

Relevance and Limitations of Funding for Structural Change

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Abstract. Gender equality plans have a long tradition when it comes to supporting structural change in research performing organisations (RPOs). Numerous institutions have been supported through structural change projects funded by the European framework programmes. These projects have been evaluated and present an ambivalent picture of the sustainability of change achieved in the funding period. To strengthen the implementation of gender equality plans (GEPs) and increase the commitment of RPOs to pursue gender equality objectives efficiently, the European Commission plans to make GEPs an eligibility criterion for applications in Horizon Europe. If RPOs have to have a gender equality plan when submitting a proposal to Horizon Europe, they will have one. But will this contribute to structural change or will it just become another bureaucratic requirement that RPOs have to fulfil in the application process? Will it be more than just a box-ticking exercise? Which framework conditions will be necessary to ensure that it will be more than that? This paper discusses the potential impact of this approach based on experiences gained in a structural change project funded in Horizon 2020. The paper argues that a European initiative has only limited potential for innovation at national level if gender equality objectives differ at European and national level. It is therefore necessary to embed a European initiative in a political discourse about gender equality. A gender equality discourse of this kind should lead to a shared understanding of gender equality objectives and the rationale behind gender equality policies.

Key words: gender equality, structural change, research funding, gender equality plans, policy discourse

1 Introduction

The phenomenon of persistent gender inequalities despite numerous gender equality initiatives has been discussed intensively in the last decade (e.g. Drew and Canavan, 2020; White and O'Connor, 2017; Demos et al., 2014; Riegraf et al., 2010). European and national research and innovation policies have therefore addressed this problem with increasing commitment and breadth. European research and innovation policy defined gender equality as a three-dimensional construct which aims at (1) gender balance in all fields and hierarchical levels, (2) the abolishment of structural barriers for women's careers, and (3) the integration of the gender dimension in research and teaching. Furthermore, gender equality is one of the six priorities of the European

Research Area (ERA). To support these objectives, numerous structural change projects have been funded since the 6th European Framework Programme.

However, gender inequalities nonetheless still persist, and the pace of change remains slow. Evaluation studies have identified several reasons for this, namely a merely rhetoric commitment to gender equality or a lack of commitment and support by top management (EC, 2012), problems with the implementation process (Palmén and Kalpazidou Schmidt, 2019), or a lack of gender competence (Wroblewski, 2016).

The European Commission (EC) under president Ursula von der Leyen has reinforced its commitment to gender equality both in general (EC, 2020) as well as in research and innovation. In the new European Framework Programme (Horizon Europe, 2021-2027) gender equality plans (GEPs) become an eligibility criterion for applicants. This GEP requirement represents a massive push towards gender equality, and demonstrates the EC's demand for a clear commitment to gender equality from research performing organisations (RPOs). With this initiative, the EC takes up recommendations which have been made by the gender equality community for many years (e.g. the Policy Manifesto formulated at the first European Gender Summit in 2011¹; for a more recent initiative see GENDERACTION, 2019). The EC has formulated specific criteria which GEPs should fulfill as well as topics which they should address. For example, GEPs have to be published documents that are signed by top management, contain a commitment in terms of resources and gender expertise to implement concrete measures. Furthermore, the GEP has to be evidence-based and regularly monitored, and contain awareness-raising and training measures for staff and decision makers. Recommended areas to be covered are work-life-balance and organisational culture, gender balance in leadership and decision making, gender equality in recruitment and career progression, integration of the gender dimension into research and teaching content, and measures against gender-based violence including sexual harassment.

However, will this requirement actually be able to initiate institutional gender equality policies and thus contribute to sustainable structural change? In the following, I will discuss this question from the perspective of an evaluator of gender equality policies based both on a simple theory of change as well as experiences gained in the H2020-funded project "TARGET – Taking a reflexive approach to institutional transformation for gender equality".² TARGET supports seven research organisations in Mediterranean and former Eastern countries in developing and implementing GEPs.

¹ <https://www.gopetition.com/petitions/european-gender-summit-policy-manifesto.html>

² For more information see www.gendertarget.eu

2 Theory of Change for GEP requirement

Evaluation studies use a theory of change to explain how activities are understood to produce a series of results that contribute to achieving the final intended impacts (Funnell and Rogers, 2011; W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004). A theory of change can be developed for any level of intervention – an event, a project, a programme, a policy, a strategy, or an organization – and for the short, medium, and long term. It is usually represented in a visual diagram that supports a narrative.

