

Gender Equality in Academia and Research

Common obstacles and how to overcome them

Obstacles to the set-up, roll-out, implementation, management, monitoring and evaluation of a Gender Equality Plan are many and frequent. Some obstacles may be the lack of [impact drivers](#). Other obstacles may be more pervasive forms of resistance or 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 is usually not rapid: it may appear slow with concrete results and achievements not fully realised for many years. The following are common obstacles in relation to gender equality work and Gender Equality Plans identified in universities and research institutions. Suggestions on how to overcome these challenges are also provided.

Resistance

Resistance be situated at the level of the individual or of the institution, and can take many forms (both explicit and implicit) and manifestations.

Implicit individual resistance can be expressed by an individual's insufficient action or lack of action or disengagement in a process or a Gender Equality Plan.

Explicit individual resistance can be expressed by an individual's overt actions or statements which can target a Gender Equality Plan or actively seek to discredit or dismantle it.

Institutional resistance consists of a systematic, on-going, sustained pattern of non-engagement with the issue of gender equality and a pronounced lack of support for a Gender Equality Plan. Some forms of actions in such Plans, like proposed quotas or changing promotion mechanisms, may be particularly vulnerable to resistance. When a Gender Equality Plan is seen as unachievable or too prescriptive, or if there has not been sufficient information and consultation on the Plan, resistance can also emerge.

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’](#) obstacle heading may be helpful. It is also important to note that some individuals will not be cooperative and supportive in any circumstances, it may be more productive to engage other committed and supportive staff and colleagues rather than to try to change these resistant individuals.

"Promoting equal opportunities is hard work. From a lifetime of working in this field, I am aware it is often greeted with suspicion, defensiveness and overwhelming ennui. It is advisable to ‘frame’ the agenda with one that is more germane to colleagues, relating to their own agendas. In this case, we used two frames. The first was 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. The second was to embed it in a policy of ‘positive work environment’, from which everyone could benefit. (Teresa Rees, in ‘Developing a Research Strategy at a Research Intensive University’ in *The Sage Handbook of Research Management*, R. Dingwall and M. B. McDonnell (eds.), 2015)"

Need inspiration or more information?

- Consult [EIGE’s institutional transformation tool](#), which has a section dedicated to [‘dealing with resistance’](#).
- Stay tuned with the communities of practice established under the EU-funded ACT project, notably as fora for addressing resistances to gender equality in RPOs and RFOs.
- Lombardo E, Mergaert L. [Gender Mainstreaming and Resistance to Gender Training: A Framework for Studying Implementation](#). NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research Vol. 21, Issue 4, 2013.

- The joint webinar on gender bias in leadership and decision-making jointly proposed in 2020 by the EU-funded GEARING-ROLES and Gender Equality Academy projects aims at explaining and deepening the understanding of the role of gender bias while exploring resistances to gender equality, also discussing strategies for tackling bias and resistances will be discussed.
 - The Handbook on resistances to gender equality in the academia elaborated by the EU-funded FESTA project (2016) aims to summarize what barriers are being experienced along the process of change. It provides a list of recommendations for dealing with the barriers and resistances along this process. The handbook thus hopes to give clues to the audience about the possible interpretations of a case of resistance and the suggested practices to tackle it.
 - [More examples.](#)
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Lack of understanding of gender equality and/or a Gender Equality Plan

There can exist a fundamental lack of understanding of the need for and importance of gender equality within some organisations. This can lead to lack of engagement and involvement of key actors, minimising the importance of the work and considering gender equality a ‘woman’s issue’. To counteract this it is important to clearly reiterate that gender equality is not a minority, marginal issue but it concerns all who work 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 all who work and study in it. Setting up a Gender Equality Plan which is fully and publicly supported by senior managers and leaders will help giving visibility to gender equality. Basic (possibly mandatory) training, in person or online, for all staff in an organisation on gender equality may also be required (see examples of awareness-raising and competence development initiatives in the [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 for this training in staff work schedules gives gender equality prominence within an institution and frames it as an organisational priority. Finally, explaining what a [Gender Equality Plan](#) *is* and *is not* may also be required (possibly with relevant examples shared amongst staff). This may ensure a common appreciation of the analysis, content, actions and monitoring that make up an effective and comprehensive Gender Equality Plan.

