

Gender Equality in Academia and Research

Resistance and common challenges – and how to overcome them

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Challenges to the set-up, roll-out, implementation, management, monitoring and evaluation of a gender equality plan (GEP) are manifold and frequent. Some challenges are related to a lack of [success factors](#); others may take pervasive forms of resistance or are institutional and/or administrative barriers that need to be tackled in a range of ways. It is important to state that work on gender equality does not usually happen rapidly and may appear slow, with concrete results and achievements not being fully realised for a number of years. In the following, challenges in relation to gender equality work and GEPs are pointed out. Suggestions on how to overcome these challenges are also provided.

Resistance

Resistance can take numerous forms and manifestations: it can be **explicitly** expressed, but can also be **implicitly** expressed by an individual's insufficient action or lack of action or engagement in a process or a GEP. There can be **personal resistance** (e.g. due to individual beliefs, motives) and **institutional resistance**, which consists of a systematic, ongoing, sustained pattern of non-engagement with the issue of gender equality and a pronounced lack of support for a GEP. Resistance can take the form of **gender-specific resistance**, if the reasons are connected to opposing views on gender equality (activities). However, resistance can also be directed at change processes in general or be related to personal conflicts, fear of more bureaucracy and workload (**non-gender-specific resistance**). Some forms of measures in GEPs, such as proposed quotas or changing promotion mechanisms, may be particularly prone to triggering resistance.

For more information on the different forms of resistance, see the female empowerment in science and technology academia (FESTA) handbook on resistance (see the resources in tab 3).

Overcoming resistance

Overcoming resistance can be challenging. All levels of staff need to be enabled to realise the value of gender equality work, and this may involve training or specific time allocation for work on the Gender Equality Plan. Commitment that is unequivocal and visible from the highest levels of management is required to overcome resistance and to ensure progress in relation to gender equality. Involving stakeholders in identifying and naming problems and resistance points may also be useful. This way, solutions can emerge and ownership of the solutions is not only held by one group or person. Lack of knowledge and understanding may also manifest as resistance, in this case the suggestions contained in the '[Lack of understanding of gender equality and/or a gender equality plan](#)' challenge heading may be helpful. Some may also fear an increased workload due to gender equality measures, which can be prevented by designing efficient measures, using synergies and making time resources available.

It is advisable to frame the agenda together with one that your colleagues are more familiar with, relating to their own agenda, for example promoting equality in order to promote excellence by not allowing gender, race, ethnic origin, disability or any other irrelevant variable to intervene in appointment and promotion, or embedding it in a policy of a 'positive work environment', from which everyone could benefit. It is also recommended that the terminology is adapted if the term 'gender' provokes too much resistance, for example by focusing on 'equal opportunities'. Examples from other organisations and countries can help to frame the topic in a more positive way. It is also important to note that some individuals will not be cooperative and supportive under any circumstances; in this case it may be more productive and efficient to focus on institutional forms of resistance and/or to engage other committed and supportive staff and colleagues, rather than to try to change these resistant individuals.

Have a look at tabs 2 and 3 for more valuable resources and tools on resistance and how to overcome it. In addition, the arguments for involving specific stakeholders contained in the section on [stakeholders](#) might be helpful.

Challenges regarding: Engagement and mobilisation of stakeholders

Of course, it is easier to develop and implement a GEP if the organisation is aware of gender equality issues, recognises the need for a GEP and supports its activities, especially the senior management. However, this ideal case does not happen too often. Getting (almost) everyone on board can prove difficult. Hereafter, you can find common challenges in this regard.

Lack of (early) stakeholder engagement

The first crucial step in mobilising and engaging stakeholders is to identify who needs to be communicated with and engaged in the development and roll-out stages of a GEP. Factoring in the time for finding and engaging allies is important to avoid challenges at a later stage of implementation of the plan, for example in the form of resistance because of not feeling ownership. However, communicating and working with a diverse set of stakeholders is a challenge in itself. If you are unsure who to involve and how, have a look at the [stakeholders](#) section.