The key element in a theory of change is to explicate the assumptions for why interventions should lead to the expected outcome and impact. It should indicate the goal at the top (intended impact), the changes (outcomes) that need to be made to achieve that goal, as well as all the things that need to be delivered (outputs) to bring about those changes and the activities that need to be carried out in order to ensure that the planned outputs are delivered.

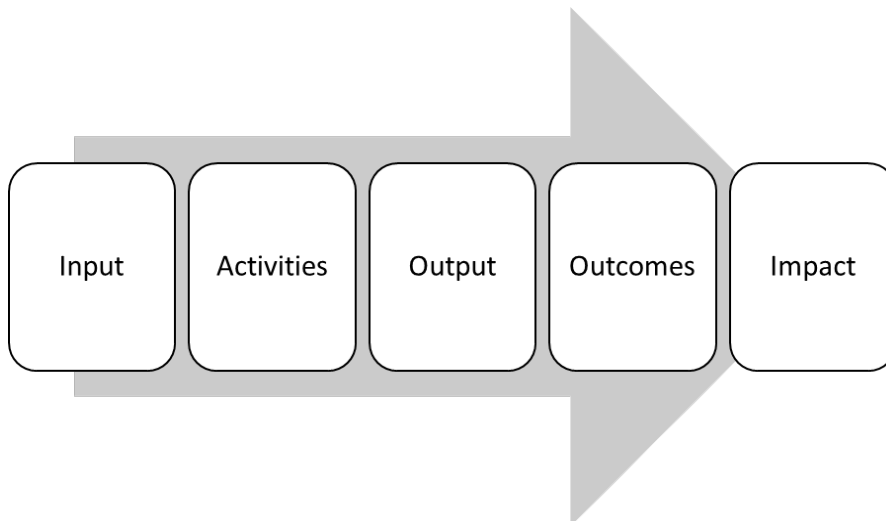


Fig. 1. Theory of change

The simple theory of change formulated below is designed to provide input for the discussion of the potential effects of the GEP requirement and necessary preconditions to realise the expected impact.

The GEP requirement in Horizon Europe aims at supporting the development and implementation of gender equality policies at institutional level. By formulating building blocks and recommending thematic fields, the EC also defines specific quality standards that GEPs should fulfil. The explicit assumption is that RPOs formulate targeted GEPs. It is also assumed that by fulfilling this formal requirement (adoption of a GEP by top management) awareness of gender inequalities will increase and existing structures will be reflected upon from a gender perspective regarding any

inherent gender bias. In an ideal world, structures will be altered when a gender bias is identified, and structural change will thus take place.

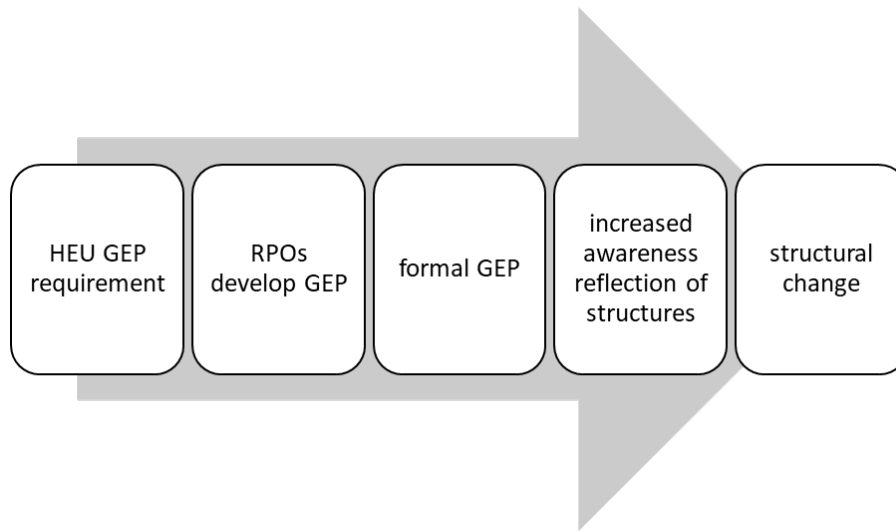


Fig. 2. Theory of change for GEP requirement

When considering the building blocks for GEPs formulated by the EC, it is evident that they support the theory of change:

- A publicly accessible GEP expresses the commitment of top management to gender equality and provides a basis that bottom-up initiatives can address.
- Sufficient resources – in both financial and personnel terms – are a precondition for successful implementation of a GEP.
- The fact that gender expertise has to be available for the implementation of the GEP is of specific importance as it increases the visibility of internal gender expertise or forces institutions to build it up.
- Training for staff and decision makers to increase awareness of unconscious bias also contributes to the effectiveness of GEP implementation.

