

Gender Equality in Academia and Research

Success factors for gender equality plan development and implementation

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A number of elements can be pointed out as supporting gender equality work in research organisations and research funding bodies. These are success factors for effective and sustainable change. When these success factors are present in an organisation, the efforts towards gender equality are more likely to succeed.

Promote gender equality plan support and collaboration within and outside the organisation

Almost every organisational endeavour is more likely to succeed if it is a collective effort. In this regard, the following success factors can be considered as relevant for gender equality work.

Awareness and capacity building

Implementing a gender equality plan (GEP), in any type of organisation, needs awareness, knowledge and expertise, not only at the time of designing and planning measures, but also when implementing and monitoring the measures. Staff members can support transformational change by gaining knowledge of gendered processes and practices. Staff can also increase the understanding of gender equality aspects and the need for (certain) action, and reduce resistance to the active promotion of gender equality and structural, as well as cultural, change in the organisation. Awareness-raising and capacity building, which transfer and enhance knowledge among a great number of stakeholders (including senior/middle management) through multiple lines of communication (e.g. specific events, training, social media), should therefore be pursued. In order to transfer knowledge about policies sustainably, it is helpful to create educational programmes for new department chairs and senior management, in which they can learn about the rationales of all crucial gender equality policies and practices, and discuss how to tackle potential difficulties in implementing them. For more support, the communications / public relations department and/or gender researchers throughout the organisation can be involved. However, awareness-raising and capacity building should be accompanied by structures, policies and practices to lead to real change.

Senior management support

Explicit, clearly communicated and reiterated support and backing from the top of the organisation over time provides legitimacy to gender equality work. This legitimacy in turn offers the opportunity to sustainably integrate the changes into the internal procedures and systems, that is it can be easier for the gender equality practitioners to establish structures, adopt strategies and implement activities, as they are the ones taking the decisions for the organisation. It also significantly reduces the chances that gender equality initiatives are rejected. When the top explicitly supports gender equality, it signals its importance to the organisation and makes it easier to mobilise all components, levels, communities, and financial and human resources within the organisation. Support from the top can also reduce the fear of individuals that their scientific reputation may be harmed by engaging with gender equality work, and increase individuals' motivation and engagement. The 'top' refers to the central governing bodies and people in decision-making positions, such as (vice-)rectors, (vice-)chancellors, deans, presidents, executive boards, (boards of) directors or chief officers. Regarding legitimacy, it can also prove helpful to gain the support of people with 'informal power' (e.g. prestigious researchers).


Stakeholder involvement in planning and further cooperation for implementing the gender equality plan


Stakeholder participation in planning and implementation is key, as it creates a feeling of ownership. Collaborative planning processes lead to measures that are likely to have a greater impact. Bringing together different stakeholders (including senior and middle management), with different expertise and types of knowledge about the (formal and informal) functioning of the organisation, is productive. It helps in building more targeted policies, anticipating potential resistance, and creating greater acceptance and support. A mixed team (in terms of positions within the organisation, genders, seniority or disciplinary backgrounds) can provide more diverse impulses and also more easily initiate strategies for gender equality that permeate the whole organisation. A positive change in organisational and personal attitudes and a greater understanding of gender equality is achieved through work at senior management level and in other areas of the organisation (i.e. academics, administrative staff, human resources, students). Addressing all genders and awakening interest in gender issues among all those different groups creates collective responsibility. A collaborative process provides time for dialogue and for clarifying objectives and responsibilities, thus generating synergies and increased legitimacy and ownership of the implementation of proposed measures. Therefore, integrating participatory methods and processes (e.g. co-creation/co-design) can be helpful. It can also prove fruitful to delegate some activities to other stakeholders, for example, letting the faculties or departments come up with their own GEPs (activities) that fit their specific contexts. During the GEP development process and afterwards, strategic communication and dissemination (e.g. presentations, seminars, newsletters) is crucial to ensure that stakeholders are provided with the necessary information. This information and documentation should include the rationale and process of the GEP development, a comprehensive explanation of the goals, the considerations that went into adopting it and a precise description of how it will be administered and monitored. It is important to find a clear, comprehensible design and language, which also reflects/includes arguments important to various stakeholders. This information should be disseminated regularly and quite frequently.

