

# Gender Equality in Academia and Research

## Rationale for gender equality change in research and higher education institutions

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Setting up and implementing a gender equality plan (GEP) requires strong arguments about the benefits of working towards gender equality in research and innovation (R & I). These supporting arguments are of different nature and outreach. They can be combined in different ways to build the case for gender equality within your organisation, and to reach different categories of [stakeholders](#).

The European Commission expects the following benefits for the European research area (ERA) through its commitment to promote gender equality in R & I:

- increased success and innovation performance of organisations thanks to greater diversity;
- greater understanding of sex and gender specificities;
- improved work–life balance, equal access to opportunities and increased well-being.

In the following section, you will learn about these and other **positive impacts of gender equality for R & I**. In itself, quoting these broad areas of impact can help you build the case for setting up a GEP for your organisation. The scope of the arguments to be used should be adapted to the culture of your organisation. In particular, you should be cautious about the uptake and acceptance of performance-related arguments. While it is widely accepted that measuring performance matters in R & I, this framing is not accepted to the same extent in every context.

Consider broadening and strengthening your arguments for promoting gender equality by using arguments related to diversity and intersectionality. This will enable you to show that all employees, students and applicants will benefit from better (gender) equality.

As stated in **UN sustainable development goal 5** [🔗](#), 'gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world'. In this sense, the **main types of benefits** of gender equality in R & I are as follows.

### **Fairness**

Gender equality and equal treatment is about fairness in organisations and in society at large. Everyone needs to have the same opportunities to participate and contribute meaningfully to R & I, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, social background, age, etc. Committing to fairness and equality, and introducing organisational changes to meet these commitments, is a value in its own right. Increasing the fairness of organisational processes and practices contributes to more transparency and legitimacy of decision-making and organisational procedures. Therefore, increasing fairness and transparency in R & I can bring additional benefits to individuals and organisations.

### **Attracting and retaining talent**

Research activities are highly intensive in human capital. Training qualified and creative researchers and innovators is costly, and bringing them up to their full potential takes time. Moreover, research organisations are involved in an intense competition for talent. This also requires retaining research staff over time and giving them the opportunity to achieve their personal and professional objectives and potential.

It has been shown that women are abandoning their scientific careers in much greater numbers than men. Described as the 'leaky pipeline' of women in science, this phenomenon has a considerable impact: a loss of knowledge, an organisational cost, and a reduced and limited perspective in scientific research. It also feeds a vicious circle: as women leave research in greater numbers, research becomes less attractive to women. Implementing GEPs to promote structural and cultural change in your organisation can contribute to attracting and retaining talented women – or rather diverse talent – in your organisation.

### **Creating a better work environment**

Promoting gender equality in your organisation can contribute to a more engaging and inclusive work and study environment, in which people feel safe, valued and comfortable. This will increase the well-being, work satisfaction, sense of belonging and motivation of staff members in your organisation, regardless of their gender. Your organisation will also benefit from these individual gains in terms of innovation performance, effectiveness (see below) and talent retention.

### **Effectiveness and efficiency of research**

Building gender-diverse teams helps to secure a broader set of viewpoints, which can enhance creativity and innovation – and thus also the quality of research. In addition, teams with balanced numbers of women and men tend to perform better and to exhibit superior dynamics and productivity, which is expressed in higher shares of publications and citations, and in broader dissemination to public audiences. Ensuring diversity in work teams (in terms of gender, race, nationality, age, etc.) needs a clear commitment to promoting gender equality with an intersectional focus; this will create an inclusive organisation that, in turn, will improve the organisation's reputation and will contribute to the organisation retaining and attracting (new) talent (see above).

### **Excellence and research quality**

Bringing a gender dimension to R & I content improves the overall quality of research design, hypotheses, protocols and outputs in a large variety of fields. It makes it possible to address gender bias and to build more evidence-based and robust research, and also contributes to pluri-disciplinarity. As R & I is increasingly framed as working for/with society, thereby creating social impact and benefits, and contributing to solving the main societal challenges of our time, reflecting the diversity of final users, their needs and boundary conditions from the early research stages has become a must. 'Gender blindness' (understood as the lack of consideration for gender-related aspects) often goes with neglecting other relevant social or experiential parameters. Challenging this blindness, on the contrary, creates awareness for a broader set of variables than sex and/or gender. The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly shown how the integration of sex/gender analysis into research not only increases the quality or excellence of research, but also provides better data and evidence for developing targeted solutions for public health, social welfare or economic policies (for more information, see the COVID-19 case study in the [Gendered Innovations 2 report](#) and on the '[Gendered innovations' website](#)). Integrating sex/gender analysis into research and innovation thus improves its quality and also its relevance.

