



Gender equality, diversity, and inclusion in academia: successes and failures of the initiatives promoted by the European Union

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Abstract

The article summarises the scientific debate on the strengths and weaknesses of the strategies adopted by the European Union to promote gender equality in academia and the adoption of a gender perspective in research.

The article focuses on introducing gender mainstreaming, promoting gender equality and structural change in research performing and financing organisations, and adopting gender action/equality plans. The discussion is structured around textual analysis of relevant EU acts, scientific literature, reports of EU funded research projects, communication and support actions. The authors discuss the critics of the various initiative and advance some considerations about what could support individuals and groups interested in promoting positive changes towards gender equality, diversity and inclusion in the academic field. The article relevance is linked to the innovation promoted by Horizon Europe, that requires all public institutions applying for Eu funding to have a Gender equality plan, and the risks that previous mistakes can be repeated hindering the process towards gender equality as in the recent past.

Key words: gender equality, gender equality plan, gender mainstreaming, positive actions, Horizon Europe

1. Introduction

Academic institutions, like any other organisation, are not neutral, but rather gendered, as “abstract jobs and hierarchies, common concepts in organisational thinking, assume a disembodied and universal worker” (Acker, 1990, p. 146), not reflecting the embodied nature of work. The distinctions drawn between male and female, masculine and feminine, are still embedded in processes, policies and practices. Of these hierarchical distinctions, inequalities between female and male academic staff are well-known by the European Union (EU), which promoted structural measures to reduce and eliminate gender discrimination and biases in organisations in recent decades (European Commission, 2019). The promotion of equality and diversity in universities has a potential cascade effect at the societal level. The range of positive changes in the academic sector may represent a model for other organisations in the public and private sectors.

Notwithstanding the fact that positive developments lead to more gender-sensitive universities (Bencivenga & Drew, 2020), the measures promoted by the EU, at a broader level and in particular in the higher education sector, have raised a debate among scholars who have reported difficulties and strategies that have slowed down the process or favoured actions less efficient than others.

The decision by the Commission to make mandatory, from 2022, Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) for all higher education institutions, research organisations and public bodies wishing to apply for EU funding through Horizon Europe will accelerate the process towards gender equality and diversity. However, this requirement risks re-creating at the level of single universities the same situations which hindered in some cases the progression towards gender equality in the recent past.

Over the following pages, the authors provide a brief description of the numerous strategies adopted by the EU, focusing on introducing gender mainstreaming (GM), promoting gender equality and structural change in research, and encouraging gender action/equality plans. After summarising the debate among scholars on the strengths and weaknesses of the strategies, the authors will conclude with some considerations about what could support individuals and groups interested in promoting positive changes towards gender equality, diversity and inclusion in the academic field.

2. EU policy context

Over the years, research Framework Programmes (FPs)¹ have sustained actions to rise the amount and role of women scientists, and to mainstream gender in the research content. A detailed history is beyond the possibilities of this contribution², however, before detailing the path towards gender equality followed by the EU through the FPs, it is important to point out that the European Union has adopted since the 1980s various initiatives and actions to address the topic at a general level, funding pilot projects and positive actions, and creating over the years networks of persons and organisations active in policies to ensure equal opportunities.

There are three ideal-typical approaches to gender issues identified by Rees (1998): equal treatment, positive action, and mainstreaming. The EU has sustained the three approaches over the past several decades through strategies addressing different aims:

1. "Fix the Numbers" emphasises on rising women's and underrepresented groups' participation.
2. "Fix the Institutions" encourages structural change in organisations for an inclusive equality in careers.
3. "Fix the Knowledge" or "gendered innovations" encourages the mainstream sex, gender, and intersectional analysis into all research phasis to assure excellence in science and technology and quality in results (Schiebinger & Schraudner, 2011). The request for an intersectional analysis has been added more recently, and it is now a requirement in FP9, Horizon Europe, running from 2021 to 2027.

A short recapitulation of the different approaches adopted, and their evolution along time will allow the reader to understand better the succession of initiatives, from those focused on equal opportunities, to the introduction or strengthening of positive initiatives and the adoption of GM. Positive actions were deemed necessary for a twofold reason, on the one hand in order to analyze the provisions that would address the real disadvantages that women face in accessing the equal opportunities formal offered to them, and on the other hand because they, in some cases, allow for the structuring of an effective GM. This will make it easier to understand the application of both positive actions and GM to the research field, leading to the obligation to adopt a gender equality plan to receive EU funding for research.

