

Institutional Transformation

Individual level

On an individual level, resistance might develop because the subject of gender is often taken as a matter of a person's identity. Sometimes people feel uncomfortable with the term gender because their perception of the concept also encompasses a critique on the way individuals behave or conduct their lives. For example, an executive who is the male breadwinner of the family might feel that this private role is being questioned by institutional processes in which gender patterns both within the organisation and within society are being addressed.

Also persons may feel personally targeted when gender equality is introduced as a subject because they think they will be accused to act in a discriminatory way. This can create a diffuse mixture of guilt and defence, also triggering resistance. Therefore it should be communicated very clearly that mainstreaming a gender perspective within an organisation is a matter of gender equality competence and this again is a competence like many other professional requirements.

Individuals in an institutional setting have certain needs. Referring to a model of Morgan (1997), Erfurt (2011) introduces the idea of the "ego-needs" (such as recognition and approval) as well as the social needs (e.g. being part of a team or group) of executives or staff members. Resistance can arise if actors are not involved in the process of gender mainstreaming to create ownership.

If there is a lack of acknowledgement and if no incentives for implementing gender mainstreaming are given, then it is not perceived as being attractive for staff to get involved. For example, if the top executive officially labels gender equality as important, but informally makes clear that it is not, this will result in a lack of recognition for staff involved in the process of change. If involvement in an institutional gender mainstreaming process is not recognised in the assessment of performance, or if it is seen to hinder promotion, then resistance is likely to occur.

The Swedish Jämtland County Administrative Board has published a booklet on how to deal with resistance with practical examples and illustrations: “Facing Resistance – managing gender mainstreaming in organisations”

How to deal with resistance on an individual level

It is important to stress that gender mainstreaming is about structural change within an institution. The individual person does indeed play a role, but their private life is not being questioned. Gender equality is not about prescribing individuals how to lead their lives, but rather it is a professional strategy leading to better working results and better services for citizens.

Furthermore, gender mainstreaming is not about blaming men for discriminating against women. Instead, it allows a sophisticated perspective on the situation of women and men as social groups and the patterns that create imbalances in gender relations.

If there are ideological constraints that lead to staff passively or actively boycotting gender mainstreaming, it should be made very clear that it is not an individual or private decision whether to take part in an organisational process or not. It is the professional responsibility of every member of staff at every level to contribute to the institutions policy. Sometimes it can be useful to compare gender equality with other policies and rules such as working efficiently and saving costs – why are certain policies scrutinised significantly more than others although both policies are crucial for the institution’s success?

Sometimes questions like “Why do we have to do additional work?” are expressed. In this case, it is important to check whether this is a sign of resistance or whether the task of implementing gender mainstreaming has really increased staff workload significantly. If so, the working plan should be revised. However, it also should be made clear, that gender mainstreaming is not an “extra” project but a natural part of operations. As any other task, mainstreaming gender within staff working routines is also to be recognised in performance appraisal procedures.

It is also important that gender equality is not perceived as being a “women’s issue”. A study commissioned by the European Commission on “The Role of Men in Gender Equality” clearly shows that men can also benefit from gender equality; balancing care and employment tasks as well as an improved work-life balance is also related to improvements in male health – even leading to an increased life expectancy (Scambor/Wojnicka et al. 2013).

Using Facts and Figures to overcome resistance

Resistance is also caused by a lack of knowledge. It is therefore important to introduce key facts and figures. Questions and answers which are adapted to suit the target group's knowledge and field of experience are even more appealing and effective. For example, a quiz also showing gender disparities in one's own organisation or in sectorial fields of the organisation may lead to "Aha!" Experience.