribute to DEI policy research with a proposed extension of the policy operational framework to include academic content, teachers, and students' everyday practices in learning. To transform universities into inclusive spaces, policy operational frameworks must be holistic, addressing individual, structural, cultural, and epistemic aspects, given the university's role in learning and knowledge production. Therefore, the epistemic dimension must be addressed with concrete measures beyond mere assessment of the absence or presence of DEI perspectives. It must specify what should be included in the study content, how it will be done, and how this will foster equality.

To conclude, despite the clear shift towards the utility argumentation in the previous plans, we see a more nuanced argumentation of the coexistence of both utility and fairness in the 2020–2024 DEI action plan, but also a more complex understanding of the organizational aspects of the equality problems. These nuances became apparent in the variety of solutions at all the identified levels. However, the UiT Plan predominantly deals with gender equality, with limited focus on diversity, despite its change of name from the Gender Equality Plan (2015–2020) to Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Action Plan 2020–2024. Many diversity measures lack clarity and detailed directives, such as the vague guideline "have information about how to support people who are in a process of changing gender identity" (UiT, 2020a, p. 4), which does not specify how this information should be obtained, utilized, and to what end. Further research is hence needed to explore how policy problem representations incorporate the changing fluidity in gender and other differentiating categories. Additionally, there is a need to examine how DEI policies can navigate the growing neoliberalization of academia, which may obscure the fundamental goal of promoting DEI. Overall, more critical and intersectional policy research is required.

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Data Availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

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From Authoritative Voices to Dialogical Policy-Making: How Norwegian Universities Navigate Diversity Implementation

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Abstract

This article examines how Norwegian universities implement gender equality and diversity policies through a Bakhtinian dialogical lens. Using document analysis of action plans from four major universities and interviews with 19 department heads and research group leaders, we trace how authoritative voices from external policymakers are transformed as they move from institutional plans to local implementation. The study reveals a fundamental shift from top-down policy transmission to distributed dialogical sense-making. While university action plans echo external directives by adopting expansive diversity definitions, they paradoxically create “authoritative polyphony,” messages too diffuse to enable meaningful local response. Our analysis identifies three patterns of local engagement: active resistance, where leaders contest institutional messages based on situated knowledge; interpretative paralysis, where unclear directives create obligation without actionable understanding; and creative transformations, where leaders reframe diversity through personal experiences and academic identities. When institutional guidance proves insufficient, local leaders draw upon two primary interpretative resources: embodied knowledge of inclusion and exclusion from personal experiences, and scholarly frameworks that reframe diversity through academic lenses. This process creates what we term “dialogical delegation,” a tacit transfer of interpretative authority from institutions to individuals without corresponding support. The findings demonstrate how “doing diversity” becomes an active dialogical process where authentic diversity strategies emerge through countless individual interpretative acts rather than centralised planning. This reveals both the limitations of broad institutional diversity policies and the emergence of alternative governance forms where meaning-making authority becomes distributed across organisational hierarchies, with significant implications for policy implementation theory and diversity governance.

Keywords

Bakhtin; dialogical analysis; diversity policy; higher education; policy implementation

1. Introduction

Gender equality and diversity have become central concerns in higher education, with a growing emphasis on creating inclusive environments that reflect the diversity of society. Institutions face the challenge of implementing diversity initiatives that comply with legal requirements and effectively promote inclusion and belonging. However, research suggests a significant gap between institutional diversity policies and their local implementation (Ahmed, 2012; Lagesen, 2021; Lagesen & Suboticki, 2024; Ní Laoire et al., 2021). This article examines how Norwegian universities navigate this implementation challenge, revealing a fundamental transformation from top-down policy transmission to distributed dialogical meaning-making.

Instead of viewing policy implementation as a simple transmission, we utilise Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "voices" (Bakhtin, 1986, 2010; see also Maybin, 2001) to comprehend how diversity policies are dialogically constructed through continuous interactions among external mandates, institutional plans, and local interpretations. Authoritative political views refer to the substantive policy positions of governmental and institutional actors. However, we focus on how local leaders communicate, interpret, and enact these views. Bakhtin's concept highlights the dialogical nature of policies, allowing us to both trace how authoritative messages are transformed through local interpretation and demonstrate how local actors actively respond to, modify, and occasionally resist external directives.

This study examines Norwegian universities through two analytical steps. First, we analyse centrally created equality and diversity plans to understand how they echo and transform external authoritative voices. Second, we investigate how department heads and research group leaders interpret and respond to these institutional messages while "doing diversity" in their daily leadership practices. Thus, this study provides insights into how local leaders engage with diversity in their daily work, highlighting the impact of central policies and how personal experiences and academic identities serve as interpretative resources.

The concept of "diversity" is multifaceted and has been explored through various lenses, including race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, age, and disability (Sim & Bierema, 2025). Research highlights the benefits of diverse teams for creativity and innovation, as well as the persistent challenges of achieving inclusive universities (Leišytė et al., 2021; Moreu et al., 2021). This multifaceted nature makes diversity particularly suitable for dialogical analysis, as its contested meanings require constant interpretative work by local actors navigating competing definitions and expectations.

Norway offers a compelling context for such investigation. It consistently ranks high in international gender equality indices (World Economic Forum, 2023) and has implemented more extensive gender equality policies in higher education than the other Nordic countries (Drange et al., 2023; Husu, 2015). However, this policy-rich environment creates complex dialogical challenges, as universities must respond to multiple authoritative voices while maintaining academic freedom.

This article explores how national goals and policies influence how universities define and address gender and diversity. It is inspired by ethnomethodological theories of "doing difference" (West & Fenstermaker, 1995) and Bakhtin's concept of voices (Maybin, 2001). Our analysis reveals that contemporary diversity governance operates through what we term "dialogical delegation"—a tacit transfer of interpretative authority from institutions to individuals without corresponding support. This has implications for

understanding how organisations navigate the tension between institutional authority and distributed interpretative work.

2. Theory: Dialogism and Doing Diversity

Our analysis draws inspiration from Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of voices within his broader theory of "dialogism" (Bakhtin, 2010; see also Jones, 2017). Dialogism is a concept introduced by Bakhtin that describes how meaning arises through the interaction and dialogue between different voices, perspectives, and discourses rather than from a single authoritative source. At its core, dialogism suggests that all language and meaning are inherently relational and social. Bakhtin argued that every utterance exists in dialogue with other utterances; it responds to previous statements, anticipates future responses, and is shaped by its social and ideological contexts. No word or statement exists in isolation; instead, meaning is generated through this ongoing conversation between various voices. Furthermore, Bakhtin distinguishes between authoritative and marginalised voices, aiding in the identification of dominant discourses (Maybin, 2001).

This concept offers a nuanced lens for analysing how department heads understand and engage with authoritative voices in gender and diversity policies. In Bakhtinian terms, voices carry the social, institutional, and ideological positions from which they speak (Jones, 2017). When department heads encounter diversity policies, they engage with broader constellations of embedded voices—from EU directives to national legislation to institutional priorities. This framework is especially valuable for analysing diversity concepts because these terms are inherently contested and multifaceted, requiring local actors to navigate competing definitions and expectations.

In our study, we identify three levels of dialogical interaction: external authoritative voices of policymakers; institutional voices of university action plans that attempt to translate external demands into local strategies; and responding voices of department heads who must interpret often ambiguous directives.

We combine Bakhtin's dialogism with West and Fenstermaker's (1995) concept of "doing difference," which extends their earlier work on "doing gender" (West & Zimmerman, 1987). This framework conceptualises social categories as ongoing accomplishments achieved through everyday interactions. "Doing difference" recognises that gender, race, and class are interconnected and mutually constitutive, intersecting in complex ways (Crenshaw, 1989). This combination allows us to analyse diversity work as an ongoing interactive process. While "doing difference" shows how social categories are performed in daily interactions, Bakhtin's concept of voices reveals how these performances are shaped by an ongoing dialogue between institutional directives and individual interpretation.

In our analysis, we trace the dialogical interaction of voices, highlighting how department heads respond to institutional messages not as passive recipients but as active interpreters who infuse their own experiences, identities, and local contexts into policy interpretation. Accordingly, we investigate "doing diversity" as an active interpretative process shaped by multiple intersecting voices. We ask:

1. How do Norwegian universities' gender equality and diversity action plans echo and transform the authoritative voices of national and European policy directives?

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2. How do department heads and research group leaders interpret and respond to the authoritative voices embedded in their institution's diversity policies when "doing diversity" in their daily leadership practices?

These questions allow us to trace the dialogical process from external policy formation through institutional translation to local implementation, revealing how authoritative messages are transformed and the resources local leaders rely on when institutional guidance proves insufficient.

3. Background: The Making of Authoritative Voices in Norway

Gender balance and equality in academia have gained significant attention in Norway since the 1970s. Several national policy instruments have been established to promote gender equality and diversity in research and higher education. This includes legislation and directives from the Ministry of Education and Research. Since 2004, the ministry has maintained a dedicated Committee for Gender Balance and Diversity in Research (the so-called KiF Committee), which provides support and recommendations to enhance gender equality and diversity in higher education and research institutions. Moreover, the Research Council of Norway has required Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) for funding applications since 2022. This initiative is inspired by the European Commission, which, under Horizon Europe, mandates that research and higher education organisations have GEPs to be eligible for funding. Furthermore, integrating gender considerations into research content is mandatory, and gender balance is emphasised in evaluation panels and advisory bodies in EU and Norway. These GEP requirements stipulate that plans must be adopted by top-level management, be publicly accessible on the institution's website, and refer to allocated resources for gender equality initiatives.

Numerous studies have examined how universities have implemented GEPs. For example, Clavero and Galligan (2021) analysed seven plans from European universities. They found that the lack of genuine commitment from senior management, combined with the persistence of gendered power dynamics, hindered success. Although the initiatives were well-received and had positive impacts, the study underscored their failure to address the deeper structural issues perpetuating gender inequality. According to Palmén and Schmidt (2019), numerous measures are required to facilitate better implementation of GEPs. In the Norwegian context, Tica (2021) investigated 48 research institutes, universities, and colleges and found that while they organised their gender equality and diversity efforts in various ways, action plans enhanced universities' ability to implement and sustain gender equality and diversity initiatives. Similarly, Egeland and Drange (2022) examined key stakeholders, including equality and diversity advisers, managers, and academic staff from five institutions (two universities, one university college, and two research institutes), and found that having dedicated equality and diversity advisers, action plans, and robust systems in place can significantly improve gender balance and diversity efforts.

However, Silander et al. (2024) argue that the primary strategies of the policies of Nordic countries aim at organisational transformation through so-called gender mainstreaming, which often depends on weak policy instruments, leaving implementation to institutions where action plans serve as a key instrument. While action plans may be performative, Ahmed (2012) contends that institutional speech acts, such as action plans, tend to be ineffective. Her critique highlights the disparity between what institutions say and what they do. This disparity can be revealed through an analysis of policy documents and the experiences of those within the institution.

Much scholarly work suggests that it is important to be aware of the potential gaps between the GEPs established by universities at the top level and the practices at the department level (Lagesen & Suboticki, 2022; Ní Laoire et al., 2021). We pursue this in our study using the aforementioned two-step approach.

3.1. A Discursive Shift in Norwegian Higher Education

Diversity issues within Norwegian higher education have historically centred predominantly on gender (Husu, 2015; Suboticki & Sørensen, 2022). However, over the past two decades, the discourse has expanded to include ethnic diversity and internationalisation, reflecting the emergence of new authoritative voices that have transformed the landscape of diversity. We understand this discursive shift as a response to factors that have created new demands for institutional attention.

The increasing presence of international researchers has warranted a greater focus on diversity. Currently, immigrants make up 34% of the academic workforce (Gunnes & Steine, 2020). Most come from Europe, the United States, and Australia, rather than Norwegian-born descendants of immigrants. This demographic shift has led to new authoritative voices demanding an institutional response.

First, government policy has clearly promoted this shift through authoritative directives emphasising diversity and gender equality. The government's long-term research and higher education plan from 2018 expresses that "the quality of higher education must be further enhanced. There must be greater recruitment of the best talents" and a concern that it is "still a long way to go in fully utilising the potential of the population as a whole, both in terms of diversity and in terms of gender balance in senior academic position" (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2018, p. 20). This requires deliberate efforts to promote equality and inclusion, establishing institutional obligations that universities must address through action plans.

Second, the growth of authoritative voices is evident in legislative changes. In 2017, the Equality Act became the Equality and Discrimination Act, prohibiting all forms of discrimination "on the basis of gender, pregnancy, leave in connection with childbirth or adoption, care responsibilities, ethnicity, religion, belief, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age or other significant characteristics of a person" (Ministry of Culture and Equality, 2017, §1, p. 1). This expansion introduced new authoritative demands on universities, including intensified activity and reporting requirements.

Third, the mandate of the KiF Committee illustrates the institutional broadening of the focus on "diversity." Initially centred on gender, ethnic diversity was incorporated into its mandate in 2014, followed by "social background" in 2022. The committee now analyses how gender, ethnic diversity, and social background "affect critical transitions in a research career" while functioning as "a driving force in the international work on gender balance and diversity" (Kifinfo, n.d.). This institutional evolution shows how authoritative voices multiply and interact over time.

3.2. Governance and Scholarly Influences

The shift toward diversity also reflects broader changes in academic governance that create new forms of authoritative pressure. Bråten and Mikalsen (2022) argue that diversity emphasis reflects goal-oriented management focused on efficiency, competition, and excellence. Sørensen (2019) identifies 16 reform

initiatives designed to “discipline universities” for greater efficiency, including governance forms where priority-setting is “pushed down the system to individual units and employees” (Sørensen & Traweek, 2022). According to Bråten and Mikalsen (2022), diversity desires can be interpreted as part of this “utopian form of governance.”

International scholarly developments have also contributed to authoritative voices that promote a focus on diversity. The feminist researchers’ concept of intersectionality has influenced policy development by emphasising how social categories overlap and create complex forms of discrimination and privilege (Acker, 2012; Carbado & Roithmayr, 2014; Orupabo, 2014; Rodriguez et al., 2016). Research has also highlighted the complex challenges international researchers face in Norwegian academia, including language requirements and employment discrimination (Flikke, 2024).

This evolution from gender to diversity represents a multiplication of authoritative voices that universities are expected to incorporate into their action plans. The increased discursive attention to diversity extends, rather than replaces, the focus on gender equality, creating complex dialogical challenges as institutions attempt to respond to multiple, sometimes competing demands. We investigate how these competing authoritative voices are managed in university action plans and how local leaders interpret and respond to these expanded diversity demands when institutional guidance proves inadequate.

The above review reveals that diversity is not merely a policy area but a site of competing authoritative voices. It sets the stage for examining how universities navigate these complex dialogical demands through their action plans and local implementation practices.

4. Method

The first step of our study involves analysing the action plans for equality and diversity at Norway’s four largest universities: Bergen, Oslo, Tromsø (the Arctic University of Norway), and Trondheim (NTNU Norwegian University of Science and Technology). The plans have been obtained from the universities’ websites. We analysed these documents by reviewing and contextualising their purpose, target group, and authorship (Bowen, 2009). Next, we examined the content of the plans (Prior, 2020). Content analysis emphasizes the presence and frequency of relevant textual elements, thus helping to identify the prevalence of specific themes or topics. Our primary focus was on how the action plans have responded to the demands from institutions and national policymaking, concentrating on content related to these concerns. Consequently, we analysed the plans by identifying which dimensions of diversity are mentioned, how often, and in what ways.

To investigate the local implementation of these plans, we conducted in-depth interviews with 19 department heads and research group leaders at the same four universities. We interviewed department heads because they are responsible for executing the university’s diversity policies. We also spoke with research group leaders, as they often occupy a middle management role between staff and department heads and can therefore address diversity issues. The selection of participants was strategic to ensure broad representation from various academic fields. The interviewees were drawn from the same disciplinary departments within each university’s faculties of humanities, social sciences, and STEM fields. Each faculty consists of five to nine departments. The interviews took place over a four-month period in 2023. Tables 1 and 2 provide an overview of the interview data.

Table 1. Interviewees according to gender and position.