For the implementation, 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 subcultures, are also necessary. The cooperation should connect the central level of the organisation with the local level (e.g. departments, faculties), for example by establishing central and local gender equality committees/representatives or networks of focal actors. A clear distribution of tasks and responsibilities among stakeholders based on their individual areas of expertise and competence must be ensured. For instance, it should be clearly established which activities fall within the remit of the central level or the local level, respectively (e.g. faculties, departments). You should also provide educational and practical support, so that all stakeholders in the organisation can be usefully complemented by alliances. The more widespread stakeholder support is, the more resilient the change efforts will be. The cooperation should allow flexibility to find points of compromise, but at the same time should follow the fundamental goals and objectives of the GEP. The organisation should also make sure that the stakeholders' efforts regarding gender equality, for example the work in a gender equality network, are rewarded and recognised within the organisation and do not take the form of unpaid, additional labour (that takes away time from research-related activities). Rewarding and recognising gender equality activities can be formalised, for example in time allocation models (40 % teaching, 40 % research, 20 % work) or by awarding additional points in performance evaluations for promotions.

For more information on which stakeholders to involve and resources for participatory methods and techniques, see the section on [stakeholders](#) and step 4 of the [step-by-step guide, 'Implementing a gender equality plan'](#). Note that the direct link will lead you to the step-by-step guide for research organisations, universities and public bodies; there is a separate guide for [research funding organisations](#).

External networks to enable exchange on gender equality

While every GEP is unique, there is still a lot of potential in learning from others. Thus, the involvement in international, national or subnational networks (e.g. communities of practice) with other organisations can help your organisation to acquire knowledge, exchange experiences, give and receive feedback, and get inspiration. It can also be motivating to hear perspectives from other organisations and feel solidarity with other gender equality practitioners. For some, the participation in structural change projects within the frameworks of the seventh framework programme and Horizon 2020 fulfilled this purpose. If you do not have any networks yet, you can read more about experiences and inspiring practices in the gender equality in academia and research (GEAR) [action toolbox](#)  Or, have a look at other networks, such as the European Universities Initiative or the Young Universities for the Future of Europe Alliance, and see if you would like to join them.

For more information on the role networks can play for stakeholders, see the section on [stakeholder](#) .

Establish effective gender equality structures and embed the gender equality plan into these or other existing structures

In order to ensure sustainability, structures are key. In this regard, the following success factors can be considered as relevant for gender equality work.

Well-equipped and well-positioned gender equality body

Such a central structure coordinates and monitors the gender equality efforts undertaken. It provides gender equality work with human resources, knowledge and expertise. Ideally, and depending on the size of organisation, it does not consist of one person only, but of qualified and motivated team members supporting each other and sharing responsibilities and workload. Its clear permanent mandate and responsibilities, designated budget and position in the governance of the organisation, and the existence of clear responsibility structures, are important to ensure sustainability. It has to be located at the appropriate level to effectively support the implementation of gender equality work. Proximity to decision-making and the capacity to inform human resources and scientific management foster effective implementation. Knowledge (of, among other things, sex-disaggregated data) and expertise are essential for the ability of these bodies to act. It is also important that gender equality bodies exert some leadership on gender mainstreaming implementation, with the support of executive bodies. If the implementing responsibilities are shared among other stakeholders (e.g. faculties, departments, the human resources department), it is crucial to provide the necessary financial resources at this level as well. The resources of the structural change / Horizon 2020 projects proved helpful in establishing such permanent gender equality bodies in numerous universities.