With these building blocks, the EC follows recommendations from evaluators, gender experts, and activists. However, experiences from the TARGET and other projects show that the successful implementation of the initiative depends on specific conditions which are not mentioned explicitly in the GEP requirement or the underlying theory of change. These specifically address the stage between the formal adoption of a GEP and its implementation in the organisation.

3 Lessons learned from TARGET

To discuss the potential impact of the Horizon Europe GEP requirement, I will refer to experiences gained with the implementation of the TARGET project as well as results

from the GENDERACTION project. TARGET aims at supporting GEP development and implementation in seven organisations in countries which have been identified as being rather inactive with regard to gender equality in R&I (Lipinsky, 2014; EC, 2009). The national contexts of the TARGET implementing partners are characterised by a lack of a national discourse on gender equality in R&I, thus creating a specific and challenging situation for structural change policies at institutional level.

One task of the GENDERACTION project is to monitor the implementation of Priority 4 of the ERA Roadmap (Council of the European Union, 2015). To implement the ERA Roadmap at national level, Member States formulated national action plans (NAPs) which address six priorities (Priority 4 focuses on gender equality in R&I). An analysis of these NAPs (Wroblewski, 2020) points to a significant gap between EU15 and EU13 countries. The NAPs of the “new Member States” (EU13) are more likely to focus on a narrower concept of gender equality than those of EU15 countries. While most EU15 countries follow the ERA’s multidimensional gender equality concept, most EU13 countries focus on the first dimension – women’s participation especially in Grade A. Objectives regarding structural change or the integration of the gender dimension in research and teaching remain the exception. Although some EU13 countries did develop their gender equality policies and objectives further in the context of the NAP, the dominant gender equality concept still remains unchallenged in most. This is also due to a lack of policy discourse at European level (between the EC and Member States) which leads to a shared understanding of gender equality objectives.

The gender equality objective pursued by the structural change project and the (lack of a) national discourse on gender equality in R&I proved to be a major challenge for implementing institutions in the TARGET project. Such challenges in the national context have to be considered alongside any institutional factors that support or hinder GEP implementation, whereby the discussion usually tends to focus on institutional barriers and ignore the external ones. Accordingly, I will now discuss the relevance of the interplay between institutional and national context factors for a successful implementation of structural change policies (GEPs), drawing thereby on the experiences gained in the TARGET project.

3.1 Relevance of National Context

In countries where gender equality has not been formulated as a priority for R&I policy, it is mostly reduced to women’s participation, which represents just one of the three ERA gender equality objectives. This understanding is heavily supported by the ERA monitoring system (EC, 2019b). The ERA progress reports refer to the headline indicator “share of women in Grade A” in the context of Priority 4. The two supporting indicators (“share of women among PhD-students” and “share of women among authors”) play a minor role. Hence, countries with a high share of female professors

are ranked as top performers when it comes to gender equality in R&I. While this defines countries like Romania and Bulgaria as top performers in gender equality (EC, 2019a), it does not mean that women there have an equal share in decision making or that the gender dimension is integrated in research and teaching (EC, 2019c).

Institutions developing and implementing a GEP in such a context are confronted with the problem that their own ambitions regarding gender equality go beyond the national objectives. This becomes a specific challenge for institutions which are state funded or work on a state mandate. Even if these organisations implement internal policies which go beyond the national objectives, it is difficult for them to communicate this to an external audience. In such a case, the implementing organisation has to initiate a gender equality discourse with the relevant national stakeholders, which is a really difficult undertaking since a single organisation can scarcely compensate for the lack of a national discourse on gender equality in R&I.