equality work and/or Gender Equality Plans

Some individuals in organisations may strongly subscribe to the belief that a commitment to academic excellence or promotion on merit alone negates the requirement for a Gender Equality Plan or work on gender equality. This belief appears to have led to an absence of women in many 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 an assurance to attract and retain the highest calibre of staff. There are two ways to address the obstacle faced here. First, by providing and promoting [unconscious bias](#) training for all staff within an organisation. Second, by referring to international and European research and reports on this topic, which may be useful to convince colleagues and stakeholders of the importance of gender equality and Gender Equality Plans. In the specific case of lower-intensive research – or “widening” countries, a case is to be built that correlates bridging the gender gap and bridging the knowledge and innovation gap, as expanding the pool of talents, tackling unconscious bias or better addressing gender relevant aspect through ground-breaking research together contribute to enhancing excellence and can result in a competitive advantage.

For example, you may refer to:

- [She Figures](#), the main source of pan-European, comparable statistics on the state of gender equality in research and innovation.
- [GenPort](#), an online portal and repository that provides access to research, policy and practical materials on gender, science, technology and innovation.
- [Gendered Innovations](#), a website that explains practical methods of sex and gender analysis for scientists and engineers, and provides case studies as concrete illustrations of how sex and gender analysis leads to innovation.
- The [online section dedicated to unconscious bias from the Royal Society](#) (UK and the Commonwealth), where you can find a briefing, some further reading, as well as an animation.

Want to learn more?

- Go to [Key resources](#) and [EIGE's website](#) for more information

Perception that gender equality work is not required or denial

In some settings, countries or academic disciplines there may be a perception that there is no need for gender equality measures or Gender Equality Plans. 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. However, in this case, it is important to clarify that developing a Gender Equality Plan and work on gender equality needs to be continued and maintained and is not a 'once off' activity. This is in order that prior gains achieved are sustainable and are flexible enough to adapt to changes in an organisation that both originate internally and externally. It is also important to emphasise that on-going work on gender equality benefits all staff, not only women. Denial may also be related to [resistances](#).

Lack of autonomy of research organisations and higher education institutions

In some countries or regions, there may be limited autonomy given to organisations to enable changes related to gender equality to be made. This lack of autonomy may be particularly pronounced in relation to hiring, recruitment and promotion procedures and regulations. Higher education and/or research institutions need to respect the provisions of the law, but if there is an internal drive and catalyst for change, more can be achieved. Bottom-up approaches can push for change. Identify activists in the organisation to help thinking of creative solutions that comply with the law and, at the same time, promote fairer recruitment and career progression practices. They will also help putting actions in motion and convincing senior management and leadership. Alliances need to be sought and built in order to contribute to a better working environment for both women and men.

Lack of sufficient, on-going resources: human and financial

An absence of dedicated, adequate and sustained resources, both human and financial, for gender equality work and for developing, implementing and monitoring Gender Equality Plans is a common obstacle. An absence of funding can lead to chronic under-resourcing of the work, which may lead to only 'cost-neutral' actions and policies being resorted to. This is despite, in most cases, investment and committed finances being required to accelerate change, support initiatives and actions of the Gender Equality Plan. The staff time required to develop and implement a Gender Equality Plan and the initial analysis, assessment and drafting of a Plan 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 actions of the Plan give a strong impression that gender equality is not valued at an institutional level. Not funding training on gender and allowing for time in staff schedules to attend such training also is a 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 make up and evident senior level commitment sought (see also ['rationale for gender equality change in higher education and research institutions'](#)). The resources needed, both human and financial, to develop and maintain a Gender Equality Plan must be clearly articulated, agreed and documented in the early stages of [Plan development](#). This is to fully and accurately 'cost' the work involved and to avoid staff burn-out, key actor disengagement 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 Gender Equality Plan and the importance it places on gender equality. A persistent and chronic lack of resources for this work and a Gender Equality Plan may indicate [institutional resistance](#) to the issue.

Lack of institutional or organisational authority

The staff involved in the development and roll-out of a Gender Equality Plan may not hold the authority or decision-making powers to promote and drive change in an organisation. This can lead to frustration, limited progress and blockages in terms of goal or output achievement of the Plan. This obstacle can generally only be resolved by early involvement, commitment and on-going support from top 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. In addition, identifying in the development phase of the Gender Equality Plan who is needed to grant authority, progress and authorise decisions and liaising with them early on in the process is also crucial (see also [Not engaging key allies early in the process](#)).