Position	No. men	No. women	Total
Department heads	6	2	8
Group leaders/deputy heads	5	6	11
Total	11	8	19

Table 2. Interviewees according to gender and discipline.

Discipline	No. men	No. women	Total
Humanities	2	5	7
STEM	5	1	6
Social sciences	4	2	6
Total	11	8	19

All interviews were conducted individually by two of the co-authors, while a third co-author participated in some of them. The interview guide included open-ended questions about the definition of diversity, challenges and opportunities related to diversity, and specific measures and strategies for promoting diversity in academic environments. Each interview lasted an average of 60 minutes and was conducted via Teams or Zoom. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy in data analysis. We employed thematic analysis, coding and categorising the transcriptions to identify key themes and patterns.

We have anonymized the interviewees (as promised) by assigning them fictitious names. The first letter designates whether they are from the humanities (H), the STEM fields (R), or the social sciences (S). The Norwegian Centre for Research Data, which oversees ethical issues in the social sciences, approved our empirical approach. All interviewees provided informed written consent to participate before each interview, with the option to withdraw later.

As social science researchers employed at one of the universities included in this study, we acknowledge our insider status within the Norwegian higher education system. This positioning likely influenced our interviews: Participants may have felt more comfortable discussing institutional challenges, but may also have provided socially desirable responses given our institutional proximity. We attempted to mitigate these effects through careful interview design, focusing on concrete experiences and ensuring participants understood our role as researchers rather than evaluators. However, the prevalence of critical perspectives, explicit resistance to institutional policies, and candid admissions of uncertainty in our data suggest that social desirability bias did not substantially constrain participants' responses.

5. Analysis

5.1. *The Role of Authoritative Voices in the Universities' Action Plans*

In Norway, gender equality and diversity plans are typically crafted by the central administration, often by gender equality and diversity advisors (Egeland & Drange, 2022). Three of the four universities we study

have such advisors coordinating these efforts; the fourth employs a committee. Draft plans are circulated for consultation and formally adopted by the university boards or equality committees.

Many resources support plan development, particularly the KiF website, which provides a repository of action plans from all Norwegian academic institutions, plus scholarly literature and policy guidance. The Research Council of Norway's website offers similar resources, linking to European Commission materials.

Despite expecting local adaptation under advisor leadership, the four university plans show remarkably similar designs and structures. All align explicitly with the universities' main strategy plans and now clearly assign implementation responsibility—a European Commission funding requirement. With few exceptions, central administration, particularly HR units, bears responsibility for most measures, indicating a centralised diversity management (Silander et al., 2024). Department heads handle specific measures like: “Everyone with managerial responsibilities must set clear boundaries and signal clear expectations of mutual respect and good collegial behaviour” (NTNU, 2022, p. 23).

The plans demonstrate clear compliance with national legislation and policies. The Universities of Oslo and Bergen systematically structure their plans to meet external requirements, while the University of Tromsø's plan provides detailed explanations of compliance alignment.

5.2. Dialogical Transformation of External Voices

Drawing on Bakhtin's dialogism, we interpret this planning as echoing authoritative voices from national policymakers and the European Commission while extending beyond mere regulatory compliance. All plans include broad diversity definitions that encompass even more dimensions than external policy documents. The University of Tromsø's plan includes education level, life experiences, cultural background, work experience, competence, interests, family situation, minority experience, Indigenous status, national minority status, and underrepresented group membership. Gender remains significant, but alongside many other forms of diversity.

Some external authoritative voices prioritise gender equality, such as the Research Council of Norway and the European Commission. When universities' plans expand beyond this focus, it likely reflects broader perspectives from the Ministry of Education and the KiF Committee, which regularly meets with university leadership to discuss gender equality and diversity efforts while providing implementation advice.

However, the plans conceive diversity ambiguously. They clearly address discrimination, reflecting legislative requirements, while also responding to research showing that international staff often feel excluded and experience harassment. This ambivalence appears in frequent mentions of “inclusion” and “belonging.” Aligning with external voices, diversity is presented as both a benefit and a resource—something to pursue while leveraging existing diversity to attract talent and maximize employee potential. Thus, diversity sometimes appears as a quantitative measure of having “little” or “much.”

5.3. *Strategic Communication and Institutional Branding*

From a Bakhtinian perspective, the universities' action plans reveal complex dialogical processes where multiple authoritative voices interact and compete for influence. External voices—particularly from the European Commission, Research Council of Norway, and national legislation—are not simply adopted but actively engaged with and transformed. This dialogical engagement is evident in how universities expand beyond the gender focus of some external voices to embrace broader diversity definitions, suggesting an internal dialogue between compliance and institutional values.

The universities' expansive diversity definitions can be interpreted as dialogical responses to anticipated critical voices—preemptive engagement with potential exclusion claims from overlooked groups. This broad approach may also serve reputational functions, positioning universities as inclusive institutions in competitive higher education landscapes. The authoritative voice of diversity becomes intertwined with institutional branding, where demonstrating inclusion commitment serves external legitimacy as much as internal transformation. One university uses the slogan “Knowledge for a better world” to explicitly position itself as a social progress actor. Such messaging demonstrates how diversity policies function dialogically—responding to external authoritative voices while constructing institutional voices speaking to prospective students, faculty, funding bodies, and the public about social responsibility and inclusive excellence commitments.

The analysis reveals significant limitations in these authoritative voices' concrete implementation guidance. While the plans echo the authoritative message that “diversity is essential,” they struggle with translating this into specific, actionable measures. Some measures remain vague and without explicit responsibility assignment. Many plans delegate the creation of more tailored local action plans—for example, NTNU's plan proposes that faculties and departments analyse their situations and implement their own gender balance measures.

5.4. *Summary*

The action plans define diversity very broadly, articulating nearly every possible diversity dimension while echoing national and European policymaking. They adopt inclusive stances resembling the slogan “No One Should Be Left Behind!” and acknowledge current underrepresentation while arguing that increased diversity enhances universities and research quality. However, the plans do not address any challenges, ambiguities, or dilemmas associated with these inclusive messages, rather presenting approaches as straightforward: “The more, the better, and just do it.”

This creates a dialogical delegation where institutions maintain rhetorical authority over the diversity discourse while tacitly transferring interpretative responsibility to local leaders without corresponding support.

To explore this situation, we examine the dialogical relationship between the institutional voices of the action plans and local leadership practices in the next section, asking: How do department heads and research group leaders respond to the authoritative voices embedded in their institutions' action plans when “doing diversity” in their daily work? To what extent do they echo, resist, or transform these institutional messages? And when the authoritative voice of the action plans proves insufficient or ambiguous, what interpretative resources do local leaders draw upon to construct their understanding of diversity work?

6. University Departments' Leaderships Perceptions of and Engagement With Diversity

The above analysis showed how universities may transform external authoritative voices, shifting emphasis from gender equality toward expansive definitions of diversity. We now examine the next stage in this dialogical chain: How department heads and research group leaders interpret and respond to their institutions' diversity messages. We will show how the dialogue between institutional directives and local implementation generates new forms of interpretation that diverge significantly from both policy intentions and the institutional plans' authoritative voices. During the interviews, we frequently noted uncertainty about what diversity should mean. Several asked us at the beginning of the interview what we meant by diversity and wondered if their understanding was correct or aligned with what we were looking for. Thus, many doubted if their definition was "correct." They perceived the issue as complicated, in terms of which dimensions should be the focus. This uncertainty suggests a lack of clarity and consistency in the institutions' communication about diversity and the content of the action plans. The authoritative voice was insufficiently unambiguous. However, several had noted the discursive shift from a gender to a diversity focus. Simon, a department head, observed: "In Norway, diversity used to refer to first and foremost...gender diversity."

Moreover, diversity was not necessarily considered a blessing despite the positive arguments of the authoritative voices in policy documents and action plans. Some were critical and contested this message:

The orders [from above] are very often imprecise. It wears us down a bit. Now we must increase diversity....Implicitly, it is assumed we have a problem with diversity. I refute that; it is not true at all. I have a problem with gender balance. We are desperately trying to do something there. (Runar, Head of Department)

Runar's response exemplifies active resistance to the authoritative voices, demonstrating how local leaders can contest institutional messages when they conflict with their situated knowledge and departmental realities. His statement reveals multiple layers of dialogical tension. First, he critiques the lack of precision. The vague directive to "increase diversity" lacks the specificity needed for meaningful action. This vagueness creates what we might understand as an incomplete dialogue, where the institutional voice fails to engage meaningfully with local contexts and challenges.

Second, Runar's explicit refutation—"I refute that, it is not true at all"—directly rejects the authoritative voice's underlying assumption. By asserting that his department has no diversity problem, he positions his experiential knowledge against institutional assessment. His department has been "internationally diverse for 30 years," giving him confidence to challenge the institutional narrative. This demonstrates how personal and departmental experience becomes a powerful interpretative resource to override external directives.

Most significantly, Runar's insistence on gender as "the real problem" reveals how local leaders may actively reshape diversity discourse through selective interpretation. Rather than accepting the broad diversity framework, he narrows the focus to what he perceives as the most pressing local challenge. His phrase "we are desperately trying to do something there" indicates genuine engagement with diversity work, but on his terms. This selective resistance illustrates how "doing diversity" becomes a negotiated process where local leaders filter authoritative messages through their understanding of departmental needs and capacity to effect change.

When authoritative voices prove insufficient, local leaders are caught between institutional expectations and practical uncertainty. As observed in the analysis of the action plans, institutional directives offered limited concrete guidance for translating broad diversity commitments into departmental practice. This created a peculiar dialogical situation where the authoritative voice was audible enough to state an obligation but too vague to enable a meaningful response. Some department heads found themselves in a state of interpretative limbo, aware of expectations but unable to construct coherent action frameworks.

I know I should work with diversity, but I'm not sure what that means. I don't know what to do. We are so diverse, so I don't really know.

This department head's statement reveals the profound disorientation resulting from inadequate authoritative voices. Her repeated expressions of uncertainty—"I don't know," "I don't really know"—underscore the failure of the institutional message to provide sufficient guidance. The phrase "I know that I should work with diversity" demonstrates the authoritative voice's directive force, while "but I don't know what that means" reveals its communicative failure. This creates a dialogical impasse—the institutional voice successfully conveyed an obligation but failed to provide an actionable understanding.

Her attempt to self-assess against unstated criteria is particularly telling: "We are so diverse, so I don't really know." She recognises diversity in her department ("we include the international ones") but lacks the interpretative framework to assess if the response adequately meets the institutional demands. Later in the interview, she speculates that "it is probably written somewhere," revealing awareness of authoritative texts while simultaneously acknowledging her disconnection from their practical meaning. This demonstrates how written policies can exist as distant, authoritative voices that create obligations without providing proper guidance.

Thus, the authoritative voice requiring diversity efforts was strong enough to be heard but not considered helpful, which leaves local leaders suspended between institutional expectations and practical paralysis. This situation illustrates how poorly constructed authoritative voices can generate anxiety and confusion rather than enabling the "doing diversity" work they promote. When institutional voices seemingly fail to bridge the gap between policy intention and practical implementation, local leaders are left to navigate diversity demands without adequate dialogical support, potentially undermining the very goals the policies seek to achieve.

This gap between authoritative voices and practical implementation created space for interpretation, where department heads and research group leaders drew upon their own experiences and observations to make sense of diversity demands:

When I think of diversity, it's a list of four things I think....It's gender, ethnicity, age, and ability/disability. For me, personally, that's the definition I think of when I hear, "we have to include diverse perspectives; we have to be sensitive to diversity." (Stefan, research group leader)

In the above quote, Stefan illustrates how local leaders actively construct their own definitions when authoritative voices remain ambiguous. His systematic enumeration—"I think four things"—reveals an attempt to impose order and specificity on what he has received as a vague institutional message. Moreover, Stefan explicitly acknowledges hearing authoritative voices ("when I hear, 'we have to include diverse

perspectives’”), but he immediately personalizes the interpretation (“For me, personally, that’s the definition”). This move from the institutional voice to a personal interpretation demonstrates the dialogical process, where Stefan actively translates “diversity” through his own conceptual framework.

This process of personal definition-making illustrates how “doing diversity” at the local level requires not just implementation of policies but active construction of meaning when authoritative guidance proves inadequate. The result is a proliferation of locally constructed diversity frameworks that may share common elements with institutional plans while diverging significantly in emphasis, scope, and practical application.

6.1. Personal Experiences and Academic Identities as Interpretative Resources in Doing Diversity

When institutional voices provided inadequate guidance, department heads relied on personal experiences to understand and prioritize their diversity efforts. The interviewees’ perceptions of what was easy or challenging to engage with, as well as what they identified as the most significant diversity issue, varied greatly depending on their experiential frameworks. These personal experiences served as dialogical anchors, assisting local leaders in making sense of abstract institutional directives by linking them to concrete, embodied knowledge.

Personal encounters could transform previously overlooked diversity dimensions into urgent priorities. For example, Hanne, a department head, initially saw little relevance in disability issues:

We have not had the opportunity to include disability so actively in my time. Should you work to get employees who are disabled or what, I don’t know? Functional impairment—what to do with that? We have students we help, we have both blind and hearing-impaired people, so we do that, but it’s mostly the administration.

Hanne’s uncertainty reflects the gap between institutional diversity rhetoric and practical understanding.

However, others who had experienced disability-related challenges developed heightened awareness. Department head Steinar’s dilemma during a research trip illustrates this transformation:

I wanted to ensure a mix of men and women, and preferably diversity in ethnicity, class, and age. There is a very smart guy, a professor. Very relevant. He is in a wheelchair. And then I thought, what do I do now? He would have been a great resource to have...[he] is theoretically interested, and very good. But there were no resources.

This painful episode transformed his understanding, demonstrating how personal encounters can shift diversity from abstract policy requirement to embodied ethical concern.

Similarly, Hege, a deputy head, described a situation where she discovered that her office was inaccessible to a wheelchair-using student, which created a lasting impact: “It must have been an unpleasant experience for the student. I think it was very painful to witness.” These encounters reveal how personal experiences can generate emotional engagement that institutional directives alone cannot achieve.

Conversely, positive personal experiences could also lead to the de-prioritisation of certain diversity dimensions. Sigurd, a department head, showed little focus on sexual orientation because of his positive assessment: “We simply haven’t had any focus on it because it feels so natural that people have different sexualities today.”

Sigurd’s quote suggests that perceived progress can reduce attention to particular diversity issues.

Personal identity and lived experience are interpretative lenses for prioritizing diversity work. Hege’s working-class background made her acutely aware of class issues:

I have another matter close to my heart. It is not certain that this is how you define diversity, but I believe class is also a very important factor. I experienced this myself as a scholarship holder, student, and new employee, where it was expected that I would undergo a class journey and end up in the middle class.

Hege’s personal navigation of class mobility became an interpretative resource for understanding institutional dynamics that she experienced, which formal diversity policies did not address.

Similarly, department head Randi’s experience as a gender minority in STEM shaped her focus:

I am a minority myself. I have been throughout my entire career. So, in a way, I think I find it easier to both see and pick up on situations where, based on my own experience, I would have felt that this was not okay.

For Randi, her lived experience as a minority became both an interpretative lens and a practical tool for recognising and addressing exclusionary dynamics.

These examples reveal how “doing diversity” becomes deeply personal when institutional guidance is scarce. Personal experiences function as interpretative filters that transform general diversity directives into specific, actionable priorities, creating locally situated versions of diversity work that may diverge significantly from institutional intentions but are grounded in embodied understanding of exclusion and inclusion.

The second important interpretative resource was academic identity and disciplinary perspective, particularly among research group leaders who lacked direct influence over staffing decisions. When confronted with institutional diversity directives that seemed disconnected from their academic roles, many local leaders drew upon their scholarly identities to reframe diversity in more relevant and actionable ways.

Stefan, a research group leader, exemplifies this academic reframing of diversity. While acknowledging the authoritative voices defining diversity as “gender, ethnicity, disability, etc.,” he then repositioned the conversation around academic concerns:

I would like to add that as a research group leader, for me, it’s very important to have theoretical diversity, epistemological diversity, and methodological diversity. Those are diversities that, for me, as a research group leader, are more important....I don’t staff our department.