Lack of participating men

Involving various people of the organisation in the process of designing and implementing a GEP is important in order to receive widespread approval for gender equality measures. Some groups are more difficult to involve than others. Men, in particular, are often difficult to reach and hard to get to participate in activities. A lot of them seem to think that they are not co-responsible for gender equality and cannot benefit from it. It is thus a common perspective that gender equality is a job for women. In order to increase men's participation, they must be made aware of their significance in promoting gender equality. Furthermore, it should be clarified to men that they could also benefit from gender equality measures, such as a diverse working culture or a better work–life balance. Therefore, it should be examined and discussed, whether activities can or should be opened to all genders. If there are already some men who are active in gender equality work or convinced by the agenda, you can rely more upon them. It is also recommendable to connect with men holding positions of power and find common ground between their professional agenda and gender equality work. However, when engaging in a dialogue about privileges, it should be kept in mind that not all men have the same privileges due to their ethnicity, disciplinary background, gender expression, sexual orientation and other intersecting dimensions.

Lack of awareness or understanding of gender equality (plans)

In some organisations, there can be a fundamental lack of understanding regarding the need for and importance of gender equality. Little awareness of the gendered nature of current systems and methods of evaluating research and innovation (R & I) has been identified as a challenge. Not all organisational members and stakeholders always agree on the problem of gender inequalities. This can lead to lack of engagement and involvement of key stakeholders, the relevance of the work being minimised and gender equality being considered a 'woman's issue'. It can also have the effect that gender equality is seen as not necessary or as contradictory to meritocracy or scientific excellence (see below). A lack of understanding and awareness can also be a cause of resistance. To counteract this, it is important to reiterate that gender equality is not a minority, marginal issue, but concerns each and every person in an organisation. Gender equality may also need to be framed as key to developing a successful, open and forward-thinking research and higher education institution that respects and enables everyone working and studying there. Setting up a GEP, which is fully and publicly supported by senior managers and leaders, will help to give visibility to gender equality. Basic (possibly mandatory) training and/or seminars, in person or online – for all staff in an organisation – on gender equality and meetings with stakeholders may also be required (see [examples of training initiatives in the gender equality in academia and research \(GEAR\) action toolbox](#)) This is to ensure a collective, shared understanding of the importance of gender equality and related work. Ensuring that time is allocated to this training in staff work schedules gives gender equality prominence within an institution and frames it as an organisational priority. Finally, explaining what a GEP entails (and does not entail) may also be required (possibly with relevant examples shared among staff).

Belief that gender equality work contradicts the value of meritocracy or scientific excellence

Some individuals in organisations may believe that the requirement for a GEP or work on gender equality contradicts the commitment to scientific excellence or promotion on merit. Moreover, some may believe that gender inequalities are partly self-inflicted by women because they are not self-confident enough. This belief appears to have led to an absence of women in various fields and at higher levels of academia or research settings. In fact, a commitment to excellence in research requires a diversity of expertise, experience and staff, as well as the assurance to attract and retain the most talented staff. There are two ways to address this challenge: first, by providing and promoting [training](#) (e.g. on unconscious bias) for all staff within an organisation, and, second, by referring to international and European research and reports on this topic, which may be useful in order to convince colleagues and stakeholders of the importance of gender equality and GEPs. In the specific case of lower-intensive research, or 'widening' countries, a case is to be built that bridging the gender gap and bridging the knowledge and innovation gap correlate. More concretely, expanding the pool of talent, tackling unconscious bias or better addressing gender-relevant aspects through groundbreaking research together contribute to enhancing excellence and can result in a competitive advantage. For more material to support your arguments against this belief, have a look at tabs 2 and 3 of this page, for example the video of the ACT project on meritocracy.

Opinion that gender equality work is not required or denial

In some settings, countries or academic disciplines, the perception prevails that gender equality measures and GEPs are unnecessary. You may also find a 'job done' attitude. This may be attributed to women being well represented in certain disciplines, fields, faculties or sectors, or a historical legacy of gender equality work in an organisation. In a number of cases, other organisational everyday matters seem to be more urgent and gender equality as part of change processes falls into oblivion. In spite of the best intentions, gender equality measures are unconsciously left out. In addition, some believe that gender equality issues will improve on their own, without the need for special activities or resources, or specific issues are considered as neutral, but are in fact impacted by power relations. In this case, it may be beneficial to conduct a status quo analysis and regular monitoring, for example with a survey, focus groups or an in-depth quantitative analysis of human resources (HR) data to be able to pinpoint gender equality issues (see the section on [data collection](#)). It is also important to clarify that developing a GEP and work on gender equality need to be continued and maintained, and are not 'one-off' activities. This is to ensure that the gains previously made are sustainable and flexible enough to adapt to changes in an organisation caused both internally and externally. It is also important to emphasise that ongoing work on gender equality benefits all staff, not only women. In order to spread those arguments and messages within the organisation, awareness-raising measures (e.g. seminars, information days) can be helpful. Keep in mind that denial may also be related to resistance.

