Gender equality plans in academia and research: success factors and obstacles

In the past few years, key elements that appear to support gender equality work in research and innovation (R & I) organisations and in research funding bodies have been identified. When these elements are present in organisations, efforts towards gender equality are more likely to succeed and contribute to effective change. The success factors discussed below can help to promote gender equality through institutional change in R & I settings.

These success factors can also be understood as basic requirements or impact drivers to ensure that gender equality actions are resilient and impactful. Furthermore, the presence of these success factors may help to avoid and/or overcome common obstacles that are encountered when implementing gender equality plans (GEPs) in R & I organisations. Watch a video by the EU-funded project GENDERACTION to learn about the main success factors for effective GEPs.

Success factors

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

Awareness raising and capacity building:

- enhance knowledge and its transfer among employees within the organisation;
- ensure a common understanding of what promoting gender equality through institutional change means.

Senior management and leadership support:

- provides legitimacy to gender equality work;
- counteracts opposition/resistance to initiatives promoting gender equality;
- facilitates the availability and mobilisation of human and financial resources within the institution;
- ensures the sustainability of actions.

Stakeholder involvement in the GEP set-up phase and in implementing the GEP:

- allows the combination of different types of knowledge;
- creates a feeling of ownership, which supports the implementation of gender equality actions;
- reduces opposition/resistance to initiatives promoting gender equality;
- guarantees that tasks and responsibilities are shared;
- makes it possible to reach a wide range of organisational staff and departments;

- increases commitment to and the potential impact of gender equality measures through participatory approaches;
- helps to achieve sustainable, institution-wide change;
- ensures that the process is transparent, within and outside the institution.

External networks to enable exchanges on gender equality:

- increase learning opportunities and sharing of experiences;
- build support, motivation and solidarity among gender equality practitioners.

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Establish effective gender equality structures

A well-equipped and well-positioned gender equality body (e.g. a dedicated unit, working group, team or office):

- coordinates and monitors gender equality efforts;

- ensures the implementation of gender equality actions with the support of and in cooperation with leadership and executive bodies (e.g. the human resources department);

- strengthens sustainability through a clear mandate, definite responsibilities, a designated budget and incorporation into the organisational governance structure;

- ensures that human resources and relevant knowledge and expertise are available in house.

Incorporation into existing structures and management procedures:

- supports institutional change towards greater gender equality and strengthens the sustainability of planned measures;

- creates accountability with regard to the implementation of gender equality activities and progress within the organisation;

- guarantees that gender-sensitive and gender-specific actions are incorporated into standard management procedures (e.g. gender training, gender-sensitive recruitment and career management procedures, the collection of sex-disaggregated data).

Gaining awareness of domestic (national and/or regional) legislation and policies:

- serves as a basis for argumentation, legitimacy and support;

- drives organisational gender equality work.

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Follow an evidence-based approach to gender equality work

Availability of sex-disaggregated data and data on intersectional dimensions such as age, nationality and disability:

- allows a thorough assessment of the status quo on gender equality and its intersections with other grounds for discrimination in the institution for different categories and levels of staff, researchers and students;

- helps design evidence-based and effective measures to address any problems identified;

- enables monitoring of achievements and progress.

Monitoring instruments:

- increase the robustness and sustainability of gender mainstreaming strategies;

- promote accountability and stakeholder engagement through continuous monitoring of indicators and reporting of the progress achieved;

- provide opportunities to ensure visibility through regular progress reports and help to identify areas for further improvement.

Evaluation:

- makes it possible to draw on lessons learned from implemented initiatives;

- improves the effectiveness of future strategies and GEPs.

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Find the balance between clear objectives and flexible implementation

Clear and tailored goals and objectives:

- prove commitment to the implementation of planned gender equality actions;

- enable the assessment of progress and render the GEP more concrete and tangible;

- define responsibilities within the institution.

Flexibility, creativity and resilience:

- enable the reassessment of the institution's GEP priorities at different levels;

- allow for the adaptation and reshaping of gender equality measures in cooperation with (a growing circle of) stakeholders, based on insights and/or data to ensure that targets and objectives are achieved.

Common obstacles and how to overcome them

Obstacles to the set-up, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of a GEP are diverse and frequently encountered.

Some examples of obstacles and suggestions on how to overcome them are provided below.

Resistance to the implementation of a gender equality plan

Resistance is hardly avoidable in change projects, but it can be managed.

- Consider setting up awareness-raising training tailored to different groups of staff.

- Ensure explicit and visible commitment from leadership and senior management.

- Involve key actors in identifying problems and resistance points, so that solutions can be devised together, thus creating a feeling of ownership of these solutions.

- Frame the change agenda in ways staff, researchers and students can easily relate to (e.g. increasing quality, improving working conditions).

Watch the video produced by the EU-funded ACT project ([1]).

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Engagement and mobilisation of stakeholders

Low stakeholder engagement in the early stages of the GEP development process can be an issue.

- Start to work on broad stakeholder engagement early in the process.

- Offer training, workshops, seminars, meetings, etc., to staff not directly involved in drafting or rolling out the GEP, because their support will be important for progress and to avoid obstacles during the implementation of the plan. For training sessions and a database of trainers, visit the GE Academy website ([2]).