His distinction between demographic and epistemic diversity shows how academic leaders could transform institutional messages through their professional identities, creating what we might call “scholarly doing of diversity.”

This pattern of academic reinterpretation appeared across multiple interviews. Hans, a department head, emphasised the academic-specific nature of diversity: “I think diversity is both on the student side and on the employee side. In that sense, there are many categories in academia of different types of staff groups and students.” Similarly, Raimond highlighted “the diversity of ideas and backgrounds that give us different ideas.” These responses demonstrate how local leaders actively distinguished between the diversity dimensions voiced by action plans and what they perceive as uniquely academic forms of diversity, epistemic perspectives, and intellectual positions.

For some, research expertise itself became an interpretative resource for understanding institutional diversity demands. Research group leader Sarah’s response illustrates this scholarly lens: “I have been most concerned with diversity in relation to the immigration debate and not so much with regard to gender...in my professional field, I have written extensively about diversity policy.” Sarah’s research background becomes both an interpretative framework and a source of authority for prioritising certain diversity dimensions over others.

This academic reframing demonstrates how “doing diversity” can be transformed from policy compliance into intellectual engagement. Rather than simply implementing institutional directives, these leaders filtered diversity messages through their scholarly identities, creating academically meaningful versions of diversity work. Particularly among social sciences and humanities interviewees, diversity became a policy challenge and a research perspective integral to their academic identity.

In the absence of clear guidance, we therefore saw three distinct patterns of dialogical engagement when the authoritative voices proved inadequate. The first we term “active resistance.” This is exemplified by Runar’s explicit refutation of institutional assumptions. Runar’s resistance illustrates how “dialogical authority” can emerge from local expertise. His 30 years of experience with international diversity gave him the confidence to reject institutional assumptions while remaining committed to gender equality work. This reveals how effective dialogical engagement requires not just clear institutional messages but recognition of local expertise and context. The second is what we term “interpretative paralysis.” This is demonstrated by leaders who “heard” institutional demands but could not translate them into action. Interpretative paralysis represents a sort of dialogical breakdown, where authoritative voices successfully convey obligation but fail to enable response. This pattern reveals the critical importance of institutional message quality in dialogical processes. When authoritative voices are too vague or disconnected from local realities, they create “dialogical impasses” that generate anxiety rather than action. It shows how institutional attempts to be maximally inclusive (addressing all diversity dimensions) can undermine practical implementation by creating interpretative overload. The third we have termed “creative transformations,” shown by the reframing of diversity through academic lenses. This represents the most productive form of dialogical engagement, where institutional messages serve as starting points for locally meaningful interpretation rather than rigid directives. These leaders demonstrate the ability to transform vague institutional messages into actionable frameworks through creative engagement with their professional and personal resources.

This typology demonstrates that “doing diversity” locally transcends simple compliance or non-compliance, instead involving complex dialogical negotiations between institutional demands, local contexts, and individual interpretative capacities.

The latter category included two primary interpretative resources: personal experiences that provided embodied knowledge of inclusion and exclusion, and academic identities that reframed diversity through scholarly lenses. These resources enabled department heads and research group leaders to construct meaningful approaches to diversity work, though the resulting practices often diverged significantly from institutional intentions. This demonstrates how the dialogical process between authoritative voices and local interpretation generates new forms of “doing diversity” that are grounded in situated knowledge rather than policy compliance.

To sum up, our analysis reveals that local leaders don’t simply comply with or reject institutional diversity policies. Instead, they engage in complex dialogical negotiations in a pattern of three distinct ways. The typology shows that leaders possess varying degrees of “dialogical competence,” meaning the ability to productively engage with authoritative voices. This competence depended on experiential resources (personal encounters with diversity issues), professional identities (academic frameworks for interpretation, institutional position (authority to make changes), and departmental context (existing diversity challenges and strengths). Thus, this typology advances understanding of policy implementation by showing how the same authoritative voice can generate systematically different forms of local engagement depending on the interaction between institutional message quality, local context, and individual interpretative resources.

7. Conclusion: From Authoritative Voices to Dialogical Policy-Making

Employing a Bakhtinian perspective, we observed a fundamental transformation in how diversity policies operate—from top-down authoritative communication to distributed dialogical meaning-making. While universities responded to external authoritative voices by creating comprehensive action plans, these institutional attempts to echo and amplify policy directives paradoxically undermined their own effectiveness. By attempting to include every possible diversity dimension, the action plans created what Bakhtin might recognise as an “authoritative polyphony,” that is, messages loud enough to demand attention but too diffuse to enable a meaningful dialogue or response.

A significant finding is an unacknowledged shift in diversity governance—what we term “dialogical delegation.” While action plans assert institutional ownership of diversity goals, the practical implementation has been tacitly transferred to local leaders without accompanying resources, training, or support. This situation represents a profound transformation of Bakhtinian dialogue: Rather than institutions providing well-articulated authoritative voices that enable productive local responses, they have effectively outsourced the interpretative work to individuals.

Our analysis reveals three distinct forms of dialogical engagement with authoritative voices: active resistance, interpretative paralysis, and creative transformations. This typology demonstrates that local “doing diversity” is not simply a matter of compliance or non-compliance but involves complex negotiations between institutional demands and local capacities.

This outsourcing resulted in local leaders relying on two primary interpretative resources: personal experiences that provided embodied knowledge of inclusion and exclusion, and academic identities that reframed diversity through scholarly lenses. These resources enabled department heads and research group leaders to develop meaningful approaches to diversity work, although the ensuing practices often diverged significantly from institutional intentions. This pattern reveals a fundamental tension in contemporary diversity governance: Institutions seek to maintain authoritative control over the diversity discourse while depending on local leaders to perform the interpretative work that renders diversity efforts possible.

Thus, the dialogical process generates not only local variations but also a form of distributed policymaking in which genuine diversity strategies emerge from numerous individual interpretative acts rather than centralised institutional planning. This has significant implications for understanding policy implementation more broadly, demonstrating how apparent “policy failure” may actually signify the emergence of alternative governance forms where meaning-making and decision-making authority become dispersed across organisational hierarchies.

Paradoxically, the institutional strategy of broad and inclusive definitions of diversity may have undermined effective local action. By trying to include everything, the action plans offered minimal guidance, forcing local leaders to become unwitting policy entrepreneurs who essentially must rewrite diversity policies through their daily practices.

Thus, this pattern reveals a fundamental tension in contemporary diversity governance. While institutions claim authority over diversity policy, the work of “doing diversity” has been inadvertently delegated to individual leaders who must rely on their biographies and professional identities to understand institutional demands. The dialogical process thus generates not just local variation, but a form of distributed policymaking where authentic diversity strategies emerge through countless individual interpretative acts rather than centralised planning.

Finally, it is important to emphasise that our findings do not suggest that a “polyphony” of multiple voices and a considerable interpretative space are inherently problematic. While overly vague authoritative voices can create paralysis and inconsistency, overly prescriptive directives risk stifling the local knowledge and contextual adaptation that our study shows are crucial for meaningful diversity work. The challenge lies not in eliminating interpretative space but in achieving a more productive balance between institutional guidance and local agency that provides sufficient direction to enable action while preserving space for the creative transformations that makes diversity work locally relevant and effective. Our findings suggest that this delicate balancing act has not yet been achieved by Norwegian universities, creating opportunities for both policy innovation and further research into how institutions can better support rather than delegate the complex interpretative work that diversity implementation requires.

7.1. Contribution to the Research Field

This study makes significant theoretical and empirical contributions to research on gender equality and diversity action plans by introducing a dialogical framework for understanding policy implementation. While previous research has primarily focused on the content of action plans or their measurable outcomes (Clavero & Galligan, 2021; Egeland & Drange, 2022), this study reveals the complex interpretative processes

that mediate between institutional policies and local practices. The concept of “dialogical delegation” advances understanding of contemporary diversity governance by showing how organisations inadvertently distribute meaning-making authority while maintaining rhetorical control—a phenomenon likely prevalent across many policy domains beyond diversity. The three-pattern typology (active resistance, interpretative paralysis, creative transformations) provides a sophisticated alternative to binary compliance models. By demonstrating how “doing diversity” emerges through ongoing dialogical negotiations rather than straightforward policy transmission, this research fundamentally reframes diversity implementation as an active, interpretative accomplishment that requires attention to local contexts, individual resources, and the quality of institutional message.

7.2. Study Limitations and Transferability

This study’s focus on Norway—a country with exceptionally robust gender equality policies and strong egalitarian values—may limit its transferability to contexts with less developed diversity frameworks or different cultural orientations toward equality. The Norwegian setting provided rich dialogical complexity precisely because of multiple, well-developed authoritative voices creating interpretative challenges for local leaders. In countries with weaker institutional diversity commitments or less elaborate policy frameworks, local leaders might experience different types of dialogical challenges, perhaps more characterised by the absence of authoritative voices rather than their proliferation and ambiguity. Additionally, the study’s focus on department heads and research group leaders in university settings may not capture how dialogical delegation operates in other organisational contexts or among different types of implementers. The sample, while strategically selected across disciplines and institutions, is relatively small and concentrated in large research universities, potentially missing perspectives from smaller institutions or different higher education contexts. Future research should examine whether the dialogical patterns identified here manifest similarly in countries with different diversity policy landscapes, alternative cultural approaches to equality, or varying organisational structures, and whether the concept of dialogical delegation applies to policy implementation beyond the diversity domain.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data generated and analysed during this study consist of qualitative materials (e.g., interview transcripts, field notes) that are not publicly available due to confidentiality agreements and ethical considerations.

LLMs Disclosure

Portions of the text in this article were refined using a large language model (LLM) to enhance clarity, coherence, and academic tone. The model was employed strictly for linguistic and stylistic improvements, without altering the substantive content or introducing new ideas. All intellectual contributions and interpretations remain those of the authors.

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Common Measures in Gender Equality Plans at Catalan Universities from a Structural Change Approach

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Abstract

Despite the legal framework for gender equality in science developed by the European Union, significant territorial disparity in its implementation has been identified (Caprile et al., 2022; Krzaklewska et al., 2023). The situation in Catalonia is of particular interest in light of a governance system that promotes common gender equality measures across all Catalan universities. This governance system is rooted in the 2015 Catalan Equality Law, which imposed several mandatory requirements on universities. Within this system, the Women and Science Committee (WSC) of the Inter-University Council of Catalonia plays a key role. Our research employs qualitative and quantitative techniques to analyse the implications of common Gender Equality Plan (GEP) measures at Catalan universities. The qualitative analysis involves two steps: Our first step consists of a documentary analysis of GEPs implemented at all Catalan universities from 2006 to 2023, followed by a qualitative comparison between the first GEP and the most recent one approved. From a quantitative standpoint, we proceed with an aggregated regional data analysis of the “Women in Science” Indicators to assess the position and conditions of women in Catalan academia between 2015–2016 and 2022–2023. On the one hand, we detected that agreements under the WSC framework are incorporated into the GEPs of Catalan universities. On the other hand, the findings capture the persistence of gender imbalance in academic positions while also showing a trend towards gender equality with some specific areas of resistance, such as in the case of single-member decision-making positions.

Keywords

academic careers; gender balance in decision-making; gender in teaching; Gender Equality Plans (GEPs); monitoring impact

1. Introduction

The principle of gender equality is a fundamental tenet of legislation within the EU, which, from 1999, has promoted the incorporation of gender equality policies in science by member states and Research Performing Organisations (RPOs; European Commission, 1999). Since then, the development of European gender equality policies in science has been coordinated through the European Research Area (ERA) to “harmonise” R&I systems across Europe.

In terms of strategic goals for gender equality in science, the three main areas which European institutions have focused on have been: (a) the promotion of equality in academic careers, (b) the establishment of gender balance between men and women in decision-making processes, and (c) the integration of a gender perspective into the content of research and teaching (EIGE, 2016; European Commission, 2012, 2021a). Aside from these principal structural areas, in recent developments, EU policies have also addressed major areas of intervention such as gender-based violence, work–life balance at universities, and intersectionality (EIGE, 2024; European Commission, 2021b).

As shown by an empirical analysis of the implementation of gender equality measures in RPOs, European policies have been a driving force for the promotion and implementation of gender equality in science and universities (Anagnostou, 2022; Bustelo, 2023). This influence has been particularly pronounced in contexts where national governments display a lower level of commitment towards the development of gender equality policies (Anagnostou, 2022; Bencivenga & Drew, 2021; Caprile, 2012; Caprile et al., 2022; Krzaklewska et al., 2023). Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) have been a central strategic instrument employed by EU policies within framework programmes for research and technological development to ensure the effective development of gender equality measures across academia.

Despite the efforts to gender equality policies harmonisation through the ERA and the numerous good practices that have been developed therein, gender equality remains an unresolved issue at universities and in R&I. Indeed, analyses of gender equality policies in EU countries have identified major challenges to the achievement of structural change, as well as significant disparity among national contexts (Anagnostou, 2022; Caprile et al., 2022; EIGE, 2016; Krzaklewska et al., 2023).

This article aims to analyse and assess the implementation of gender equality policies at universities in Catalonia which rely on a particular system of governance for the promotion and implementation of GEPs. It consists of an analysis of the measures included in the GEPs of Catalan universities and the indicators on the progress of gender equality in academia published by the Catalan Government.

1.1. A Structural Change Approach to Gender Equality in Science

1.1.1. Conceptual Framework: A Structural Change Approach

Our research is based on a structural change approach (SCA) to gender in science (Bencivenga & Drew, 2021; Bustelo, 2023; Ferguson, 2021; Kalpazidou & Cacace, 2019). This approach focuses on two main dimensions to analyse gender equality actions: (a) it considers the path from the formal definition of gender equality measures to their effective implementation and transformative impact (Bencivenga & Drew, 2021;

Bustelo, 2023; Caprile et al., 2022; Kalpazidou, 2013); and (b) it centres inequalities when addressing the issue of gender and science. Beyond individual performance, this perspective focuses on the interrelationships between structural inequalities in terms of material conditions and cultural and subjective aspects of gender normativity. These interrelationships are considered at the social inequalities level (macro level), while also considering institutional contexts (Bencivenga & Drew, 2021; Bustelo, 2023; Ferguson, 2021; Kalpazidou & Cacace, 2019).

The SCA recognises that new public management tactics in the context of neo-liberal academia—which consists of applying the logic of for-profit business models to the public sector—have led to a highly technocratic culture of control and surveillance, with detrimental effects on the advancement of gender equality (Ahmed, 2007; Castaño et al., 2019). In this regard, studies from a SCA have identified that actions were often limited to bureaucratic box-ticking to comply with external accountability requirements but without generating real change within institutions (Bencivenga et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2012).

As Tardos and Paksi (2021, p. 49) argue: “Equality Plans, to be more effective in their impacts on gender equality, need to be embedded in complex organisational processes and infrastructures, including the commitment of top management to frame gender equality as a strategic priority.” Consistent with this finding, Clavero and Galligan (2021) highlight that one of the most critical aspects of ensuring effective measures towards gender equality is the commitment of senior management within universities. Other factors identified by the literature as particularly explanatory of the lack of measures for structural change being taken are the absence of incentives and sanctions, as well as the lack of accountability to ensure effective results (Bencivenga & Drew, 2021).

1.1.2. The EU Policies and the Role of GEPs from a SCA

The EU situates its policies on gender equality in science within the framework of structural change, as stated in *Reinforced European Research Area Partnership for Excellence and Growth* (European Commission, 2012). From 2010, these policies have shifted from an approach focused on the capabilities of women to be scientists to the progressive incorporation of social dimensions like structural inequalities and institutional barriers; the paradigm shifted from “fixing the women” to a further developed model based on “fixing the organisations’ policies” (Kalpazidou, 2013, p. 163). This approach was fully consolidated by 2012, when the three ERA priorities were established: gender equality in scientific careers, gender balance in decision-making, and integration of the gender dimension into the content of research and innovation (European Commission, 2012).

GEPs are considered key drivers in this process, having been defined as “gender mainstreaming tools that outline the specific actions an institution will take to advance gender equality in their organisation...through a process of structural change” (EIGE, 2024, p. 4). The value of GEPs lies in their comprehensive analysis of each institution’s specific context, combined with a strategic planning of targeted measures that institutions ought to address.