One of the European Union's founding values is the equality between men and women, dating back to 1957 when the "principle of equal pay for equal work" became part of the

¹ In the document, for practical reasons the authors will adopt the usual abbreviation for Framework Programme, FP (followed by the number of the Programme, i.e FP2, FP3, etc). When speaking in general of Framework Programmes, the abbreviation will be FPs. The full name has been left when it is part of a title or used in quotations.

² For a detailed and updated account: Ruby Gropas (2020) 'Gender, Anti-discrimination and Diversity: The EU's Role in Promoting Equality', in Levrau, F. and Clycq, N. (eds) *Equality*. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 231–265. doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-54310-5. (Gropas, 2020)

founding Treaty of the European Economic Community (EEC), the Treaty of Rome. Gradually, equal treatment principles have also been applied to other aspects of employment, training, welfare and other fields.

In the 1980s, the EU began to mark the way for substantive equality measures by emphasising positive action programs addressed to women, stimulating vocational training and education opportunities for women, addressing gender-based violence and other actions (Cichowski, 2013).

Equal opportunities programmes adopted by the EEC (and since 1993 by the EU) have addressed employment, socially underprivileged women, women's health, and numerous other issues. These Programmes started prior to the initiatives which have directly impacted the Research and Development programmes from FP5 onwards.

An important role in improving the situation of women and promoting cooperation at all levels has been played by the first three EU medium-term action programmes on equal opportunities for women and men (hereafter: Action programme).

The First Action Programme (1982-85) centred on developing a global policy for women's employment. The Second Action Programme (1986-90) introduced a more diversified policy focusing on disadvantaged and socially underprivileged women. This programme also introduced a series of studies prior to the third Action Programme, covering the impact of new technologies

tackling women's health problems. The Third Action Programme³ (1990-1995) sought to increase women's lives by rising public awareness of gender equality issues, the image of women in the mass media and their participation in decision-making processes at all levels and in all areas of society. The Fourth Action Programme (1996-2000)⁴ concentrated on integrating gender into government policies. The Fifth Action Programme (2001-2006)⁵ implemented the EU global framework strategy on gender equality. The European Commission and the Member States were asked to guarantee consistency and complementarity between actions taken under this programme and other relevant actions (the DAPHNE, MEDA, PHARE and STOP programmes), the FP6 for research⁶, the programme to reduce social exclusion and the Action programme prevent and combat discrimination (2001-2006). At the same time, specific actions supporting equal treatment for women and men in employment and work were linked to the Structural Funds, the EQUAL Community initiative or other measures encouraging cooperation to support employment strategies.

In 2007, the Action programmes for equal opportunities were replaced by the PROGRESS Community programme, the employment and social solidarity programme, focusing on

³ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=LEGISSUM:c10915&from=EN>

⁴ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:51995PC0602>

⁵ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=LEGISSUM:c10904&from=ET>

⁶ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM:i23012>. The authors will give more details on FP6 in the following pages, as it has represented an important point in relation to the promotion of gender equality in research.

supporting financially the achievement of the EU goals in employment, equal opportunities and social affairs.

In the 1990s, when the Action Programmes were still being implemented, the EU made a formal commitment to GM, creating institutional bodies and mechanisms to encourage the inclusion of a gender perspective in decision-making and establishing the principle of GM in the Treaty, in Action Programmes and communications. In particular, the European Commission announced its commitment to a strategy of GM in 1996, first announced in 1995 at the IV World Conference on women in Beijing, according to which all political activities are expected to promote gender equality.

Mainstreaming “involves not restricting efforts to promote equality to the implementation of specific measures to help women but mobilising all general policies and measures specifically for the purpose of achieving equality by actively and openly taking into account at the planning stage their possible effects on the respective situations of men and women (gender perspective). This means systematically examining measures and policies and taking into account such possible effects when defining and implementing them: thus, development policies, the organisation of work, choices relating to transport or the fixing of school hours, etc. may have significant differential impacts on the situation of women and men which must therefore be duly taken into consideration in order to further promote equality between women and men” (Commission of the European Communities, 1996, p. 2).

Since 1984 the EU has been funding research in the European Research Area (ERA) through multi-year grants programmes known as *Framework Programmes for Research and Technological Development*. The last two programmes, Horizon 2020 (2014-2020) and Horizon Europe, FP9, which will run through to 2027, are different in their specific objectives and actions for the scientific research being funded. While the emphasis in the previous programmes was on technological development, in Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe the focus has shifted to innovation, as reflected in their full name: Framework Programmes for Research and Innovation. Implementing gender, sex, and intersectional analysis in research represents an innovation, leading to new discoveries, technologies, services but also revisiting previous research in new perspectives.