- Engage stakeholders continuously and frame the GEP as an encompassing, institutional plan to ensure greater cross-departmental and cross-faculty support is ensured.

Implementing a GEP is frequently seen as a women's issue and men rarely participate in the activities.

- Target men in your organisation specifically with awareness-raising activities.

- Seek out men as allies and involve them actively in your change project.

- Make clear that successful implementation of the GEP will be beneficial for all employees and students of all genders.

- Take into consideration that neither men nor women are a homogeneous group; pay attention to the intersectional perspective.

A lack of understanding of the need for and importance of gender equality may be encountered.

- Frame gender equality as a key element in developing a successful, inclusive, open and forward-thinking R & I organisation.

- Give visibility to gender equality by setting up the GEP and ensuring that it is fully and publicly supported by leaders and senior managers.

- Set up (perhaps mandatory) training on gender equality, in person or online, for all staff to ensure a shared understanding of its importance and benefits.

- Make the organisation aware of gender imbalances and inequalities, as well as gender equality achievements, through regular reporting, including publishing sex-disaggregated data.

([1]) https://act-on-gender.eu/project
([2]) https://ge-academy.eu/

Some individuals may strongly adhere to the belief that a commitment to academic excellence or promotion on merit alone is at odds with initiatives promoting gender equality.

- Provide and promote unconscious bias training for all staff within the organisation.

- Refer to international and European research, reports and projects to show that excellence in research is based on diversity of expertise, experience and staff, and find evidence to support your arguments. To get inspired, you might check out, for instance, the European Commission's report She Figures 2021 ([3]) or Gendered Innovations 2 ([4]), or the websites of EU-funded projects such as GenPORT ([5]).

There may be a perception that a GEP is unnecessary because women are well represented in certain fields, faculties or sectors, or because it is assumed that gender inequalities will improve on their own.

- Use the data collected during the status quo assessment to pinpoint persistent gender inequalities in the organisation.

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Organisational resources

Some R & I organisations may not be experienced in or have a tradition of teaching or engaging in gender studies.

- Look for support from and utilise gender equality networks (at national, regional or international level) to enhance institutional capacity and knowledge.

- Use the EuroGender stakeholder directory ([6]) or GE Academy's directory of trainers ([7]) to find gender experts and trainers, and GenPORT's people directory ([8]) to find, for instance, gender networks and gender equality practitioners.

An absence of dedicated, adequate and sustained resources, both human and financial, for gender equality work and for developing, implementing and monitoring a GEP can be an obstacle.

- Clearly outline the value and the concrete results of gender equality actions (e.g. increased staff retention, more robust research, more diversity in staff).

- Search for human and financial resources at national, regional or institutional level in the early stages of the development of the GEP.

A lack of availability of, or access to, sex-disaggregated human resources data.

- Update existing data collection by human resources and management systems to ensure the availability of statistics broken down by sex (and other intersectional variables, such as age).

- Allocate resources and responsibilities for continuously collecting and analysing data (e.g. to measure the success of the GEP).

- Store data in a way that complies with European and national data protection requirements.

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([3]) European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, *She figures 2021: gender in research and innovation: statistics and indicators*, (2021), https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/06090

([4]) European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, *Gendered innovations 2: how inclusive analysis contributes to research and innovation: policy review*, (2020), https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/53572

([5]) https://www.genderportal.eu/

([6]) https://eurogender.eige.europa.eu/community

([7]) GE Academy (https://ge-academy-trainers.eu/trainers/)

([8]) https://www.genderportal.eu/people

Governance

A lack of institutional or organisational authority of staff responsible for GEP implementation can generally be resolved by:

- ensuring early involvement and commitment, as well as visible ongoing support, from leaders;
- identifying who is needed to grant authority, foster progress and authorise decisions, and liaise with these actors throughout the process.

Limited autonomy enabling (public) organisations to make changes related to gender equality (e.g. in relation to hiring, recruitment and promotion procedures and regulations).

- Check if there is any lack of compliance with the principles of equal opportunities and equal treatment of women and men in matters of employment, as set out in Directive 2006/54/EC.
- Check whether there are – European, national or regional, binding or non-binding – regulations that promote gender equality in R & I, and use them as convincing arguments to enact change.

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Sustainability

Promoting gender equality is a long-term process, and the corresponding actions have to be designed to be sustainable.

- Embed commitment to both gender equality and the work related to the GEP in multiple organisational structures.
- Establish clear responsibilities and resources for gender equality work and GEP implementation.

- Create the conditions for clear accountability within the organisation.
- Build your GEP on a mix of different measures and approaches addressing gender inequalities at different levels.
- Devise a clear monitoring and evaluation strategy to accompany GEP implementation.

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COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic and the reactions to it have greatly changed the way we live and work together as a society and have also affected organisational work promoting gender equality.

- Use COVID-19 as a lens to shed light on gendered aspects of R & I.
- Make sure that providing additional family care during the COVID-19 pandemic does not further inhibit the career progress of researchers with such responsibilities compared with those without.

- Ensure that new modes of working and collaborating do not (re)produce gender inequalities in your organisation.
- Demand that research on COVID-19 and on its impacts on public health, society and the economy use approaches involving sex and/or gender analysis.

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