The implementation of EU gender equality policies in science comprises two stages: First, under the Framework Programmes for Research and Technological Development, work programmes are defined to fund projects aimed at developing methodologies and resources to design, implement, and evaluate

effective and transformative GEPs (Bustelo, 2023; Bencivenga & Drew, 2021; Caprile et al., 2022). The second stage introduces the compulsory requirement for participating organisations to design and implement a GEP to access funding (EIGE, 2016; European Commission, 2021a, 2021b).

The Commission has mandated that universities and research centres establish GEPs as a prerequisite to access funding. It has also made the integration of the gender dimension into the content of research and innovation compulsory for all proposals and projects submitted to European calls; however, more than half of the organisations have failed to meet these eligibility criteria (European Commission, 2021a).

One of the main weaknesses of EU policies is the lack of mandatory requirements in national policies. This is coupled with insufficient monitoring and accountability of organisations participating in European calls. This oversight hinders the effective implementation of GEPs and the gender dimension in their projects.

Finally, from the SCA, monitoring and measurement of the impacts of gender equality actions are crucial to ensure both the commitment of institutions and the development of effective measures to address gender inequalities in academia. At the institutional level, the EU specifically recommends the definition of indicators to monitor the progress of GEPs (European Commission, 2012, 2021a, 2021b). At the macro level, the EU has its own system of indicators to monitor gender equality in the European Research and Innovation system, which are published in the *She Figures* reports that are issued biannually by its Publications Office (European Commission, 2025). However, despite these recommendations and the data available at the European level, several studies from an SCA have highlighted the need to improve the monitoring and evaluation of the impact of gender equality measures and GEPs (Bencivenga et al., 2021; Kalpazidou, 2013; Palmén et al., 2020). The present research contributes to this field by focusing on the measures included in the GEPs of Catalan universities and analysing indicators on the progress of gender equality in academia published by the Catalan Government.

1.2. The Context of Spain: Early Legislation but Tardy and Heterogeneous Implementation

Spain was one of the first European countries to implement the EU recommendations on gender equality in academia into its legislation. The enactment of the Spanish Law for Effective Equality between Women and Men (Spanish Government, 2007) was a turning point in the institutionalisation of equality policies in Spain, including its higher education system. This act mandated the establishment of equality units and the formulation of GEPs, which were regarded as the principal instruments for articulating and implementing gender equality initiatives across Spanish universities (Caprile et al., 2022; EIGE, 2016; Pastor et al., 2020; Soto Arteaga et al., 2020).

Despite this early implementation of European regulations in Spanish legislation (Spanish Government, 2007), studies show that the requirements of Spanish Equality Law were not always effectively put into practice across the Spanish higher education system (Caprile et al., 2022; Pastor et al., 2020; RUIGEU, 2022; Soto Arteaga et al., 2020). According to the most recent data from the *Women Scientists in Figures* report by the Ministry of Science and Innovation (2023), 86.8% of Spanish universities had an Equality Plan in force, while others were in the process of implementing their first one. Equality policies are clearly not being introduced at the same rate across all Spanish universities. As Pastor et al. (2020) identified, these variations are primarily influenced by the commitment of the university structure towards gender equality and the

allocation of sufficient funding for the implementation of the GEPs. In this context, Catalonia, on which this article specifically focuses, presents particularities in terms of its coordination mechanisms and the actors that play a key role in implementing GEPs at universities.

1.3. Gender Equality Policies at Catalan Universities: The Role of Women and the Science Committee of the Inter-University Council of Catalonia

The situation in Catalonia presents particularities due to its governance system, which articulates common measures on gender equality to be developed by Catalan universities. This governance system consists of the approval of the Catalan Equality Law (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2015) that establishes several mandatory requirements for universities, together with the key role of the Women and Science Committee (WSC) of the Inter-University Council of Catalonia (CIC). The CIC is not only responsible for coordinating the Catalan university system but also advises the Catalan government on university matters and operates through different committees.

The WSC, created in 2005, is a collegiate body composed of representatives from public and private universities and research centres, as well as relevant governmental bodies, such as the Department for Research and Universities (DRU) and the Catalan University Quality Agency (AQU Catalunya). Its mandate is to ensure compliance with the equality objectives established in the current legal framework (DOGC, 2018). In 2018, it was expanded through the incorporation of AQU Catalunya, which extended its functions to include ensuring compliance with the equality objectives for higher education and research set out in the Catalan Equality Law that was passed in 2015 (DOGC, 2018; Generalitat de Catalunya, 2015).

In the twenty years since its creation, the WSC has coordinated and promoted different joint actions across the Catalan academic system (Berga, 2018), with one of its main contributions being the definition and agreement of common measures that Catalan universities are required to incorporate into their GEPs.

1.3.1. Common Measures for Structural Change to GEPs Established by the WSC

The actions agreed to within the framework of the WSC played a key role in the early implementation of GEPs at Catalan universities (Pastor & Acosta, 2016; Verge, 2021), as also explicitly outlined in the GEPs reports of a range of universities (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2024; Universitat de Barcelona, 2022; Universitat de Girona, 2021; Universitat de Lleida, 2008; Universitat Internacional de Catalunya, 2022; Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, 2020; Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, 2022; Universitat Ramon Llull, 2021).

After the Spanish Equality Law was passed (Spanish Government, 2007), the WSC convened sessions to propose actions to embed GEPs in the Catalan university architecture and to establish indicators to assess their efficacy. As a result, by 2011, all Catalan universities had an officially endorsed GEP—just four years after the Spanish Equality Law was passed in 2007. At present, most Catalan universities have their third or fourth equality plan in force (RUIGEU, 2022).

One of the main actions of the WSC is the creation of methodological materials to support the implementation of GEPs. These include the document *A Decalogue for Equal Opportunities Plans for Women and Men in Universities* (CIC, 2013), which presents some of the good practices emerging from the earliest

equality plans and provides recommendations for the future. The WSC also works on fostering agreement and commitment to develop specific measures within GEPs. In alignment with the main strategic areas developed by European policies, the WSC particularly focuses on the promotion of gender equality in academic careers and gender balance in decision-making bodies, the incorporation of a gender dimension in teaching, and the definition of indicators to measure the progress of gender equality in science.

The WSC's many actions to foster equality in academic careers include its recent promotion of measures to intensify research among women returning from maternity leave. A working group has been set up to urge AQU Catalunya, which is responsible for evaluating academic careers in Catalonia, to consider the impact of maternity leave when evaluating women's research. The WSC is also promoting the implementation of specific measures aimed at making the labour conditions of university lecturers who have recently become mothers more flexible, which has been identified as a critical factor in terms of vertical segregation and the "leaky pipeline effect" of indicators (European Commission, 2025).

Concerning gender balance in decision-making bodies, the Catalan Equality Law (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2015) establishes that universities must "guarantee effective equality between women and men in teaching and research careers and promote the balanced representation of genders in the different collegiate bodies and at all levels of decision-making" (article 28). The Law stipulates that, within five years of its entry into force, public universities should achieve a balanced composition of the members of their decision-making bodies. Consequently, the WSC established a working group to analyse the data on each university and evaluate their degree of compliance with this mandate. In 2021, the WSC agreed to include the gender balance of collegiate decision-making bodies in its "Women and Science" system of indicators, thus generating an annually updated assessment of progress since 2015 (DRU, 2025).

In relation to the incorporation of a gender perspective in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, gender mainstreaming has been a quality requirement in degree accreditation processes since the introduction of the Catalan Equality Law (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2015). The EIGE recognised this measure as a good practice in its Gender Equality in Academia and Research Toolkit (Benito & Verge, 2020; EIGE, 2020).

With the aim of turning this legal requirement into an effective implementation of a gender dimension transversally into all degrees, the WSC and AQU Catalunya worked together on the creation of an Interdisciplinary Commission of Experts from different fields of knowledge. The outcome of this initiative was a guide for universities, called the *General Framework for the Incorporation of the Gender Perspective in University Teaching* (AQU Catalunya, 2019), with a particular focus on the evaluation of Official Degrees. To provide an incentive and to generate visibility, the WSC created a new award for the best university teaching practices from a gender perspective, called the Encarna Sanahuja Yll Merit Award, presented by the Catalan Government (DOGC, 2019).

Finally, to monitor progress and help ensure real structural change, in 2018, the WSC defined the "Women and Science" Indicators to measure and evaluate the situation of women in Catalan universities and RPOs. These data, which are comparable at the European level, are obtained from the integrated data management system of all Catalan universities and published annually in the 'Women and Science' section of the Government of Catalonia's website (DRU, 2025).

Although several studies mention the specific situation in Catalonia regarding the agreement on common measures (Berga et al., 2022; Pastor & Acosta, 2016; Verge, 2021) further empirical evidence is required to account for the particularities of Catalonia and the role of the WSC in advancing gender equality measures in the GEPs and assess its implication in effective the gender equality.

In the following sections, we will analyse how these common measures are included in the GEPs of Catalan Universities to further the understanding of the implementation of such plans in Catalonia. It not only identifies the degree to which GEPs have been implemented but also presents a nuanced analysis of the measures adopted regarding the three main areas in which the WSC has reached central agreements over the years in alignment with the main strategic areas developed by European policies: (a) the promotion of equality in academic careers, (b) the establishment of a gender balance between men and women in decision-making processes, and (c) the integration of a gender perspective in teaching.

2. Methodology

This research employs a methodology that encompasses both qualitative and quantitative techniques to analyse the implications of the common measures of GEPs of Catalan Universities agreed in the framework of the WSC. We draw on the SCA to consider two levels of analysis. The first is a qualitative analysis of the measures included in the GEPs of the 12 Catalan universities by comparing the earliest approved version with the latest that incorporates the agreement reached by the WSC. Table 1 shows that the first GEPs were issued by Catalan universities in 2006, and most of the others followed suit within a year of the enactment of the Spanish Equality Law (Spanish Government, 2007), with the latest dated to 2011. As for the most recent plans, the oldest that is currently in place dates to 2016, while the newest plan was initiated in 2024.

Table 1. Dates of approval of the first and current GEPs at Catalan universities.

	First GEP: date of approval	Current GEP: date of approval
UB (Universitat de Barcelona)	2008	2020
UAB (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona)	2006	2024
UPC (Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya)	2007	2022
UPF (Universitat Pompeu Fabra)	2008	2018
UDL (Universitat de Lleida)	2008	2016
UDG (Universitat de Girona)	2009	2021
URV (Universitat Rovira i Virgili)	2007	2020
URL (Universitat Ramon Llull)	2008	2021
UOC (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya)	2011	2020
UVic-UCC (Universitat de Vic-Universitat Central de Catalunya)	2008	2022
UIC (Universitat Internacional de Catalunya)	2009	2022
UAO (Universitat Abat Oliba CEU)	—	2022

The documentary analysis is based on the flexible approach of grounded theory defined by Thornberg and Charmaz (2014). This involved the following steps. The first step consists of an analysis of the GEPs through open coding of the different types of measures identified. This is followed by selective coding to identify the measures relating to the WSC's areas of agreement. Finally, the third step entails a nuanced comparative

analysis of the first and the most recent GEPs. The second level of analysis consisted of a quantitative analysis of aggregated secondary data taken from the “Women and Science” Indicators produced by the Catalan Government (DRU, 2025) and agreed by the WSC to gain insight into the potentiality of GEPs as a means for structural change to the conditions and position of women in Catalan academia. Specifically, a comparative analysis was conducted by identifying differences between 2015, the year of the revised Catalan Equality Law (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2015), and 2023, the latest year for which data is available. The indicators analysed were those related to the main measures developed in GEPs and agreed by the WSC, with the exception of the gender dimension in teaching due to the lack of indicators for this area. As the microdata of these indicators is not accessible, a regional analysis was performed by analysing the percentages of women and men in the different positions, the associated conditions, and how they have evolved over time. Doing so revealed different patterns and turning points in terms of gender equality in Catalan academia, which can be directly linked to the measures that the WSC agreed should be included in subsequent GEPs.

3. Results

The results of the study are structured in two sections, corresponding to the two levels of analysis: the qualitative documentary analysis and the analysis of “Women and Science” Indicators (DRU, 2025).

3.1. Analysis of the Measures Included in the GEPs of Catalan Universities

The qualitative analysis of GEP measures is structured around the WSC’s three main areas of agreement: gender equality measures in academic careers (a) the promotion of equality in academic careers, (b) the establishment of a gender balance between men and women in decision-making processes, and (c) the integration of a gender perspective in teaching.

3.1.1. Gender Equality Measures in Academic Careers

The current GEPs of all Catalan universities contain specific measures to achieve gender equality in academic careers, in terms of access and promotion. The centrality of these measures was already present in the initial GEPs (11 of 12 universities had specific measures in place).

In current GEPs, measures pertaining to gender equality in academic careers have undergone a 21% increase in comparison with the initial GEPs (from 67 measures to 81; see Table 2). Specifically, the incorporation of a gender perspective in selection processes has been identified as a primary measure designed to prevent gender bias (13). This involves introducing mechanisms to prevent exclusion and gender bias in selection processes, such as the review of communicative actions related to the publication of the job offer. The analysis of data on selection processes has been identified as a secondary measure (12), with a particular emphasis

Table 2. Number of measures and universities with gender equality actions on academic careers (Catalonia).

	First GEPs	Current GEPs
Number of measures on gender equality in academic careers	67	81
Number of universities with gender equality measures in academic careers	11	12

on gender impact reports, which investigate differences in application and hiring rates between women and men. In the first GEP, several universities developed studies to identify the obstacles impeding women from progressing in their academic careers, with UVic-UCC's investigation into objective and subjective barriers being of particular interest.

However, it is also important to note that while positive actions are advocated by many universities (10), these are not always binding. In fact, only two universities state their obligation to ensure gender balanced representation in academic positions. The UPC is noteworthy in this regard. Its recent strategy included an action to "modify the plan for the promotion of chairs to guarantee a minimum of 35% of positions for female professors" (Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, 2022). This could serve as a pioneering example for other universities seeking to advance gender equality in academic careers.

Another common measure among Catalan universities concerns the balanced gender composition of selection committees responsible for hiring processes (9). Finally, we also identify measures aimed at promoting training and mentoring programmes to improve women's qualifications and foster their professional advancement (6).

3.1.1.1. Work-Life Balance Measures to Foster Equality in Academic Careers

Specific actions related to work-life balance to foster equality in academic careers, such as making teaching hours more flexible and allowing staff to focus more on their research careers, deserve special analysis in the GEPs of Catalan universities, since 10 out of 12 have interventions in this area. Specifically, Catalan universities have 29 such measures in the latest approved GEPs as opposed to 13 in their earliest plans.

The central actions in this area are those that include a corrective factor for researchers returning from maternity leave. Specifically, six out of the 12 universities are considering measures to promote the research careers of women and/or those who have taken a career break for care reasons. Moreover, all public universities in Catalonia (7) signed a commitment to draw up a plan of action to allow teaching and research staff to focus on research after maternity leave.

The main measure concerns modified schedules and reduced teaching hours for people returning from maternity/paternity or care leave (9). The case of the UPC is noteworthy, where teaching and research staff are freed from teaching or management responsibilities for a certain period of time; meanwhile, the UDG includes actions such as giving priority to candidates returning from maternity leave in the event of a tie in selection processes for associate professorships, and extending the period for the excellence in research accreditation processes. Also, UVic-UCC has a particularly innovative measure, whereby chronological age is replaced by academic age in order to mitigate the impact of maternity on women's academic careers.

Other actions include studies to assess the impact of maternal leave and work-life balance policies on academic careers (6); positive action to facilitate access to training courses (2); and the inclusion of leave not only to care for children, but also for dependent and elderly persons, such as the case of UAB.

3.1.2. Measures on Gender Balance in Decision-Making Bodies

All Catalan universities have specific measures in relation to gender balance in decision-making bodies, and all but one have a specific section dedicated to this in their GEPs.

The number of measures on gender balance in decision-making bodies has experienced an increase of 57% from the initial plans to the most recent ones; the number of measures on gender balance in decision-making bodies rose from 23 to 36 (Table 3), reflecting how this issue is a primary concern among Catalan universities.