Embedment into existing structures and management procedures

Anchoring gender equality provisions in 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 lifelong learning schemes. Monitoring instruments, in the form of quantitative and qualitative indicators or regular surveys, gain relevance and sustainability when incorporated into routinised management procedures. Aligning the GEP objectives with the overall strategic goals (e.g. university/company strategy) can create synergies and legitimacy. It can facilitate the work with stakeholders if you explain how gender equality contributes to achieving the overall strategic goals of the organisation (e.g. attracting talented personnel) and show that you are all in the same boat, working in the same direction. If structures and procedures aimed at gender equality are already in place, further efforts should build on these and proceed from there.

Legislation and policies

If there are impulses for gender equality, equal opportunities, anti-discrimination and/or diversity, the national or subnational framework can be a driver for organisational gender equality work and serve as a basis for argumentation, legitimacy and resources (e.g. training or guidelines from ministries). The same holds true for frameworks at international level (e.g. European legislation, Horizon Europe eligibility criteria). In addition, policy frameworks of other countries can be drivers in the sense that they are a source of inspiration and offer material for arguments for stakeholders. However, organisational gender equality work does not necessarily have to mirror the approach presented in legislation and policies, but can go beyond that.

To read more about the national frameworks on gender equality in R & I in the EU-27 and the corresponding framework at European level, consult the country notes and/or EU-specific information in Chapter 5, '[Where](#)': Legislative and policy backgrounds'.

Follow an evidence-based gender equality work approach

Evidence from your own organisation can give you orientation on where to start and how to shape the future direction of your organisation. Regular dissemination of data and the impact of activities can also be beneficial to uphold stakeholders' attention and engagement. In this regard, the following success factors can be considered as relevant for gender equality work.

Availability of sex-disaggregated data

Sex- and/or gender-disaggregated data and, as far as possible, other data (e.g. on intersecting inequality dimensions, such as age or ethnicity) 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 quantitative and qualitative data is a precondition for the impact of measures and initiatives. Indeed, making proposed measures evidence-based allows for not only the appropriate distribution of resources and tackling of problems, but also the monitoring of achievements. Having organisation-specific data can also help to raise awareness, increase understanding and overcome resistance. If there is no data or you want to look into the reasons behind the numbers, the launch of in-depth auditing processes, in the form of surveys, focus groups or pilot interviews, are a way to identify organisation-specific issues, thus providing a starting point and base for further work. The data on the status quo of gender equality in the organisation should be made available to staff to keep them informed. For more information, [see step 2 of the step-by-step guide 'Analysing and assessing the status quo in your organisation'](#). Note that the direct link will lead you to the step-by-step guide for research organisations, universities and public bodies; there is a separate guide for [research funding organisations](#).

Monitoring instruments

Creating implementation follow-up mechanisms is paramount. The monitoring system can involve all implementing units (e.g. faculties, departments, gender equality body, senior management) and units that are responsible for the data collection in the organisation (e.g. the human resources department, the research and development department, grants office). The mechanisms can take the form of regular monitoring meetings with the implementing units and the gender equality body / senior management, regular surveys, or data collection and indicators that are fully integrated into governance and management monitoring systems. Follow-up indicators increase the validity and sustainability of gender mainstreaming strategies and should be tailored to the GEP's objectives and activities. For example, quantitative indicators can be used to monitor goals regarding recruitment and upwards mobility, and work environments can be monitored by means of a survey. These methods provide key instruments for the overall assessment of gender equality work. Available data can promote the implementation of gender equality policies and strengthen the engagement of different stakeholders interested in being part of the progress. Increased accountability via the monitoring cycles can serve as a driver of positive change. When assessing impact, you should also keep in mind that data should be fine-grained enough to detect change and that impact is not assessed for the average employee, but for a diverse group of employees. Both qualitative and quantitative indicators have to be specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time-related (SMART). For more information, see [step 5 of the step-by-step guide 'Monitoring progress and evaluating a gender equality plan'](#). Note that the direct link will lead you to the step-by-step guide for research organisations, universities and public bodies; there is a separate guide for [research funding organisations](#).