Organisational resources

Gender equality work needs a strong foundation in organisational resources: on the one hand regarding human and financial resources, on the other concerning evidence on gender issues in the organisation, and gender knowledge and expertise.

Lack of gender knowledge and expertise

Some universities and research institutions may not have a previous history or tradition of teaching or engaging with gender studies or practical gender equality work. This can be challenging for the team/person responsible for the GEP development and can make it even more difficult to convince staff and stakeholders of the importance and benefits of gender equality work and GEPs. An initial discussion about valuable knowledge could be a remedy in this case. This challenge may require support from and utilisation of gender equality networks (at national, regional or international level) and the buying-in of gender expertise to enhance institutional capacity and knowledge. One challenge in that regard could be that it is not possible to transfer objectives, measures or tasks from other organisations; they can serve as inspiration, but have to be adapted to the specific context of your organisation. Have a look at the videos and webinars in tab 2 and the tools and resources in tab 3, if you want to deepen your knowledge. You can also use the '[Join](#)' section of the GEAR tool to engage with other gender equality practitioners.

Lack of relevant data

A lack of availability of or access to sex-disaggregated HR data and other forms of data (focus groups, interviews, surveys) is a challenge, as these figures and insights are required to develop a status quo assessment of where gender equality work and measures need to be targeted in an organisation. Several case studies pointed to a lack of information and indicators regarding the intervention, which makes effective monitoring and evaluation difficult. Having the data and statistics collated and prepared is also needed to inform and convince stakeholders and counter resistance with actual up-to-date facts and figures. Another challenge for the data collection can be the time lag between the implementation of gender equality measures and their impact, which can also be a challenge for the monitoring and evaluation of GEPs (e.g. students' education period and result of this education in later professional careers). Furthermore, data protection policies and legislation may in some cases (in particular in organisations, faculties or departments with low staff numbers) limit the availability of sex-disaggregated personnel data. Updated HR data collation and management systems may need to be utilised to enable statistics broken down by sex/gender to be generated from existing staff records. Time and costs for collecting and analysing data may need to be factored into the GEP. If specific sex-disaggregated data relevant to your status quo assessment is not readily available in your organisation, it is important to include a specific activity in your GEP to produce a methodology and procedure for collecting this data in a standardised form in the future. Storing any resultant data in a way that complies with European and national data protection requirements is also critical. In addition, it is recommended to use a mix of quantitative (e.g. HR data) and qualitative data (e.g. focus groups) to map the most pressing issues, but also to have information on the reasons behind these issues. In the GEAR tool, you can find more detailed information on [data collection](#) and on [monitoring and evaluation](#).

Lack of human and financial resources

An absence of dedicated, adequate and sustained resources, both human and financial, for gender equality work and for developing, implementing and monitoring GEPs is a common obstacle. A lack of funding can lead to chronic under-resourcing of the work, which may lead to only 'cost-neutral' measures and policies being resorted to. This is despite, in most cases, investment and committed finances being required to accelerate change and to support the initiatives and measures of the GEP. The staff time required to develop and implement a GEP and the status quo analysis, assessment and drafting of a GEP needs to be acknowledged and resourced. Adding to the workload of already overburdened staff, offloading this task to inexperienced or junior staff, and not financially supporting the measures of the GEP give a strong impression that gender equality is not valued at an institutional level. Not funding training on gender or allowing for time in staff schedules to attend such training is another form of not resourcing gender equality work. To overcome this obstacle, the value of gender equality work should be clearly outlined, such as increased staff retention, more robust research, more diversity in staff composition and evident senior-level commitment. The resources needed, both human and financial, to develop and maintain a GEP must be clearly articulated, agreed upon and documented in the early stages of [plan development](#). This is to fully and accurately account for the work involved and to avoid staff burnout, insufficient key stakeholder engagement due to a lack of results, a lack of progress (both short- and long-term) and limited goal achievement. It also demonstrates the commitment and support an organisation has for the GEP and the importance it places on gender equality. A persistent and chronic lack of resources for this work and the GEP may indicate [institutional resistance](#) to the issue ([see section on resistance](#)).