Table 3. Number of measures and universities with actions on gender balance in decision-making bodies (Catalonia).

	First GEPs	Current GEPs
Number of measures on gender balance in decision-making bodies	23	36
Number of universities with measures on gender balance in decision-making bodies	11	12

The number of universities employing language that implies an obligation to accomplish parity has increased substantially between the first and current GEPs. A significant shift in terminology is particularly noted in the latest GEPs at the main public universities (UAB, UB, UPC, and UPF), with terms like “encouraging” or “promoting” being replaced by others that express a stronger commitment, such as “correcting” or “ensuring.” Furthermore, specific actions are being designed for this purpose, as evidenced by the examples of the UAB and the UB. Another measure that has been widely implemented is the production of studies and analyses to identify the causes of the gender imbalance in decision-making bodies: 12 initiatives of this type are identified. Finally, the last widespread action in this area is training to overcome the obstacles posed by the lack of gender balance. This training has evolved from being a minor action in the earliest GEPs to being a prominent feature of more recent ones (10). Two key actions have been identified: training on incorporating the gender perspective in positions of responsibility, and leadership training to enable women to overcome obstacles and reach decision-making positions.

3.1.3. Measures on the Gender Dimension in Teaching

From the outset, the GEPs of Catalan universities paid particular attention to the integration of the gender perspective in teaching. This ensures the transversal inclusion of a gender dimension across the content and methodology of all degree programs. This is one of the issues that has evolved the most from the first GEPs to the most recent ones. While nine of the 12 Catalan universities included integration of the gender perspective in teaching as one of their strategic lines in their initial plans, with 51 actions in total, the number has since increased by 121% to 113 measures in the plans currently in force. All universities currently include actions in this area, and only one does not consider it to be a core strategy in its GEP.

The most recurrent actions identified in the latest plans are: training for teachers on the incorporation of the gender perspective in teaching content and methodologies (12), the promotion of transversal competences in terms of gender in all university studies (7), the creation of specific subjects or specialised training programmes on gender or equality (11), and prizes or awards for final degree or master’s projects that incorporate the gender perspective (9; see Table 4). Some universities, such as the UAB, have adopted an innovative approach by integrating the gender perspective into their internal quality assurance system.

Table 4. Universities with measures on the gender dimension in teaching in their GEPs (Catalonia).

	First GEPs	Current GEPs
Number of universities with measures on the gender dimension in teaching	9	12
Number of measures on the gender dimension in teaching	51	113

3.2. Analysis of “Women and Science” Indicators

A quantitative aggregated data analysis of the “Women and Science” Indicators (DRU, 2025) agreed upon by the WSC reveals an increase in the presence of women in different areas of the Catalan knowledge system, particularly in the case of permanent academic positions. Women have gone from occupying just 19.8% of such posts in Catalan universities in 2015–2016 to 29.3% in 2022–2023, an increase of 48% (Figure 1).

	2015–2016		2022–2023		Ratio of percentage increase	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Bachelor's Degree (ISCED 6)	54,7%	45,3%	58,7%	41,3%	7,3%	-8,8%
Master's Degree (ISCED 7)	56,0%	44,0%	57,8%	42,2%	3,2%	-4,1%
Predocctoral Researchers (ISCED 7+)	49,2%	50,8%	47,6%	52,4%	-3,3%	3,1%
Defended Thesis (ISCED 8)	52,6%	47,4%	50,1%	50,1%	-4,8%	5,7%
Grade D (Adjunct Professors)	45,1%	54,9%	48,6%	51,4%	7,8%	-6,4%
Grade C (Postdoctoral positions)	42,0%	58,0%	44,2%	55,8%	5,2%	-3,8%
Grade A & B (Permanent positions)	19,8%	80,2%	29,3%	70,7%	48,0%	-11,8%

Figure 1. Proportion (%) of women and men in a typical academic career and percentage increase, students and academic staff, Catalonia, 2015–2016 and 2022–2023. Source: Own calculation based on “Women and Science” Indicators (DRU, 2025).

Despite the improvement of conditions for women in terms of consolidated positions at university, as shown in Figure 2, their representation decreases later in academic careers, in line with the persistent trend of the “scissor diagram” of women in science (European Commission, 2025). Thus, in 2022–2023, it is identified that women are in the majority at university up to the master’s degree stage (57.8%, versus 42.2% for men), with the figures levelling out by the time of the defence of doctoral theses (50% women and men) and the presence of women decreasing from there on, representing 48.6% of adjunct professors (men, 51.4%) and only 29.3% of permanent academic staff, while men represent 70.7% (see also Figure 1).

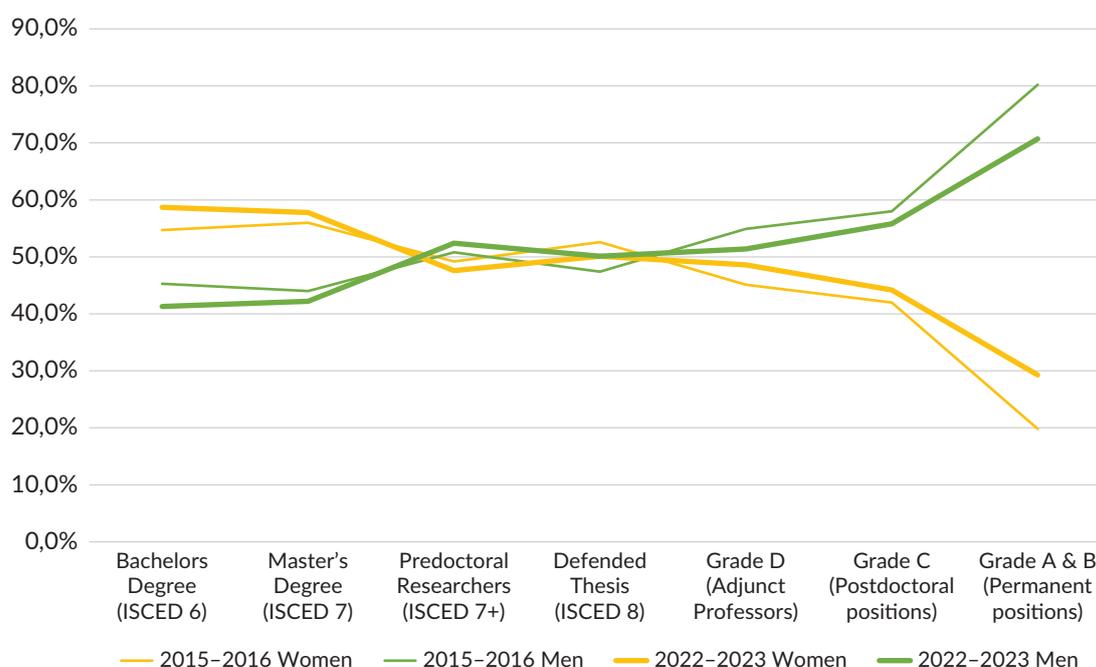


Figure 2. Proportion (%) of women and men in a typical academic career, students and academic staff, Catalonia, 2015–2016 and 2022–2023. Source: Own calculation based on “Women and Science” Indicators (DRU, 2025).

Regarding university decision-making bodies, it is detected that the imbalance between women and men is still significant, but is tending towards gender balance, with significant progress in the last decade. Women went from representing 33% of collegiate decision-making bodies in 2015 to 39% in 2021, an increase of 18%. This improvement is mainly observable on Executive Councils, where the presence of women rose from 31% in 2015 to 42% in 2021, an increase of 35% (Figure 3).

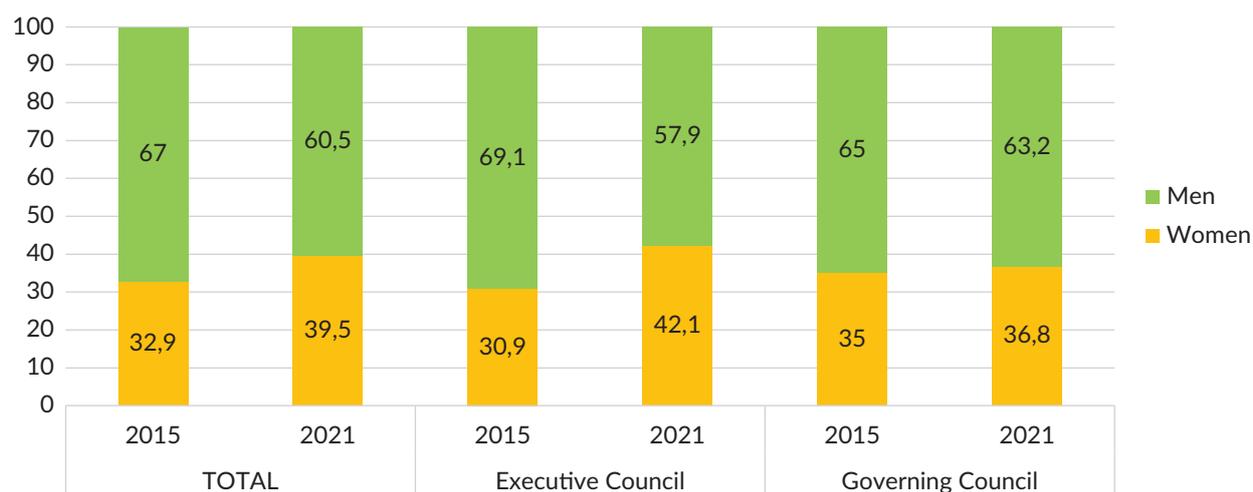


Figure 3. Proportion (%) of women and men in collegiate decision-making bodies at universities. Catalonia. 2015 and 2021. Source: Own calculation based on “Women and Science” Indicators (DRU, 2025).

Despite the trend towards gender balance in collegiate bodies, it is in single-person bodies where we find the greatest gap. Women rectors are still unusual. In 2015, there were none, and in 2021, there was just one (8.3%). In the case of executive directors, the situation has worsened, with a decline of 2.7%. Furthermore, the proportion of female (34.6%) compared to male (65.4%) deans has not changed in this period (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Proportion (%) of women and men in single-member decision-making positions. Catalonia, 2015 and 2021. Source: Own calculation based on “Women and Science” Indicators (DRU, 2025).

However, the number of women serving as secretaries general or vice-rectors is higher and continuing to rise. In 2015, there were 41.7% female secretaries general, and in 2021, there were 75%, while the number of female vice-rectors rose from 34.2% to 44.2%.

The “Women and Science” Indicators do not provide data on the incorporation of the gender dimension in teaching. However, according to the latest report from the Xarxa Vives Universities Network of Catalan-speaking regions (Rodríguez Jaume et al., 2021), 11 out of the 12 Catalan universities offer specific subjects focused on gender studies in their undergraduate degrees. Specifically, 90 of the 493 degrees in the Catalan university system as a whole include such a subject, which represents 18.2% of the overall undergraduate offer. In the case of postgraduate studies, the percentage is 13%. In addition, 12 master’s and postgraduate programmes specialising in gender are offered.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This study’s findings provide evidence on two levels regarding the common measures of the GEPs of Catalan universities from an SCA. On the first level, it has been found that the agreements in the framework of the WSC have been incorporated into the GEPs of Catalan universities. At the second level, the findings capture the persistence of gender imbalance in academic positions while also showing a significant trend towards gender equality, with some specific areas of resistance.

The findings show that the governance system developed in Catalonia to implement the legal framework on GE introduced early gender mainstreaming policy instruments, as previous studies also pointed out (Pastor & Acosta, 2016; Verge, 2021), and that these have been demonstrated to be effective. Most Catalan universities had their first equality plan approved by 2009, just two years after Spain’s Equality Law (Spanish Government, 2007) was enacted, and all of them followed suit by 2011. In contrast, as of 2023—16 years post-enactment—only 86.8% of all Spanish universities had an approved GEP (Ministry of Science and Innovation, 2023). The governance system is based on the approval of the Catalan Law (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2015), which introduced mandatory requirements for universities in terms of GE in science, alongside the key role of the WSC in promoting agreed common measures to be implemented by all Catalan Universities.

This system of governance could be a good practice to be rolled out to other regions and countries to address the delay and disparities among universities in the implementation of the legal framework on GE, as identified by different studies across Spain and Europe (Caprile et al., 2022; Pastor & Acosta, 2016; Soto Arteaga et al., 2020).

The central measures on the first GEPs introduced by Catalan Universities were related to overcoming the obstacles to female academic careers (51 measures in total), and particularly those aimed at ensuring a gender balance in access to permanent university positions. The efforts made by universities in pursuit of this specific goal have impacted the data on career progression. As identified in the analysis of the “Women and Science” Indicators (DRU, 2025), the number of women in full professorship positions in Catalonia increased by almost ten percentage points (from 19.8% in 2015 to 29.3% in 2023) reaching the European average where women represent a third of all staff at Grade A level (European Commission, 2025). From an SCA, particularly noteworthy measures include those that focus on labour conditions and institutional

barriers, which have been identified in the literature as key aspects to ensure the effective impact of GE measures (Bencivenga & Drew, 2021; Bustelo, 2023; Ferguson, 2021; Kalpazidou & Cacace, 2019).

Some actions implemented by Catalan universities to address vertical segregation could serve as transferable good practices, such as the measures that address both the objective and subjective obstacles to women's academic career progress, in addition to interventions that guarantee a minimum number of full professorships for women.

The most salient actions of Catalan universities to overcome barriers to career progress among women are measures related to work–life balance, which is related to the incorporation of social structural inequalities from the SCA (Bencivenga & Drew, 2021; Bustelo, 2023; Kalpazidou & Cacace, 2019). In this case, it takes into account the gender division of labour that assigns women responsibility for care and domestic work.

The causes of vertical segregation are manifold, but the glass ceiling of academic careers is clearly exacerbated for mothers. This underlines the necessity of policy development to remove obstacles to career advancement for girls and women (Niemistö et al., 2021). The “maternal wall” that refers to the difficulties that women face in remaining competitive while also having care responsibilities is one of the main barriers to women's academic careers (European Commission, 2025; Paksi et al., 2022; Williams, 2005). In this regard, we find that 91% of Catalan universities are implementing specific actions to ensure greater equality in this area. The most innovative measures, which serve as examples of good practice, include a corrective factor in the academic careers of researchers returning from maternity leave and programmes to allow such women to put more focus on their research, allowing them a period without teaching responsibilities. The findings reveal specific measures that, although less common, are noteworthy for being good practice. These include the replacement of the chronological age with academic age in order to mitigate the impact of maternity on women's careers and to give consideration not only to care for children, but also for dependent and elderly persons.

The WSC establishes different mechanisms to promote common measures that supersede inequalities in academic careers at Catalan universities. The main one is the creation of a working group to urge the AQU Catalunya to consider the impact of maternity leave on women's research careers when evaluating their research and to encourage universities to establish specific actions to correct this.

As for decision-making positions, the findings based on the “Women and Science” Indicators show that Catalan universities are moving towards gender balance in collegiate bodies. In line with the mandate of the Catalan Equality Law (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2015) that gender balance be achieved in the collegiate bodies of public universities within five years of its enactment, even the earliest GEPs of Catalan universities included a section on such matters, and since then, measures in this regard have been augmented. However, a significant difference is observed between public universities, in whose current GEPs such parity is mandatory, and private universities, which also mention the intention of promoting gender balance in decision-making positions but without making any specific commitments.

Despite the improvements concerning collegiate decision-making bodies, it is noteworthy to highlight that in single-person bodies (such as deans or rectors), where the law does not establish any regulations, practically no progress has been made in the analysed period, except among vice-rectors and secretaries general. This could be explained by the fact that these individuals are members of the Executive Council and, in the case of

public universities, the rector is duty-bound to form gender balanced teams. The position of secretaries general saw an increase in the percentage of women from 2015 to 2021. These positions merit particular analysis in terms of their functions and consideration, because, as critical studies from a feminist perspective point out, in academia, the gender division of labour is reproduced in management, with women undertaking the greatest burden arising from the increased bureaucratisation and management workload (Castaño et al., 2019).

From an SCA, it is also important to focus on the incorporation of a gender perspective in academic studies. Indeed, Catalan academia has made remarkable progress from the first GEP to the most recent. In their earliest GEPs, only eight of the 12 Catalan universities discussed the integration of the gender perspective in teaching, while all of them now include actions in that area.

