Gender Equality in Academia and Research

Relevant insights

The insights provided below feature in and are copied from the STAGES Guidelines. They are based on the extensive experience gained by the STAGES partner organisations throughout the project lifetime. These insights provide valuable input for anyone interested in setting up and implementing a Gender Equality Plan in their research organisation or university.

Source: Marina Cacace, 'Introduction', in Cacace, M., Balahur, D., Bleijenbergh, I., Falcinelli, D., Friedrich M., Kalpazidou Schmidt, E. (eds.), Structural Transformation to Achieve Gender Equality in Science. Guidelines, STAGES Project, 2015, pages vii-ix.

Context-sensitive implementation and mutual learning

A first consideration concerns the strong contextual character of the implementation process. It repeatedly emerged from observation that similar actions have taken on different meanings and produced even very different results in the five Action Plans based on contextual factors, the most important being the **general organisational setup** (organisational structure, culture and values, leadership style); the existence and type of **internal actors involved in gender equality**; and the cognitive and cultural **attitudes of the main stakeholders to gender equality** issues. As a consequence, **different strategies and specific tools and methodologies** were applied to the same actions across the Plans, tailored to the local environment and based on local negotiation strategies. Mutual learning meetings highlighted these differences. A session held on networks showed, for instance, the very different purposes served by women researchers' networks in the various Plans, and their varied understandings. This suggests how useless it would be to just replicate the set of measures which proved effective in a given context without properly reinterpreting and adapting them. **Exchange among partners supports the reflexive attitude needed** in this regard.

"What do you mean by gender equality?"

All the Action Plans had to **constantly negotiate the meaning of gender equality** in relation to the different actions they promoted and the different stakeholders involved. Very often, indeed, the first thing to negotiate was the very understanding of the words used and, therefore, the real objective of the Action Plan. If the word "discrimination" was generally ruled out, as it evokes the victimisation of women researchers while pointing to the existence of intentional behaviour against them, it was the whole "gender equality" thing that created more or less occasional discomfort among specific groups of stakeholders or in the organisation at large. In these cases, besides increasing awareness-raising efforts, the teams engaged in **highlighting the many different grounds for supporting the Action Plan**, by framing gender equality actions as addressing emergent priorities and widely recognised challenges for the organisation (attracting talents and research funds, scientific competitiveness, internationalisation). Stressing "diversity" over "equality" also proved beneficial in some contexts, without losing sight of the specific and cross-cutting relevance of gender diversity.

Fixing it all

The five Action Plans chose to include, in different proportions, measures directly addressing **women researchers**, measures oriented at changing their **institutions**, and measures questioning the neutrality of **scientific disciplines**. While traditionally these three types of measures are presented as opposed to one another, in a sort of evolutionary continuum, the experience of the STAGES project suggests that **in reality they tend to overlap** and that some appropriate perspectives and tools can help to address the three levels jointly, thus magnifying the impact of the actions. It is important, above all, to avoid the deficit-model perspective (as if women needed more teaching than men), and instead adopt a structural change perspective. In this way, even **actions directly addressing individual women can take on a structural character** in that they can produce modifications affecting the entire organisation, in cultural, but also in organisational and normative terms.

Building on existing resources

In action design phase, the teams not only conducted an appraisal of the problems they had to address but also worked to identify the **resources available within and outside the organisation**. These resources, understood in the broad sense, include data collection procedures, existing policies and services, internal groups or structures, communication tools, as well as supportive attitudes among the leaders, or the existence of external

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institutions pursuing objectives in line with those of the Action Plan. Preliminary mapping was, therefore, frequently conducted for different resources, aiming at **reducing expenses and effort**, as well as **fostering an increased integration** of the actions within the organisation, **gaining greater visibility and support**, **involving additional stakeholders**.

From the top-down, from the bottom-up, and from the outside

Actions that could **bridge top-down and bottom-up approaches** were of great impact. This happened, for instance, when structured occasions were provided for the leadership to be in direct contact with the researchers and their networks to discuss issues of common interest. It also happened when peer-to-peer activities were given an institutional context to support and connect them to the organisation. **Cooperation with external stakeholders**, such as national or local authorities, also proved decisive in some cases, particularly when there were initial difficulties in making contact with the internal leadership, because external support and recognition raised project visibility and status internally.

The timing of change

Even though the participating organisations were very different in many respects, **recurring patterns** emerged in the time that was necessary for the Action Plans to develop. The **initial phase** was, of course, the most challenging and time-consuming, also because the teams were still in a running-in phase and internal cooperation was yet to fully develop. It can be said, albeit with some generalisation, that it took no less than a year to get the Plans on the right track, with a cohesive and structured team and significant internal visibility. After that, "**cruising speed**" was reached: things were easier and all the teams started to cooperate with a growing number of stakeholders, while activities developed as planned. In various cases, an **acceleration process** occurred halfway: things speeded up and the teams met less resistances, enjoyed more and more visibility, received requests to cooperate with the institution on a more structural basis. It is however impossible to understand what the permanent results of just four years of implementation will actually be. International experience shows that longer times are needed for deep and lasting change. The relevance of sustainability planning (see below) cannot be overemphasised in this regard.

Continuously evolving plans

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 overtly detailed and structured ex-ante design. What is more important is, rather, to **keep the plan open to new needs and opportunities**.

The dynamic planning of sustainability

Dynamic planning is also necessary when it comes to providing for the future sustainability of the actions initiated under a funded programme. What the STAGES experience shows is that **the quest for sustainability starts from the very beginning**, through the arrangements which are setup for implementation, which are then progressively scrutinised to get to viable solutions for securing their continuity. Several actions became sustainable from the start, while several attempts were needed in other cases to finally get to a solution which sometimes implied the need to redefine, modify, merge or otherwise transform the concerned actions. In some cases, **transition phases** are needed, where the teams still continue to cooperate in the delivery of the action by gradually reducing their efforts as new institutional actors take over.