However, the national context is not a fixed factor and might change in parallel to GEP implementation. This has been the case in Greece. The new focus on gender equality in national R&I policy supported the implementation and sustainability of the GEP in TARGET's Greek partner organisation. In particular, a new law on substantive equality that was passed in March 2019 has raised the importance of the GEP as an appropriate and effective tool that public and private organisations in Greece, including universities and research foundations, are encouraged to deploy. A further law passed in 2019 aims at restructuring some universities and foresees the establishment of Committees for Gender Equality in all Greek universities. It envisions such committees as consultative bodies to assist university administrations in their efforts to promote gender equality. One of their main responsibilities is to develop Action Plans to promote substantive equality in the educational, research, and administrative structures of higher education institutions. In this national context, the implementing institution became visible as a pioneer with regard to GEPs in research organisations and played an active role in the policy discourse (e.g. Anagnostou and Avlona, 2019). The latter included an exchange of experiences with GEP development and implementation with universities.

The Greek example shows that changes in national policy can raise the interest in institutional gender equality policies. A similar situation occurred in Serbia, where its status as an accession country introduced gender equality into R&I policy, with the TARGET implementing partner also becoming visible as a pioneer institution at national level. This was further supported by the fact that the current rector of the implementing university is a woman. In the media, the university is often referred to as a progressive institution because it has a female rector. She uses the attention this creates to refer to gender equality whenever possible and to present the university as a good practice example. One interview partner from the implementing university

described her approach as follows: “She uses every opportunity to raise these issues and push the matter forward within the university. Any kind of public presentation, opening speech, conference, meeting, whatever, she uses the opportunity to mention if not the gender equality plan then some of the aspects of the gender equality plan.” In addition, representatives of the university – especially the rector – have had several meetings with the Serbian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, which is responsible for the implementation of a new Gender Equality Law in the country.

The possibility to influence the national discourse on gender equality in R&I is different in situations where the implementing institution has gender expertise but lacks a competent or responsible opposite number (e.g. in the government). It is almost impossible for an implementing partner to compensate for a lack of a national discourse. In extreme cases, this lack of interest at national level may even diminish an existing commitment from management to gender equality. However, the lack of a gender equality discourse in R&I from the government side could be compensated (at least in part) by bottom-up initiatives coming from the research community or NGOs focusing on gender equality. Such initiatives allow them to identify allies and bundle their strengths.

3.2 Relevance of Institutional Context

Barriers for GEP implementation have been discussed at length in recent years. One of the main reasons for ineffective GEP implementation or its lack of sustainability is an absence of support from the top (EC, 2012). The EC’s requirement that the GEP must be published and signed by top management addresses precisely this barrier. However, the support of top management may change due to changing priorities or changes in management. Four of the seven TARGET implementing partners faced changes in management during the project period, which led in one case to severe problems with the implementation of the GEP.

Aside from this one very pronounced example of open resistance to the implementation of a GEP, implementing partners have also been confronted with more moderate forms of resistance. A typical form of resistance – and one which is supported by the definition of gender equality in national R&I policy – is the perception of gender equality as a non-issue due to high female representation in the organisation or R&I in general. Several interview partners reported that gender issues are not seen as relevant at their institution.³ This is primarily due to the high representation of women among students and staff. “In general, the issue is not that problematic because 64% of students are female, and in engineering 48% of students are women.” (I2) “According to statistics, X [country] does not perform badly. The number of female

³ The following quotes are taken from the TARGET interim evaluation report (TARGET, 2020).

students is very high.” (I3) “There is no problem regarding female participation at all levels – including professorships and management positions.” (I8)

This form of neglecting the gender issues represents a type of resistance which might be explained by a lack of gender competence within the organisation. This is a specific problem in cases where gender expertise is provided by an external expert who joins the organisation for the duration of the project. Hence, the requirement that GEPs have to include training and awareness-raising activities regarding unconscious bias for staff and management also responds to a factor which has been critically discussed in the context of effective gender equality policies. However, the GEP requirement does not insist on internal expertise. It likewise does not specifically address the challenge of establishing internal gender competence and awareness in a country without a gender equality discourse in R&I.

Experiences within the TARGET project not only pointed to hindering factors, they also revealed supporting factors for GEP implementation which compensate (at least in part) for the lack of support at national level. The implementation of gender equality policies is facilitated if gender equality objectives are linked to key objectives or strategies of the institution. An important aspect in this context is the self-perception of the organisation as modern and open-minded. According to the interview partners in the implementing institutions, this requires that gender equality is ensured and all forms of discrimination are combatted. Hence, gender equality as an objective is not questioned by the interview partners, who see it instead as a requirement for a modern organisation. All of the interview partners are aware that dealing with gender equality is a must in European funding procedures. This forms the basis for the generally high acceptance of gender equality issues.