European and Spanish regulations recommend that universities include the gender perspective in undergraduate and postgraduate studies; however, it is not mandatory in teaching. In contrast, research requires that this be done, as it is a prerequisite for participating in European Horizon calls for proposals. The Catalan Equality Law (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2015) and the contributions of the WSC have played a key role in this regard, making the gender perspective a quality requirement in study accreditation processes, a significant advancement that can be regarded as an innovative practice (Benito & Verge, 2020; Palmén et al., 2020). A notable development was the establishment, following an agreement with the WSC, of the AQU Catalunya as the entity responsible for evaluating the incorporation of the gender perspective in study programmes.

Despite the central role of the gender dimension of teaching in the GEPs of Catalan universities, and unlike the other main measures that they have developed, there are no available “Women and Science” Indicators to monitor how successfully it has been incorporated. The only available data comes from the report by the Xarxa Vives (Rodríguez Jaume et al., 2021), which indicates that the gender dimension is present in only 18.2% of undergraduate subjects.

In terms of measuring the impact, our findings support an SCA by showing how important it is to have a system of indicators to monitor and ensure accountability for structural change (Bencivenga & Drew, 2021; Bustelo, 2023). The “Women and Science” Indicators offer a key mechanism for monitoring the impacts of GEPs at Catalan universities on academic careers and decision-making bodies to identify the situation of women but it would be also necessary to introduce an intersectional approach (EIGE, 2024) to consider also differences among women taking into account other axis of inequalities and including also the situation of non-binary people.

Furthermore, the definition and implementation of indicators to capture the gender dimension in teaching remain challenging. Finally, it should be noted that accountability can only be fully refined with microdata broken down by university. Such statistical analysis would provide far more complete insights and enable the incorporation of an intersectional approach (EIGE, 2024). One recommendation in this regard is the release of open data sets of “Women and Science” Indicators to enable statistical analysis based on microdata.

In conclusion, our research shows that the governance system in Catalonia has successfully combined concrete regulatory frameworks with the key contributions of platforms to ensure that inter-university and institutional coordination can play a pivotal role in promoting gender equality by implementing common advancements of

GEPs' across all Catalan universities, with some effective improvements in the position of women in Catalan academia. From an SCA, we have highlighted the need for accountability indicators and for the results to be reported publicly. A culture of equality is a priority strategy in order to foster structural change and should be regarded as a central notion of scientific excellence at universities.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Gender Equality Plans in Slovak Universities: Between Implementation and Resistance

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

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Abstract

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

Keywords

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

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. Theoretical Framework

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. Methodology

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

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

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

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

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

5. Research Findings

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

5.1. Ensuring Gender Equality in Education

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

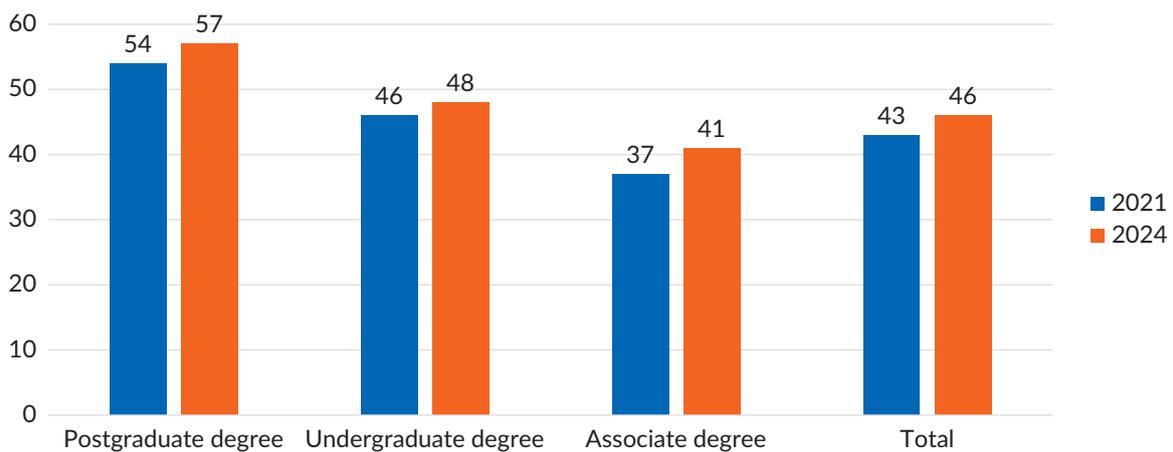


Figure 1. Percentage of female students by level of education (%).

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

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

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

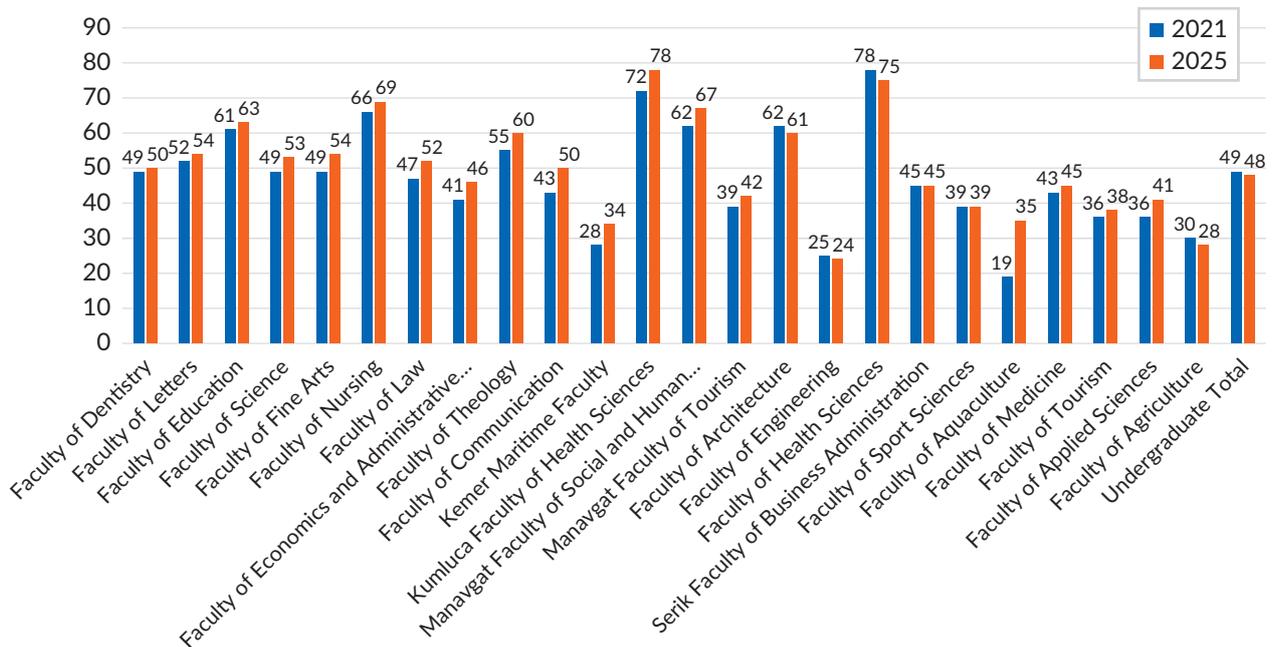


Figure 2. Distribution of female students according to faculties (%).

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

5.2. Integration of Gender Studies Courses Across Faculties

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

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

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

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

5.3. Increasing Women’s Participation in University Administration

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

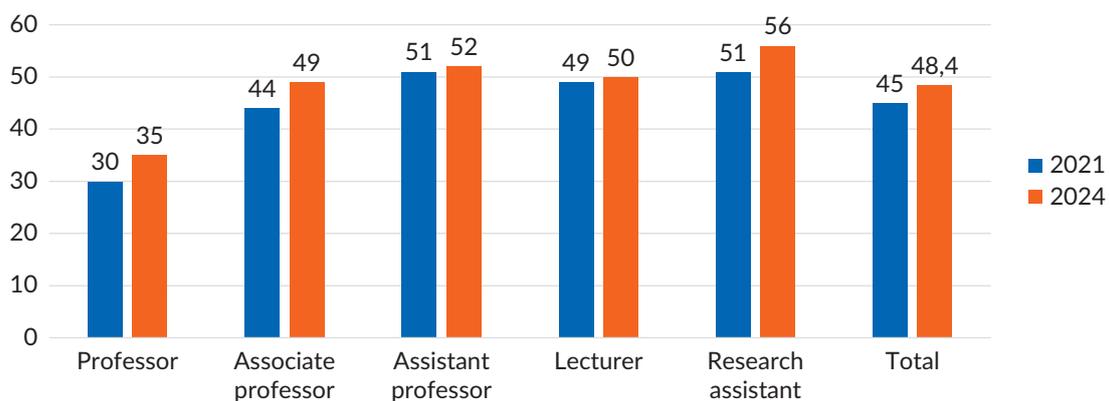


Figure 3. Distribution of academic positions of women (%).

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

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

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

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

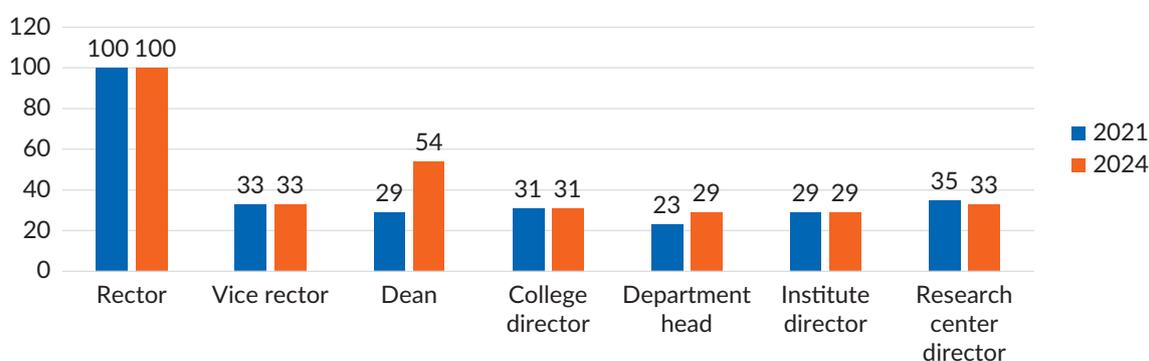


Figure 4. Women at decision-making levels (%).

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.4. Promoting the Careers of Women Academics

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

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

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

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

5.5. Empowerment of the Centre for Women and Gender Studies

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

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

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

5.6. Ensuring and Monitoring Gender Equality

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.8. Safe Campus

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

6. Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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Conflict of Interests

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

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Gender Equality and Its Significance for Scientific Research and Innovation Organisations: A Case Study

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Abstract

It is partly thanks to the European Commission and the ERA Strategy for Gender Equality that the path to gender equality has been facilitated, and that European research organisations have been encouraged to implement Gender Equality Plans (GEPs). The Italian Institute of Technology (IIT) is an exceptional example of the implementation of gender equality and gender mainstreaming in an Italian organisation dedicated to promoting quality in innovation and knowledge transfer in the STEM fields, where excellence is one of the fundamental elements and researchers from over 70 different nationalities work. This article aims to analyse the first experiences of the IIT in the field of gender equality, diversity, and inclusion. Using concrete examples and the secondary data collection method, we analysed the initial results and outcomes of the implementation of a GEP at the institutional level, taking into account persistent challenges and resistance. According to the findings presented here, gender gaps can still be observed, for example, in patent protection, start-up creation, publication rates, and other areas. Its innovative character lies in the fact that it presents an analysis within a research institute that is not an academic institution and has no previous background or experience in gender policy. We will conclude and present further actions to improve and strengthen the impact of this GEP at a cultural and institutional level.

Keywords

equality, diversity and inclusion; gender equality; gender mainstreaming; Istituto Italiano di Tecnologia; research organisations

1. Introduction

In December 2023, the Italian Institute of Technology (IIT) hosted a nationwide research and support staff gathering at one of the venues for a comprehensive discussion on the initial progress made in implementing the IIT's Gender Equality Plan (GEP). The event, which took place in Milan, Italy, attracted a significant number of participants, both in person and virtually, and was themed "advancing equality in research." This was an important opportunity to present the results of the GEP's first actions in a statistical and qualitative framework. The generous time allotted for discussion provided ample opportunity for participants to comment and contribute to the analysis of the status of the IIT's GEP to date. Other events took place, but the meeting in Milan prompted the GEP team—together with the recently created Diversity, Inclusion and Social Impact Division—to an internal reflection. This was about how to improve a supportive and inclusive culture in the IIT, an institution where scientific excellence, including in research, is indeed the only evaluation criterion (as intended by the European Research Area and the European Research Council; see König & Mohammadi, 2024).

In relation to equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) and GEPs, it should be noted that the IIT is not a university and does not share the history of Italian academic institutions, with their tradition of equality committees later to be transformed into Single Guarantee Committees (CUGs)—which are mandatory under Italian law. The IIT is located in a country where gender studies have not yet found institutional anchorage (Vertova & Vincenti, 2025) and dedicated university departments are still absent or rare (Botto et al., 2022; Nocenzi & Crespi, 2025). The lack of gender budgets, positive action plans (Galizzi & Siboni, 2016), and expertise on gender and EDI, render experiences of institutes such as the IIT extremely valuable for their uniqueness (Dahmen-Adkins & Peterson, 2021; Leone et al., 2025). Thus, these experiences could be considered more interesting for a sociological analysis, at least in the Italian panorama (Robbiano, 2022).

As a relatively young and rapidly developing institution—with a strong focus on STEM technologies and subjects—GEPs were a completely new concept when they were first brought to the IIT. As a first observation revealed, GEPs were not fully aligned with the scientific and research interests of the IIT (Addabbo et al., 2023). This seemed quite natural, especially given the usual "distance" from social science and humanities (SSH) topics and the well-established boundaries between scientific disciplines that characterised the IIT (Snow, 1969). Exceptions to this were limited to certain cases of interdisciplinary collaboration where STEM disciplines overlapped with SSH fields for specific research purposes. Such intersections already existed at the IIT in areas such as neurocognitive sciences, rehabilitation, and others (Di Bella et al., 2021).

The IIT was founded more than 20 years ago. In just a few years, it has developed into a well-known research institute capable of maintaining ongoing collaborations throughout Italy and around the world (e.g., with the MIT in Boston, USA). The IIT has quickly achieved a high level of scientific excellence and has been awarded an astonishing number of high-calibre research projects funded by the European Research Council in the recent past.

The introduction of GEPs as required by the European Commission in its granting of funding from the Horizon Europe framework programme has, on the one hand, led to institutions equipping themselves with equality plans that would have otherwise been far from becoming a reality and, on the other, to institutions

thinking about such themes in a driven way, rather than on their own accord (Bencivenga et al., 2021b; Rothwell et al., 2024). For many organisations, the creation of GEPs proved to be a process shared by the institution's scientific community and, to some extent, driven by the institution itself (Campanini & Pizarro, 2021). For many others, GEPs tended to be designed without any real involvement or shared process, and were perceived as an obligation that had to be at least formally fulfilled to access European (and extra-European) funding (Bencivenga et al., 2021a), thus representing yet another formal procedure to be followed (Caprile, 2021). Indeed, in recent cases, the process of developing GEPs was as fast as it was uninvolved (Bencivenga et al., 2021a; Cannito et al., 2023), and the GEPs appeared very quickly on any given organisation's website. As a result, they did not—or could not—have the expected impact (Addabbo et al., 2023), precisely because organisations still lacked the fundamental premise of a shared process aimed at changing their culture and initiating lasting and sustainable institutional change (Tildesley et al., 2022).

This article provides an initial reflection on how the IIT has taken up the challenge of GEPs, how the first measures were implemented, and what results can still be observed today. The authors have contributed in different ways to the conception and development of the GEP and its implementation. The article addresses gender and uses gender-specific data where available. Currently, the IIT has no way of introducing or defining gender beyond the binary category of male/female. The authors adhere to the concept of gender equality as equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities for women and men, and girls and boys, following the definition of the United Nations and the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), which were also used when introducing an intersectional and gender+ approach (see Crenshaw, 1989; Debusscher & Manners, 2020; Sangiuliano, 2019).