Governance

The work of gender equality is highly dependent on the room for manoeuvre: this means that the national and political context and the organisational set-up in terms of governance influence what can be done and how. For example, translating ideas into formal gender equality structures and policies can be difficult if the organisation has limited authority due to the political environment.

Lack of organisational authority of the gender equality body

The staff involved in the development and roll-out of a GEP may not hold the authority or decision-making powers to promote and drive change in the organisation. This can lead to frustration, limited progress and blockages in terms of goal or output achievement of the GEP. This obstacle can generally be resolved only by early involvement, commitment and ongoing support from senior management in an organisation. This support needs to be visible, perceptible and genuine to all those within an organisation and to those who fund the work of the organisation in order to develop a reputation for deeming gender equality work important. Furthermore, subordinating the body responsible for gender equality directly to senior management can be helpful. In addition, identifying who is needed to grant authority, foster progress and authorise decisions, and liaising with them early on in the process of GEP development, is also crucial.

Lack of autonomy of the organisation

In some countries or regions, organisations may have limited autonomy to enable changes related to gender equality. For example, in some countries, ministries have strong influence on universities or funding bodies. This lack of autonomy may be particularly pronounced in relation to hiring, recruitment, salaries, and promotion procedures and regulations. However, you may want to examine whether the regulation in question applies to all members of the organisation or whether there are groups to which it does not apply (e.g. administrative staff versus academic staff). Organisations have to respect the provisions of the law, but if there is internal drive and a catalyst for change, more can be achieved. Bottom-up approaches can push for change. Identify activists in the organisation to brainstorm creative solutions that comply with the law and, at the same time, promote fairer organisational practices (e.g. on recruitment and career progression). They can also help to put measures in motion and convince senior management and leadership. Alliances need to be sought and built to contribute to a better working environment for all genders. It can also be helpful to form and engage in networks (e.g. university networks, funding agency networks, research-performing networks) in order to collectively make a change in the national context or academic system (see the section on [stakeholders](#)).

The COVID-19 pandemic

COVID-19 and the reactions to it have greatly changed the way we live and work together as a society. Of course, this has been an overarching challenge for organisational gender equality work as well. The pandemic and lockdowns have affected R & I in terms of gender (for more information see '[Why change must be structural](#)'). The effects often caused delays in gender equality work, as it can be quite challenging to collect data and involve stakeholders when individual workloads increase and pandemic-related restrictions are in place, for example to collect feedback on a GEP draft. However, it can also be an opportunity to shed light on gendered aspects of academia (e.g. empirical research on care responsibilities, effects on publication activities), and you can use the results of this kind of research to present a case for your arguments. If you are interested in inspiration for how to design gender-sensitive responses to COVID-19 at your organisation, consult the [GEAR action toolbox](#).

Sustainability

Sustainability represents another overarching challenge. Gender equality is a long-term process and the corresponding measures have to be designed in a way to ensure that gender equality activities persist (e.g. also after the completion of a specific project). Progress and success in relation to gender equality and the implementation of a GEP can be vulnerable to changes, where decisions or progress may be reversed or halted. This can be particularly pronounced when key supporters or drivers at senior management level change functions/roles or leave. Budget changes, cutbacks, restructuring and apathy / gender fatigue can also lead to reduced or limited sustainability of a GEP. To overcome this challenge, embedding commitment to both gender equality and the work related to the GEP in multiple organisational structures is key. This means that support, accountability and commitment for the GEP will need to be sought from multiple stakeholders, and not allocated only to a specific school or department. Allocating a specific multiannual budget to gender equality-related work that does not originate from only one school or department alone also seems to contribute to sustainability. Furthermore, focusing a GEP on anchoring changes in organisational regulations, statutes and structures and applying an approach that contains a mix of different measures addressing gender inequalities at different levels supports sustainable change. Integrating regular monitoring and evaluation structures and/or tools into a GEP may help you to realise when sustainability begins to lag and indicate measures needed prior to crisis points being reached. The sustainability and resilience of any GEP may need to undergo a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats ([SWOT analysis](#) [↗](#)) prior to the GEP's adoption and launch. This is to ensure that it is fit to anticipate and overcome challenges in the future.