Evaluation

Mid- or long-term evaluation of GEPs is not possible when monitoring mechanisms are absent or insufficient. This is detrimental to the effectiveness of future strategies, because evaluations allow you 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. If there are no monitoring and evaluation processes implemented, it undermines the capacity of the practitioners to assess their achievements and communicate them. Evaluations, as monitoring, are especially important 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. Evaluation can also be performed by external experts. For more information on evaluation, see [step 5 of the step-by-step guide](#). [↗](#) Note that the direct link will lead you to the step-by-step guide for research organisations, universities and public bodies; there is a separate guide for [research funding organisations](#) [↗](#).

Find the balance between clear and fixed goals and objectives, and


their flexible and creative implementation

Gender equality work and plans are a complex undertaking, so navigating the process can be challenging. In this regard, the following success factors can be considered as relevant to gender equality work.

Clear and tailored goals and objectives

In a first step, gender equality needs to be framed as a meaningful issue, relevant to the whole community of the organisation. In addition, it has to be backed by explaining the nature and purpose of a GEP and what it entails. The objectives should reflect the situation in the organisation in order to be effective and gain legitimacy. GEPs should also take into account the context and situation of the different units (e.g. faculties, departments) and the framework conditions (e.g. budget, available expertise and experiences). Authenticity and context-sensitivity are key when developing the objectives (i.e. each GEP is unique), and while you can draw inspiration from others, keep in mind that what works well and is realistic for others might not work for you and your context, and vice versa. In order to assess what is relevant in the local context and to tailor the strategy and language used to the organisation, stakeholder engagement and participatory approaches are recommended. Being practical and concrete in formulating objectives and setting targets can effectively support the ownership of the strategy by the whole organisation.

Objectives should not (only) be long-term, but also short- and midterm, in order to better account for failures, successes and challenges. GEP planning should thus be driven by clear objectives and targets, set out for each planned measure and/or intervention area, along with clearly ascribed responsibilities with regard to their attainment. In this way, the GEP – as a strategic document – sets easily understandable quality standards for all measures taken based on the strategy, and provides a systematically structured and visionary path that does not need to be repeatedly negotiated with stakeholders. While the GEP is a strategic document, more concrete and operational plans can be taken up in (annual) action plans, which can also be developed at local level (e.g. faculties, institutes, departments). When developing objectives, it can be helpful to use a framework, such as a logic model, to support the process.

For more information on objectives and goals and how to establish them (e.g. using a logic model), see [step 3 of the step-by-step guide, 'Setting up a gender equality plan'](#) .

Flexibility, creativity and resilience

While clear targets and objectives indicate the orientation of the measures, there is also a need to adopt a flexible approach as to how to reach these goals. You have to find a balance between the planned activities and the actual design of the implementation, which means that the plan may require adjustments and the implementation may therefore differ from the planned version. A key to success is the ability to adapt and reinterpret the GEP (or the action plan(s) based on the GEP) in cooperation with the stakeholders, based on the results of monitoring and current organisational needs. Get creative when choosing your activities: not all problems can be solved by one single measure – diversification is key. Be in it for the long-term and do not get discouraged easily: setbacks are an integral part of the process and, if you learn from them, they may even help to push your organisation forward. Find your own pace that fits your organisation and context: do not go too fast, but do not go too slow, and look for a broad support base while focusing on progression. Have a look at who or what level of the institution has the power and willingness to make a change, and start with that level, then take advantage of opportunities to work at other levels. Resilience leads to changes in the attitudes of the members of the organisation and to sustainable structural change. Measures, such as training, are more effective if they are designed for the long-term and are carried out repeatedly. The repetition of training ensures that gender equality cannot be neglected or ignored by the senior management and staff members, and sustains the commitment of the organisation in the long-term.