### **Economic benefits**

There are different kinds of economic benefits. Firstly, research is intensive not only in terms of human capital, but also in terms of funding. Universities and R & I organisations are engaged in a fierce competition to access public funding. Increasingly, this competition is organised and framed by funding agencies bound to the objectives of the ERA. Along with other priorities, principles of responsible R & I apply to the selection of successful applications. Within this framework, gender equality is increasingly referred to as a criterion for accessing public funding. This is clearly the case under the EU work programmes of Horizon Europe. Therefore, addressing gender equality in research, and also adopting a gender lens in research content and outputs, can improve the competitiveness of universities and R & I organisations.

Secondly, an increasing part of research is directly interested in producing added value in terms of products, services and policy delivery. Gender equality also contributes to increased economic benefits, not only at macro level, indicated by [growth in gross domestic product](#), but also at organisational or company level. The presence of women board members is a reliable predictor of the value of a firm, independent of the type of industry, firm size, etc. Companies with gender-balanced management teams also report more returns on sales, more invested capital and better financial results overall. The reasons for these effects are manifold, but organisations with better gender equality and diversity are also able to engage new target audiences, beneficiaries or users/customers for their products and services, as they reflect the diversity in these groups better. Promoting gender equality in innovation teams and teams of inventors contributes to more equal benefits from their innovations/inventions. Gender-diverse teams are perceived to have better problem-solving skills and increased creativity and are able to take a broader set of needs, expectations and usages into account in their R & I processes. Therefore, they are able to develop more valid research outputs and better innovations that meet the needs of heterogeneous user groups.

### **Leverage for organisational change**

Pursuing gender equality requires [involving all staff categories](#) (including management, research and non-research staff, and students) in a joint effort to produce change.

Collaboration of all these categories is an overarching goal that provides an opportunity to enhance the sense of community and ownership.

Changes requested to achieve gender equality also bring benefits in terms of transparency and accountability, decision-making, career management and research evaluation procedures. These procedures are often affected by different sorts of biases and unwritten rules, which a concern for gender equality helps to challenge.

Gender equality can also trigger broader cultural changes that contribute to a more flexible, creative, inclusive and sustainable work environment. This can support other strategic change processes aiming to enhance the competitive edge and national or international profile of your organisation. Linking gender equality work to these strategic objectives and processes of your organisation is an important factor in the success of your change process.

### **Compliance with domestic and European Union regulations**

All research organisations, universities and funding bodies are bound to respect certain legal obligations related to equal treatment and gender equality. Therefore, even though legal and policy frameworks vary between countries, breaching existing regulations can result in fines, legal prosecutions and liability, damaged reputation, a loss of attractiveness or internal conflicts.

Complying with the rules requires resources and know-how, which are often more easily secured if implementing a gender mainstreaming strategy (e.g. sex-disaggregated data production, monitoring instruments). Investing in gender equality helps organisations to comply with legal provisions more comprehensively and proactively.

In recent years, funding bodies have also introduced compliance with specific gender equality standards as an eligibility criterion. For instance, the [German Research Foundation \(Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft \(DFG\)\)](#) introduced the research-oriented standards on gender equality [☞](#), applicants to programmes of the Science Foundation Ireland and other Irish research funding bodies need to have an Athena Scientific Women's Academic Network (SWAN) gender equality accreditation [☞](#) and the European Commission established a GEP eligibility criterion for Horizon Europe.

Find more information about EU labour law [here](#) [☞](#).

See also the [legal and policy frameworks promoting gender equality in R & I in the 27 EU Member States](#).

In order to view **videos and webinars** or further **tools and resources** on the topics in this section, switch between the respective tabs. Otherwise, click below to continue to the next section: the **step-by-step guide on GEP** development and implementation. There you can decide whether you want to continue with the step-by-step guide for research organisations, universities and public bodies, or with a separate guide for research funding bodies.