We begin with an introduction to the IIT, tracing its history, albeit in brief strokes, and giving some indications that we consider fundamental for understanding all the constraints that make up the measures envisaged in its GEP.

The IIT GEP, which was introduced in 2021, is reviewed and updated annually in line with company policy. The measures we analyse, therefore, relate to the period from 2021 to mid-2024. We refer to the GEP scheme elaborated by the European Commission, which originally seemed less suitable for research organisations such as the IIT (Brescianini et al., 2024; Diaz et al., 2023). For the concept and application of GEPs, we refer here to the EIGE definition (<https://eige.europa.eu>), as well as to previous research in the field of GEPs and its application in scientific organisations (Cannito et al., 2023; Galligan, 2025; Pépin et al., 2014). At the same time, we analyse some of the successes and failures of GEP interventions and discuss the resistance encountered at the IIT (Bencivenga et al., 2021a; Linková & Mergaert, 2021). In selected cases, we also present remedial measures that we were able to introduce before moving on to emergency measures (Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013).

The article concludes with a critical examination of the implications of the case study findings and offers reflections on how the pursuit of gender equality can improve the epistemic integrity, institutional effectiveness, and societal relevance of research and innovation organisations.

2. Research Questions and Methodology

This study examines the implementation of the IIT GEP and analyses its initial impact, challenges, and outcomes. The research aims to answer the following key questions:

1. How has the implementation of a GEP impacted gender equality at the IIT, and how have key performance indicators (KPIs) been used to monitor progress and measure scientific excellence in this context?
2. What are the main obstacles and resistances encountered in the implementation of the IIT GEP?
3. What measures have been effective in promoting a more inclusive and equitable institutional culture?

To answer these research questions (RQs), a quantitative methodological approach was chosen in which all indicators and calculations are derived from EIGE. Below we briefly outline the first steps the IIT has taken in concretely measuring gender equality and present the following indicators and metrics: (a) gender distribution at different organisational levels; (b) proportion of women in the scientific areas of the IIT; (c) scientific glass ceiling in Italy/the IIT; (d) analysis of the members of the evaluation committees by gender; (e) the Gender Pay Gap Index (GPGI); (f) success rates in recruitment by gender; (g) distribution of publications by gender; (h) external research funding and its economic value by gender; (i) prevalence of gender in start-ups founded by the IIT; (j) distribution of priority patent applications by gender.

The study is based on data and KPIs, including statistical analyses of gender representation in research output and other relevant metrics used to assess merit and ensure career advancement (Abramo et al., 2013; Nielsen, 2016), such as bibliometric measures (Mayer & Rathmann, 2018; Nielsen, 2018) and the measurement of research funding (Cruz-Castro et al., 2023; Ranga et al., 2012), patent applications, and business start-ups (Lai, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). The use of these metrics has been widely questioned and criticised across different fields (Acker et al., 2024; Anzivino & Dordoni, 2021; Kairuz et al., 2016; Pecis, 2016; Wang et al., 2020), particularly concerning the gender dimensions that such metrics tend to neglect due to their reliance on seemingly neutral but structurally biased indicators (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012). For these reasons, our methodology took into account often overlooked situational and environmental factors (Berry & Frederickson, 2015). These include, for example, an intersectional approach to organisational culture, leadership style, work-life balance policies, and institutional power dynamics, with organisational climate playing a critical role in employee motivation, engagement, and overall performance (Christensen, 1997/2023). We also rely on a secondary data collection method. In fact, the source of the numerical data we present is the data available in the IIT's database: Since its inception, the IIT has had a precise system for measuring results and performance at both institutional and personal levels. This data-driven approach has proven to be fundamental for the IIT to understand what works and where improvements are needed. Indeed, intensive monitoring and continuous feedback loops are central to the IIT's strategy and enable a dynamic process of adaptation and development. In the present GEP experiment at the IIT, ongoing measurement and data-driven decision making also represent critical components of successful gender equality practices. In fact, the quantitative analysis identifies both successful initiatives and persistent challenges, offering recommendations for strengthening gender equality strategies in research and innovation organisations (Chamochumbi Diaz et al., 2024; Mahoney & Thelen, 2009). Our methodology was also inspired by the activities carried out as part of an ongoing Horizon Europe-funded project to improve the outcomes of GEPs' implementation at the company level. This is the project titled

Twinning Research and Innovation Institutions to Design and Implement Inclusive GEPs (NEXUS; grant number no. 101094949), in which the entire Diversity, Inclusion and Social Impact Division of the IIT has been involved from the beginning.

3. The IIT as an Exception in the Italian Research Landscape: A Brief Presentation

Founded in 2003, the IIT’s research is based on the constant cross-fertilisation of new knowledge and innovative technologies. Its actual activities in this area only began after a few years. From the very beginning, the IIT showed great potential, building a complex structure from scratch and providing services to the scientific community quickly and professionally (Robbiano, 2022). Its motto is: “Where Science Comes True.” Due to its success, the Italian government decided to transfer the organisational structure of the IIT to other research foundations, which were to be established under the now expert leadership of the IIT. Currently, the IIT’s mission is based on three pillars, which are anchored in the latest Strategic Plan 2024–2029, as shown in Figure 1.

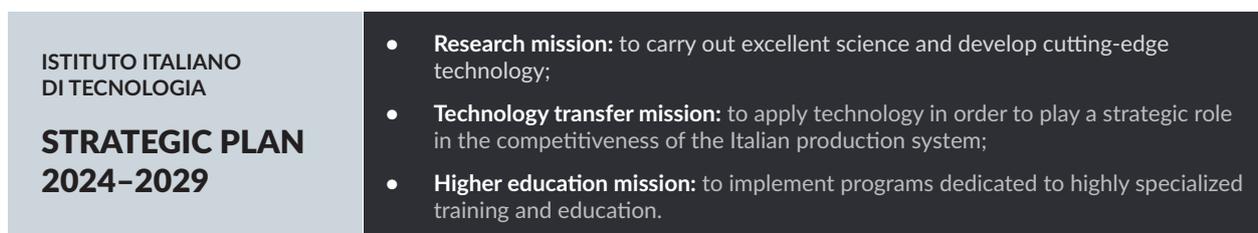


Figure 1. The IIT’s pillars. Source: Istituto Italiano di Tecnologia (2024, p.11).

Around 80 research units are divided into four major research areas: robotics, nanomaterials, LifeTech, and computational sciences, each led by a principal investigator. With around 2,000 staff members and 80 principal investigators, each heading a research unit, IIT staff come from all over the world, combining over 70 different nationalities and an average age of 36. Being a young institution, the number of patents filed between 2008 and 2023 with at least one author from the institute (1321), the amount of funding received (617 million), the number of projects approved by the European Research Council with a principal investigator at the IIT (71 by 2023, 11 of which in 2023), the number of scientific publications (21316) and the start-ups that the IIT has successfully launched (34) are impressive (Di Bella et al., 2021).

In terms of the cross-section of the workforce by sex at the IIT—and at the national normative level, which provides for two sexes: male/female—the IIT currently employs 57% men (M) and 43% women (F). Table 1 provides gender-disaggregated data on the composition of staff at different organisational levels, including research support staff, researchers, principal investigators, and top management functions.

Table 1. Gender distribution across organisational levels, in percentage, 2023.

	Female	Male
Research support staff	62	38
Research staff	39	61
Principal investigators	23	77
Top management	31	69

Source: The IIT raw data.

It is immediately noticeable that there is a strong preponderance of males among research staff, PIs and top management and, conversely, an equally strong preponderance of females among research support staff. This mirrors the status quo already observed in other organisations (Griffin, 2022), where research in STEM subjects is conducted by men and administrative support is provided by women (Witz & Savage, 1991).

As far as top management is concerned, around 69% (24 out of 35) of the highest management positions were held by men and around 31% (11 out of 31) by women in 2023. These leadership positions are represented by the president, the scientific director, the director general (all of whom are male), the Scientific Committee (17 members, 7 women), and the Directorate for Research Support (15 members, 4 women).

At the research staff level, the gender balance is, as expected (Cervia & Biancheri, 2017; Fissi et al., 2022), greatest in the lower positions, namely postdocs, research fellows, and doctoral students. In general, female research staff are more concentrated in the research fields of nanomaterials and LifeTech, where they also occupy higher positions (Gaiaschi, 2023). In contrast, female researchers are underrepresented in the research fields of robotics and computational science, as shown in the following figure (Checchi et al., 2019).

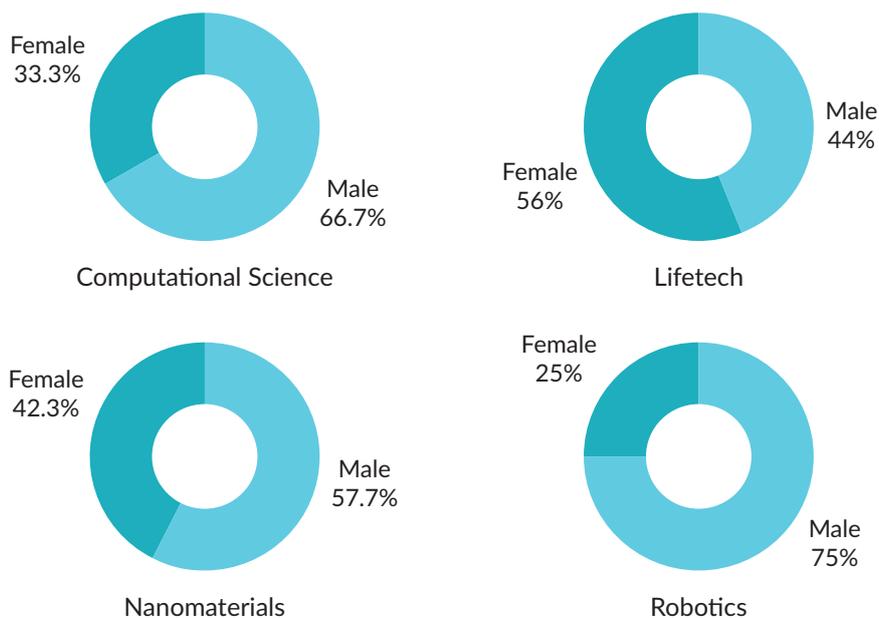


Figure 2. Composition of workforce by gender and scientific field, 2022. Source: IIT internal database and unpublished raw data from 2023.

Even though it is an institution dedicated to innovation and frontier research, and, therefore, subject to constant change (Christensen, 1997/2023), and despite the young average age of its members, the IIT reproduces the paradigm of gender segregation both in scientific fields and in labour and management positions (Avolio et al., 2020; Biasin & Chianese, 2020). Nevertheless, gender representation and distribution at the IIT can be considered relatively progressive by Italian standards, where inequality and underrepresentation in other research and academic institutions are often even more severe (Fissi et al., 2022).

Figure 3 shows the positioning of the IIT in the Italian panorama in relation to the Scientific Glass Ceiling Index—the index that measures the relative likelihood of women reaching leadership positions in scientific

careers compared to men, normalised on the basis of the relative presence of women compared to men in all research positions.

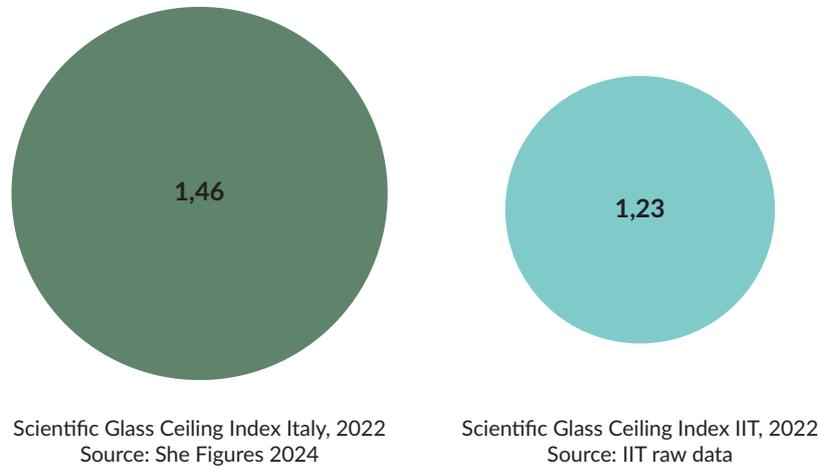


Figure 3. Scientific Glass Ceiling Italy/IIT in comparison. Source: European Commission (2025) and IIT unpublished data (latest available calculation year in each case).

The calculation of the Scientific Glass Ceiling of the IIT was carried out as follows: Required data were the number of women in grades A, B, and C for a given year Y (FGY; head count) and the number of men in grades A, B, and C for a given year Y (MGY; head count).

The formula was the following:

$$\frac{((Fay + Fby + Fcy)/(Fay + Fby + Fcy + May + Mby + Mcy))/Fay}{Fay + May}$$

The population was grouped by role using the taxonomy recommended by the EIGE for European comparability. The closer the index was to 1, the lower the glass ceiling, i.e., the lower the underrepresentation of women among professors/senior scientists.

The index calculated above shows that the IIT performs better than the reference nation. Nevertheless, despite the progress made, significant challenges remain and further efforts are needed to advance gender equality in a sustainable and structural way (Di Bella et al., 2021; Robbiano, 2022).

4. IIT and Its GEP: First Results and Outcomes

4.1. IIT's Values and Commitment to Inclusion

At the core of the IIT lies a set of foundational values—integrity, courage, societal responsibility, and inclusion—that serve as operational guidelines that guide both institutional policy and daily practice. The IIT was founded as an international research centre and attaches great importance to diversity. This is also reflected in the very international composition of its staff: Around a third of the staff come from abroad, a significant proportion of them from non-European countries. This global orientation has contributed to the development of an organisational culture that actively fosters non-discrimination and inclusivity across all levels of the institution.

However, when it came to developing a GEP, the IIT did not simply choose to fulfil mandated requirements, but instead developed an approach that reflected its unique institutional identity. Unlike many other research institutions in Italy, IIT has included an ‘Area Zero’ in its GEP—its intention being to go beyond gender equality and pursue a holistic, intersectional vision (Eigenmann et al., 2024; Verloo, 2006) of inclusion (Dixon-Fyle et al., 2020). This commitment—initially robust, at least on a formal level, especially on the part of the scientific leadership—diminished more and more over time. The initial input and first design reflect the complex dual identity of the IIT: an institution embedded in the regional context of Liguria, yet with a distinctly international and supranational orientation.

Since the first formal establishment and implementation of the GEP in 2021, the IIT has been monitoring the measures set out in it, measuring its impact (Brescianini et al., 2024), and comparing the results with the KPIs shared by the scientific and academic community (Abramo et al., 2013; Kairuz et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2020). Thereafter, if necessary, corrective actions were implemented to improve the impact on the institution, as in 2022 and 2023, when some of the planned actions were postponed due to major organisational changes or union consultations. In particular, the IIT GEP includes concrete strategies and actions aimed at removing potential barriers that could limit women’s careers within the institute. These include initiatives that benefit the whole community to promote fair and transparent recruitment, access to training and development programmes as well as the creation of a working environment that upholds diversity and inclusion, and enables a good work–life balance.

The first major action after the first IIT GEP was the permanent establishment of the Diversity, Inclusion and Social Impact Division with the appointment of a diversity and inclusion manager and the approval and funding of the GEP itself (actions implemented in 2021). In addition, a policy statement on “equal opportunity, diversity and inclusion” and “combating harassment, sexual misconduct and bullying” was adopted, and a clear reporting procedure for such incidents was introduced, as defined in the IIT Code of Conduct for Scientific Behaviour adopted in December 2022.

The GEP provided the IIT with the opportunity to continue its first training on the gender dimension in research and the analysis of the gender pay gap in top scientific positions, which was carried out in 2022. The initial outcomes of the GEP also included the implementation of the first D&I survey conducted within the IIT in 2022, the results of which played a key role in the development of the first Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan. This plan aimed to expand and integrate the GEP’s inclusive goals to promote a more equitable and inclusive work environment.