Lack of relevant data and statistics

A lack of availability, or access to, sex-disaggregated human resources data is a challenge, as these figures are required to develop a baseline or initial assessment of where gender equality work and actions need to be targeted in an organisation. Having the data and statistics collated and prepared is also needed to counter resistance with actual up-to-date facts and figures. 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 human resources data collation and management systems may need to be utilised to enable statistics broken down by sex to be generated from existing staff records. Time and costs for collecting and analysing data may need to be factored into the Gender Equality Plan. Storing any resultant data in a way that complies with European and national data protection requirements is also critical.

Not engaging potential key allies and/or actors early in the Gender Equality Plan process

Identifying who needs to be communicated with and engaged in the development and roll-out stages of a Gender Equality Plan is crucial. It will ensure on-going and future support for gender equality work within an organisation. In many organisations this will imply that constructively involving middle management is vital to reducing potential future obstacles that may hinder progress and full implementation of the Plan. Middle management may also be key sources of the data, statistics and sex-disaggregated information required to establish baseline figures and monitor trends and progress in relation to gender equality. Therefore, it is important for these actors to be recruited as important allies and enablers of gender equality work early in the process. This may require scheduling and delivering training, workshops, seminars, meetings etc. to staff not directly involved in drafting or roll-out of the Gender Equality Plan, but whose support is required for progress to be achieved. See examples of awareness-raising and competence development initiatives in the [GEAR action toolbox](#). Factoring in this time and ally-building work is important to avoid obstacles at a later stage of implementation of the Plan. In addition, embedding the Gender Equality Plan as an institutional or whole-of-organisation plan can lead to greater cross-departmental and faculty support, which will increase the sustainability of gender equality work.

Absence of a historical background in gender studies within an organisation

Some universities and research institutions may not have had a previous history or tradition of teaching or engaging with gender studies. This can mean that it is more challenging to convince staff and actors of the importance and benefits of gender equality work and Gender Equality Plans. This obstacle may require support from and utilisation of gender equality networks (at a national, regional or international level) and the buying-in of gender expertise to enhance institutional competence and knowledge. Check [Eurogender's Stakeholders Directory](#) to find gender experts and trainers in your country or [GenPort's People directory](#) where you can filter the type of stakeholder group you are looking for (e.g. gender networks, or gender equality practitioners & advisers).

Ensuring the sustainability and resilience of gains related to gender equality

Progress and success in relation to gender equality and implementation of a Gender Equality Plan 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 can also lead to reduced or limited sustainability of a Gender Equality Plan. To overcome this obstacle, embedding a commitment to both gender equality and the work related to the Plan into multiple organisational structures is key. This means that support, buy-in and commitment for the Plan will need to be sought from multiple stakeholders and not only allocated to a specific school or department. Allocating gender equality related work a specific multi-annual budget that does not only originate from one school or department alone also seems to contribute to sustainability. Building in regular accountability and monitoring and evaluation structures and/or tools into a Gender Equality Plan may help to flag when sustainability begins to lag and indicate actions needed prior to crisis points being reached. The sustainability and resilience of any Plan may need to go through [SWOT analysis](#) (Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats) and stress-testing prior to sign off and launch, this is to ensure it is suitably flexible to overcome challenges in the future.

Narrow understanding of research funding activities

RFOs have a key role in advancing new standards for research excellence, expanding research in under-investigated areas or strengthening research accountability to society. While their mandates strongly varies from one country and organisation to the other, some endorsing a research agenda setting role while others play a more supportive function strictly framed by the autonomy of RPOs, their responsibility remains important in terms of implementing the priorities of the European Research Area. Therefore, when designing a GEP in a RFO, it is deemed important to address the core values and mission statement of the organisation from a gender perspective, to provide opportunities to reframe the concept of research excellence in a gender-sensitive way and to identify windows of opportunity for the RFO to support gender equality and the integration of the gender perspective in research.

An overview of the most common obstacles and possible solutions to overcome them can be found in this [Roadmap to Gender Equality Plans in research and higher education institutions](#).