Gender Equality in Academia and Research

Basic requirements and success factors for realising a Gender Equality Plan

A number of elements can be pointed out as supporting gender equality work in research organisations and higher education institutions. These are impact drivers for effective change. When these impact drivers are present in the organisation, the efforts towards gender equality are more likely to succeed.

Impact drivers at organisational level

Senior management support

Explicit and clearly communicated support and backing from the top of the organisation provides legitimacy to the gender equality work. This legitimacy in turn offers the perspective of integrating the changes sustainably into the internal procedures and systems. It also significantly reduces the chances that gender equality initiatives are opposed. When the top expressly supports gender equality, it is easier to mobilise all components, levels, communities, as well as resources, within the organisation. Support from the top can reduce individuals' fear that they might harm their scientific reputation by engaging with gender equality work. When referring to the 'top', the central governing bodies and people in decision-making positions are meant: (vice) rectors, (vice) chancellors, deans, presidents or executive directors.

A well-equipped and well-located gender equality body

Such central structure coordinates and monitors the gender equality efforts that are undertaken. It provides gender mainstreaming with human resources, knowledge and expertise. Its clear mandate and location in the institution is important. It has to be located at the appropriate level so as to effectively support the implementation of the gender equality work. Proximity to decision-making, capacity to inform human resources and scientific management offer better guarantees for an effective implementation. Knowledge (among others sex-disaggregated data) is key to equip these bodies. It is also important that gender equality bodies exert some leadership on gender mainstreaming implementation, with the support of executive bodies.

Cooperation among different categories of stakeholders

Cooperation among stakeholders is paramount to achieve sustainable changes in all components of the organisation. Building alliances with key stakeholders is not sufficient. Broader networks between the organisation's units, spanning different organisational and/or disciplinary sub-cultures, are also necessary. A clear distribution of tasks and responsibilities among stakeholders must however be ensured. Connecting stakeholders inside the organisation can furthermore be usefully complemented with external alliances. The more widespread stakeholder support is, the more resilient will be the change efforts.

Embedment into existing structures and management procedures

Anchoring gender equality provisions into existing structures and practices ensures institutionalisation and strengthens the sustainability of planned measures. For instance, measures targeting recruitment and appraisal should be incorporated in broader recruitment and career management procedures. Similarly, gender training initiatives are more likely to be institutionalised, if incorporated in broader training or life-long learning schemes. Monitoring instruments, in the forms of quantitative and qualitative indicators or regular surveys, gain relevance and sustainability when incorporated into routinised management procedures.

Impact drivers at process level

Stakeholder involvement in planning and implementation

Stakeholder participation in planning and implementation is key, as it creates feelings of ownership. Collaborative planning processes yield measures which are likely to reach a greater impact. Bringing together different stakeholders (including decision-makers), with different expertise and types of knowledge about the functioning of the organisation, is productive. It helps building more targeted policies, anticipating potential resistances and pursuing greater acceptance and support. A mixed team (in terms of positions within the organisation, genders, seniority or disciplinary backgrounds) can also more easily initiate strategies for gender equality that permeate the whole organisation. A collaborative process provides time for dialogue, clarifying objectives and responsibilities, thus generating synergies and increased legitimacy and ownership for the implementation of proposed measures.

Clear targets and objectives

In a first step, gender equality needs to be framed as a meaningful issue, relevant to the whole community, and providing an explanation of what a gender equality plan is and entails. Being practical and concrete in formulating objectives and setting targets can effectively support the ownership of the strategy by the whole research community. Objectives should not (only) be long term, but also short- and mid-term, in order to better account for failures, successes and challenges. Gender equality planning should thus be driven by clear objectives and targets, defined for each planned measure and/or intervention area, along with clearly ascribed responsibilities with regard to their attainment.

Flexibility and resilience

Whereas clear targets and objectives indicate the orientation of the actions, there is a need to adopt a flexible approach as to how to reach these goals. A balance needs to be found between planned activities and the actual shape of the project after some time. A key to success is the ability to adapt and reinterpret the plan in cooperation with the growing circles of stakeholders that the key team manages to involve.

"Action Plans were designed before the starting date of the project, while an executive and more detailed planning was made in the first period of implementation and repeated at the beginning of each year. What clearly emerged is that the **Action Plans constantly needed adaptation and redesign** to keep the project relevant to emerging contextual situations, needs and priorities of the organisations. In some cases, **redesign was key to the success of the Action Plan**, since the team succeeded with time and experience in grasping the real triggers for change and arranged actions and resources accordingly. This points to the need to not go overboard with an overly detailed and structured ex-ante design. What is more important is, rather, to **keep the plan open to new needs and opportunities**." (STAGES Guidelines, 2015)"

Availability of sex-disaggregated data

[Sex-disaggregated data and other data](#) relevant to document the status of gender (in-)equality within the organisation are indispensable for designing effective strategies. The availability (i.e. existence and accessibility) of such data is a pre-condition for the impact of measures and initiatives. Indeed, making proposed measures evidenced-based not only allows for adequately distributing resources and tackling problems, but also for overcoming potential resistances and monitoring achievements. In case data are not present, the launch of in-depth auditing processes in the form of surveys, focus groups, pilot interviews, provide necessary grounds for further work.

Competence development

Implementing a Gender Equality Plan, as in any type of organisation, necessitates knowledge and expertise. This is not only to be guaranteed at the time of designing and planning measures, but also for their implementation and monitoring. Competence development, which allows for transferring and enhancing knowledge among a greater number of stakeholders, should therefore be pursued.

Monitoring instruments

Creating implementation follow-up mechanisms is paramount. Those can take the form of implementation clusters or networks, regular surveys or data collection, and of indicators that are fully integrated in governance and management monitoring systems. Follow-up indicators increase the validity and sustainability of gender mainstreaming strategies. For example, in Sweden, quantitative indicators are used to monitor goals on recruitment and upwards mobility, and work environments are monitored by means of a survey. These methods provide key instruments for the overall assessment of the gender equality work. Both qualitative and quantitative indicators have to be SMART: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Time-related.

Evaluation

Mid- or long-term evaluation of gender mainstreaming strategies will not be possible when monitoring mechanisms are absent or insufficient. This is detrimental to the effectiveness of future strategies, because evaluations allow to draw upon lessons learnt from previous initiatives. Evaluations also provide visibility and measurability of actual progress, which cannot always be formally attributed to the implementation of specific measures. This reality undermines the capacity of their promoters to assess their achievements and communicate about them. Evaluations, as monitoring, are especially key because changing institutions in prospect for greater equality and the integration of a gender perspective in research content, are two overarching objectives that require time to be achieved.

An overview of the success factors listed above can be found in this Roadmap to Gender Equality Plans in research and higher education institutions.