Although the GEP seemed to be going well, it suffered its first setback in 2023. In fact, a number of actions that were planned for this year had to be postponed, even if they had already been planned. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise that many of these delays and changes were due to new regulations, such as the new European Charter for Researchers or new trade union negotiations.

4.2. GEP Key Actions: Challenges and Setbacks

The following presents a selection of additional and exemplary measures that the IIT has implemented as part of its GEP.

A distinctive aspect of the Institute is the selection of scientific staff, which results from the fact that the IIT is a private organisation that receives public funding. It therefore takes a private approach to negotiations and contracts and has introduced features of Anglo-Saxon and particularly American private selection procedures, with the tenure-track system for researchers moving from one phase to the next of the tenure process, which, if successful, leads to a fixed-term contract as an IIT researcher. The procedure can take up to 10 years if the evaluation committee reacts favourably at the various stages. At the end, the successful researcher is offered a permanent contract and position. Independent of this, the IIT sets up evaluation and selection committees when it recruits new staff. The GEP has planned an intervention in this important area by organising awareness-raising activities to promote gender equality in the evaluation committees for the selection and promotion of staff, including tenure track. The first gender measurement of the members of the evaluation committees revealed a strong gender imbalance. In 2022, the committees were composed of an overwhelming majority of male reviewers (68%), with women representing less than a third (32%). In this case, the GEP measures did not achieve the expected results and were confronted with the status quo of the reference scientific environment, with the composition of the evaluation committees not changing significantly in the following year (67%–33%). This, however, was largely due to chance factors rather than a change in institutional orientation. Indeed, social, cultural, and environmental factors influence people's abilities and their ability to pursue careers, reach top positions, or occupy the highest posts in research and innovation (Bradley et al., 2009). No matter how hard we try to achieve gender balance, for example, in evaluation committees, it is always difficult to find females with the necessary background and preparation. Where this is the case, women are inundated with requests to participate in evaluation committees at both national and international levels, representing a very small number of people and thus facing a greater burden than their male counterparts (Bagues et al., 2017; Parkouda & Liao, 2024).

A very similar approach can be applied to the gender pay gap, another fundamental measure included in the IIT's GEP. A gender pay gap does not necessarily mean discrimination. It can also result from various factors, including occupational segregation, differences in career progression, and others (Goldin, 2008, 2014). For a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon, the IIT conducted a detailed analysis, taking into account factors such as job roles, years of experience, and scientific indicators.

As for measures for the reduction of the gender pay gap and the creation of a decision aid tool to make fair pay policy choices for principal investigators, the IIT's GPGI reflected similar behaviour to that analysed above, which the authors of this article believe is due to casual factors primarily, rather than a tangible result of GEP implementation and cultural change. It is a fact that the KPI for 2023 was worse than that for 2022, where the measure in question was not recognised as fundamental to lasting and sustainable change. This says a lot about gender equality in organisations, as demonstrated by several scholars over the last decades (European Commission et al., 2016; Pillinger, 2023) and confirmed in various European Commission reports (Plantenga & Remery, 2006).

The GPGI at IIT was calculated using the formula:

$$\frac{(\text{average male salary}/\text{average male hours}) - (\text{average female salary}/\text{average female hours})}{\text{average male salary}/\text{average male hours}}$$

The number of female staff has increased from 2021 to 2023, and the pay gap has remained fairly stable. In 2021, the gap was 10%, meaning that women earned on average 10% less than men; in 2022, the gap

increased to 13%, indicating a worsening of the pay gap; in 2023, the gap decreased slightly to 11%, which is a small improvement but still higher than in 2021.

The indicator considered the average gross hourly wage for men and women, function, research area, and age group in order to measure gender-specific wage discrimination. All staff units were taken into account for the calculation, both permanent and external staff, assuming a contribution of 40 hours per week for the latter and including staff on part-time contracts. This study emphasises the significant salary differences between male and female employees (Verashchagina & Capparucci, 2013). Despite the consistent improvement in the representation of female staff at the IIT, the GPGI remains significant and persistent. According to the European Commission and EUROSTAT, the GPGI in the European Union was 12.7% in 2022—i.e., women earn 0.87 euros for every 1 euro earned by a man (European Commission, 2023, 2024)—and still represents an unresolved challenge (Leythienne & Pérez-Julián, 2021). At the same time, the IIT represents one of the best results in Italy, a country where only 55% of working-age women are employed (in the EU, around 70% as per 2022 data; see European Commission, 2024).

Concerning gender over- or under-representation in certain areas, the GEP team immediately identified the weak points and took action to attract the under-represented genders in the organisational units (research units and central administrative offices) that have a higher gender gap in the distribution of staff, and then calculated the recruitment success rate by gender (Checchi et al., 2019). This rate calculates the frequency of successful female and male applicants in relation to the total number of applications received for advertised positions. The indicator refers to all selection procedures, including those for the tenure-track programme. In this case, there has not only been a growing interest in the subject, but also a significant improvement. The success rate of female applicants (1.10% in 2023, 1.72% in 2022) for a position has come closer to that of male applicants (1.29% in 2023, 2.13% in 2022), although the difference is still notable.

5. The Case of Area Zero

As it is not possible in this short article to analyse all of the IIT's activities about the individual measures of the GEP, we will now focus on the specific area that the IIT has added—"Area Zero: An inclusive culture"—which is particularly dedicated to inclusion and gender-specific participation in research results, production, and funding. This area was developed to better align the GEP with the specific characteristics of the IIT described above and to develop training on gender equality and equity specifically for managers, leaders, and senior researchers, and make it an integral part of induction and familiarisation activities for all individuals starting at the IIT. In addition, Area Zero was created with the aim of offering e-learning modules on the various dimensions of equal opportunities and inclusion to promote a broad awareness of equality at all organisational levels with an intersectional approach (Bonu Rosenkranz & della Porta, 2024; Sangiuliano, 2019).

In this area, a high level of staff participation in training activities, including webinars and training on specific topics, was noted. Activities focused on recognising and raising awareness of prejudice, inclusive language, mental health, and wellbeing. A total of eight activities were delivered with a total of 265 participants. The qualitative evaluation showed overwhelmingly positive results and will be the subject of further publications in the future.

Regarding the scientific indicators and technology transfer, it is generally recognised that they can effectively demonstrate an individual's actual involvement in knowledge production or exploitation (Truss et al., 2012) and their importance for different aspects of career progression (Otero-Hermida & García-Melón, 2018). To this end, the scientific indicators used at the IIT for an initial assessment were calculated using a database defined with the full counting metric. This metric assigns full credit to each author if a research product, such as publications, citations, or other products, was produced in collaboration with others. The data for scientific staff refers to the years 2021, 2022, and 2023 and comes from the IIT databases.

In particular, the indicators for scientific publications were realigned to publications with authors categorised according to their stated gender in the selected three years studied. Both indicators show a remarkable stability of values between 2022 and 2023 (72% male authors, 28% female authors). It is noteworthy that the proportion of publications authored by female authors increased slightly in 2022 compared to the data from 2021 (73%-27%), as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of publications by gender, in percentage.

Year	Female authors	Male authors
2021	27	73
2022	28	72
2023	28	72

Source: The IIT raw data.

These percentages do not accurately reflect the—albeit still disproportionate—breakdown of research staff by gender and thus support the justified criticism of an impossible gender-blind assessment of publications and research performance in general (Khosravi & Chavan, 2012), which also raises some criticisms of the blind use of KPIs.

It is recognised that monitoring the gender dynamics of applicants, recipients, and gatekeepers of research funding, funding processes, instruments, and criteria, as well as the role of key funding organisations, plays a central role in promoting gender equality in research. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to ensure that all genders can influence the research agenda and scientific progress (Acker et al., 2024; Biasin & Chianese, 2020). The discussion on this important topic at the European level goes back a long way (European Commission, 2009; Tildesley et al., 2022). At the IIT, similar percentages as for publications are also observed in the acquisition of external research funds, with a distribution of 73% of funds with a male scientific supervisor and 27% female supervisors in 2022 and 2023. This was a slight increase in the percentage compared to 2021, when the ratio of men and women was 77%–23%. In addition, the percentage of participation in fundraising is disproportionately high if we consider the economic value of the contributions received (Abramo et al., 2013; Montorsi, 2021). In this case, the gap widens as a female researcher receives a lower economic return, as shown in the following Table 3.

In this context, “economic value” refers to the total amount of external research funding received and not just the number of contracts concluded. While the percentage of contracts awarded to male and female collaborators suggests a certain level of participation in fundraising, the gender disparity is more evident in the actual monetary value generated by these contracts (Cruz-Castro et al., 2023). The authors agree that one of the most common reasons for this is that women, even when successful, apply for less funding than

Table 3. External research funding and economic value comparison, in percentage.

Year	Number of contracts		Economic value	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
2021	77	23	72	28
2022	73	27	78	22
2023	73	27	86	14

Source: The IIT raw data.

their male counterparts. Alternatively, they do the same work for less money, in a kind of analogy to the GPI described above (Abramo et al., 2013; Acker et al., 2024). Although the gender gap in research funding and fundraising has remained relatively constant, economic inequality at the IIT has widened significantly, especially in the last year observed, 2023. This confirms that the gender gap is still active (Cruz-Castro et al., 2023), including in terms of how differential participation and success in fundraising might affect women’s performance in science and research implementation (Hermansson et al., 2021; Schmalig & Gallo, 2023), with women suffering from performance bias and often underestimating their own value, while conversely men demanding more for the same work from an economic perspective (Babcock & Laschever, 2021).

In response to the implementation of the GEP, the IIT was given the opportunity to conduct a comprehensive analysis of gender representation in IIT entrepreneurship. The indicator adopted considers the prevalence of gender in start-ups, taking into account their corporate structures, and is calculated annually for each individual start-up. In 2023, based on the start-ups monitored by the Directorate of Technology Transfer, women associated with IIT (or employed by IIT staff at the time the start-up was founded) account for 12% of IIT staff in the overall corporate structure of start-ups. This figure represents a significant improvement compared to 2021 (9%) and remains unchanged compared to 2022 (12%).

Despite a modest improvement in the data, this study once again emphasises the pervasive gender inequality in entrepreneurship as highlighted by Gupta et al. (2009). Even in areas where the production of knowledge and novel products is more evenly distributed between the genders (Marlow & Patton, 2005; Reyes, 2022), male entrepreneurship remains largely dominant.

As for the observation of intellectual property rights, patenting trends were observed using data from a database defined by the complete count method described above. In this case, the method fully assigns each research product, in particular the priority patent applications, to each inventor if it was created in collaboration with others. The data on scientific personnel are considered as of 31 December 2021, 2022, and 2023. The most important indicator analysed was the gender distribution of inventors in priority patent applications filed between 2021 and 2023, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Distribution of priority patent applications by gender, in percentage.

Year	Male	Female
2021	84	16
2022	76	24
2023	75	25

Source: The IIT raw data.

In this context, the term “priorities” refers to priority patent applications, which are the first official applications for an invention. A priority patent application establishes an early filing date for the invention and gives the applicant a legal advantage when seeking patent protection in multiple countries.

The data shows that while female inventors are gaining presence in patenting, they are still a minority, demonstrating a persistent gender gap in technological innovation and patent ownership (Caviggioli et al., 2022; Pecis, 2016).

6. Conclusions: GEP as a Driving Force at the Cultural and Institutional Level

In summary, this article has highlighted the existing gap in the study of how the principles of EDI, particularly gender equality, intersect with the pursuit of scientific excellence in research and innovation organisations. While a growing body of literature critically examines these dynamics in academic institutions—often from a sociological perspective (e.g., Acker et al., 2024; Griffin, 2022)—there remains a notable lack of focused analyses on non-academic research institutions, particularly those operating in STEM fields. In contrast to universities, where such frameworks have been more extensively studied and implemented (Agodi et al., 2021), research institutions have received comparatively little attention. This study made an initial contribution to this under-researched area by examining how GEPs are implemented in a research-intensive context and suggesting directions for further investigation and development.

In the first instance, the GEP had enabled the IIT to systematically collect and analyse data disaggregated by gender and position, which was unique among research institutions. As far as we know, prior to the implementation of the mandatory GEP requirements by the European Commission, there were only a few public research institutions that kept comprehensive data disaggregated by gender and specific fields according to the GEP (RQ1; Nielsen, 2016; Verloo, 2006). This example could, thus, be perceived as disruptive, whereas scientific measurement and metrics have so far only served to measure and evaluate scientific excellence using a supposedly gender-blind method (Mayer & Rathmann, 2018).

Secondly, despite the fact that it is a transformative institution, institutional changes cannot be introduced and have an impact within a few years. In general, in response to RQ2, there is still a lack of commitment in leadership positions and a genuine interest in ensuring that GEP measures do not remain GEP measures forever, but are embedded in the organisational culture of the institution (Bencivenga et al., 2021a). A stronger commitment from higher levels within the institute could pave the way to prove that the GEP was not the classic ticking-off exercise (Tzanakou et al., 2021; Wroblewski & Palmén, 2022) in order to gain access to European funding. The group that implemented the GEP’s measures immediately encountered perhaps the most widespread resistance, namely a lack of interest or motivation to adhere to it and raise awareness, which in turn could have a multiplier effect and lead to cultural change, which corresponds to RQ1 and RQ3 (Agodi et al., 2021). Intensive monitoring and constant feedback were key to the GEP’s success, ensuring its actions were well publicised within the IIT and that everyone was aware of its activities. Participation of individuals was encouraged by all means available, including offering multiple time slots and customised content for different participants. Over the years, strategies were then developed to mitigate resistance and potential barriers (Wroblewski & Palmén, 2022), with a crescendo of activities and a constant effort to respond to the needs arising in the early years of the GEP—until today. However, the question of top management commitment remains open.

Thirdly, the IIT's GEP has triggered actions and reflections that have gone beyond the minimum requirements, with measures that have successfully promoted a more inclusive and equitable institutional culture—providing a first response to RQ3. Indeed, it has provided the IIT with an invaluable opportunity to critically engage with transversal issues of crucial relevance, such as inclusion and the promotion of an equitable work environment. Nevertheless, the need for further incorporation of the GEP in institutional culture is evident (Cannito et al., 2023; Caprile, 2021), as seen in the fact that the indicators for the institution's performance were not integrated with those for disaggregated data, with gender participation or with the gender composition of the KPIs in the last strategic plan (RQ1, RQ2). Even today, activities are still only seen as GEP-related measures, often owned by those who implement them without becoming part of the cultural substrate of the individual, starting with the top positions. Of course, there are also major exceptions, and in the years that IIT has been implementing the GEP, we have seen lively participation in GEP-related events, including from PIs who are genuinely interested in cultural change. This is one of the main positive outcomes of GEP activities, not only highlighting the importance of the individual in the organisation, but also providing opportunities to represent key flagships, which are both important examples of how organisations can be transformed starting from their people (Christensen, 1997/2023). Another important example is the fact that the IIT participates in several projects funded by the Horizon Europe framework programme that address issues such as equality, diversity, inclusion, and gender.

The last reference concerns the right to representation on governing bodies (Bagues et al., 2017). Italy is a country that has had to equip itself with gender quotas (Checchi et al., 2019), i.e., laws at national level that require a minimum participation of women in certain bodies allowing female participation in key or leadership positions, such as director's boards in listed companies, or public selection bodies to name a few (Arzu & Mantovani, 2020; Fissi et al., 2022; Perna et al., 2019). Given the historical composition of IIT boards, the question arises as to whether the introduction of mandatory quotas for gender representation would promote the transition to better representation in IIT's top positions as well (Bagues et al., 2017). In an institution where the only benchmark is excellence, where merit trumps all, one should still pause and ask the question of all time when it comes to gender and representation. If it is true that representation is a fruit of co-optation among peers, that a career that exceeds one's abilities is often a postulate of one's possibilities, then the issue we speak of in this conclusion might also be grounded in an institution based on excellence and merit. This idea, however, does not attempt to undermine the reach of gender mainstreaming by reducing it to a non-issue or a nameless problem (Goldin, 2021; Kelan, 2018). With Campanini and Pizarro (2021), Celis and Lovenduski (2018), and Galligan (2007), the authors agree, then, that representation is power.

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