In an ideal scenario, this first step of recognising the relevance of gender for one's own organisation is accompanied by a willingness both to reflect on the way things have been done in the past from a gender perspective and to change practices in the event of an unintended gender bias. This became very obvious in the context of a gender sensitive language. Referring to the existing regulation in his institution, one interview partner noted that “the regulation makes you think about how to express things and understand a gender bias”.

Resistance to gender equality becomes more unlikely when gender is considered a relevant dimension in the dominant research fields. The acceptance of gender relevance in research also allows people to discuss gender issues within their organisation. However, this requires a responsible change agent who is accepted by the management as well as the research community and a participatory process which is open to critical discussions and self-reflection.

In institutions where the relevance of gender issues is accepted and there is a willingness to reflect on gender bias, the TARGET approach of establishing a

community of practice worked well. This approach was based on the assumption that the sustainable implementation of a GEP requires it to be viewed as a common endeavour within the institution and not assigned to one expert who is responsible for GEP development and implementation. As the examples given above also illustrate, the establishment of a community of practice is linked to or builds on measures to develop and augment gender competence.

4 Conclusion

Experiences gained in the TARGET project show that a financial incentive alone is not sufficient to support the development and sustainable implementation of gender equality policies at institutional level. Difficult national contexts can even hamper existing institutional commitment to gender equality. Referring to the experiences gained in the TARGET project and a simple theory of change model allows us to depict the potential stumbling blocks for the Horizon Europe GEP requirement.

With the GEP requirement, the EC takes up recommendations which have been formulated by gender experts and gender activists for many years. It has been constantly claimed that gender equality should be linked to funding and sanctions for non-compliance. However, such an incentive is more likely to achieve its objective when requirements at national (e.g. from funding organisations) and European level are compatible or identical, since this would imply that gender equality objectives are also similar at both levels. Wroblewski (2020) analysed the implementation of national gender equality policies in R&I and showed that EU Member States formulate different gender equality objectives and refer to diverging gender equality concepts. EU15 countries are more likely to pursue the comprehensive gender equality objective formulated in the ERA, while the new Member States (EU13) still tend to focus on female representation in the gender equality in R&I context.

Hence, the realisation of the potential effects of the GEP requirement in Horizon Europe depends strongly on a shared understanding of the gender equality concept, gender equality objectives, gender equality plans, and related quality criteria between the European Commission and the national policy makers. This is of specific importance in times of anti-gender movements and a renaissance of traditional norms and values. A policy discourse on gender equality in R&I is a precondition for the proper functioning of a steering mechanism like compulsory GEPs. It is also needed in order to avoid a widening of the gap between EU15 and EU13 countries with regard to gender equality in R&I – especially when access to European funding depends on it.

In addition to a policy discourse between the European and the national policy makers, a similar discourse should take place at national level between all relevant

stakeholder groups. It will also be necessary to provide support at national level for those institutions that are developing and implementing a GEP for the first time or further developing an existing GEP.

In an ideal world, the gender equality policy discourse at the national and European levels is accompanied by possibilities for mutual learning and exchange of experiences. This will also contribute to capacity building. The need to build up competence and expertise in GEP development and implementation applies not only to the institutions affected by the GEP requirement but also to the Member States themselves (e.g. the stakeholders responsible for higher education or R&I policy in government ministries).

From the perspective of RPOs, funding alone is not a sufficient incentive to pursue sustainable structural change. Hence, it is important that RPOs are addressed by a European or national policy discourse on gender equality as described above. The motivation to engage in gender issues increases when gender equality is perceived as a criterion for excellent research and a characteristic of a modern organisation which is attractive for both national and international experts.

At the institutional level, it is helpful if gender equality objectives are compatible with or supported by other strategic organisational goals (e.g. excellence, organisational reform). Institutions also need to build up internal gender competence and establish cooperation with gender experts who can support the development and implementation of gender equality policies. This underlines the importance of ensuring that responsibility for gender equality is not assigned to one expert or a specific unit in the organisation but is instead shouldered by a community of practice.

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