The connection between the Community policy on equal opportunities and the adoption of GM on one side and the FPs on the other side was created by the European Council for FP5, (1998-2002). In 2000, the Commission also introduced studies on the gender impact of each funding programme, laying the foundation for an assessment of gender integration in FP5⁷.

⁷ European Commission. (2001) Gender impact assessment of the Fifth Framework Programme specific programmes. Promotion of Innovation and Encouragement of participation of SMEs. Luxembourg: Office for Publications of the European Communities. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/eb6e08f8-9269-48ff-9762-bdc13b6a156a>. This web page and all the other pages quoted in the article were last accessed on 15 July 2021.

Greater emphasis was placed on the gender dimension in FP6, having become a priority issue at each stage of the project cycle. FP6 included three closely gender-related objectives for research: increasing the number of female researchers taking part in projects, ensuring women scientists are involved in the processes of assessment, consultation and implementation, and redesigning research to ensure it meets the requirements of both women and men. To achieve these objectives, the European Commission asked the scientific community to begin considering gender issues when preparing research proposals, particularly in applications for *Integrated Projects and Networks of Excellence*: the projects had to include a Gender Action Plan (GAP) declaring how they proposed to include gender issues in their research.

The Commission also raised the percentage of women on the various committees, including assessment committees for project calls, aiming to spread the number of women in the dataset from 18 percent to 40 percent in FP5. They sought: i) women scientists with experience of any scientific discipline, in order to increase the number of women in all assessment groups for priority issues; ii) women scientists with experience of any scientific discipline relating to gender issues; iii) women scientists with gender as their main field of competence.⁸ Specific reports were also commissioned along with a summary of the findings from various spheres (EC, 2009).

Moreover, in FP6 specific funding was allocated for gender research under the call for proposals on Women and Science, but there was no other specific funding for calls for proposals on gender research as such. Issues such as the empowerment of women scientists, ambassadors for women and science, piloting new areas and enhancing the Gender Watch System, comparative research to analyse and assess the efficiency of existing measures, measurement and evaluation of scientific excellence, gender research were some of the arguments of the FP6 calls for Women and Science proposals. In FP6, around 20M € have been dedicated to Women in Science actions (Degraef, 2005).

The GM measures included in FP6 were targeted to three groups of players: project proposers, project evaluators and Commission officers in charge of projects.

In the guides for proposers of the largest-scale projects, the already mentioned Gender Action Plan (GAP) was required to draw up. In the guides for expert evaluators of proposals, assessing the extent to which gender was addressed in the proposal was required. The Project Officers working in DG Research received a Vademecum on GM (Directorate General for Research Unit c-5, 2003) explaining the importance of incorporating gender in the research content and of encouraging the participation of women in the proposals' activities.

FP6 particularly funded *Research Performing Organisations (RPOs)* and *Research Funding Organisations – (RFOs)* to eradicate discriminatory barriers for women in their scientific careers and in decision-making processes, helping research organisations implement gender

⁸ <https://cordis.europa.eu/article/id/19868-commission-seeks-women-fp6-evaluators>

equality plans and include the issue of gender in their research. This focus on RPOs and RFOs continued in the following FPs with dedicated calls.

Several changes marked the passage to the following FP, the seventh. The EU adopted a new strategy for FP7: structural change. In other words, it was deemed necessary to analyse the research organisations and institutions where women scientists work, to modernise the organisational culture, to promote gender awareness and stimulate the removal of obstacles to women's professional careers (CNR, 2015). FP7's *Science in Society* (SIS) programme FP7 and the *Science with and for Society* (SwafS) programme with calls for *Gender Equality in Research and Innovation* (GERI).⁴ - Support to research organisations to implement Gender Equality Plans in the following FP, Horizon 2020, marked a turning point, providing funding for *Gender Action Plans - GAP* (FP7) – and *Gender Equality Plans - GEP* (Horizon 2020).

A GEP is defined by the EU (2012) as “a set of actions aiming to conduct impact assessment/audits of procedures and practices to identify gender bias; identify and implement innovative strategies to correct any bias and set targets and monitor progress via indicators”. According to the latest data available, the *She Figures 2018* report, 55,9 percent of RPOs in the 28 EU Countries had adopted gender equality plans in 2016, ranging from the over 90 percent of RPOs in Sweden Denmark and the United Kingdom to the below 20 percent of Bulgaria, Czech Republic, and Slovakia and the 0 percent of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Malta. The data, however, are only partially reliable and would require further analysis. For example, Italy scored at 38,9 percent, but the Italian Plans for Positive Actions, mandatory in all public organisations, are defined by the *European Institute for Gender Equality* as follows: “By Law, Public Administrations – including all Public research organisations including Universities – must have a gender equality plan (also called Positive Action Plan and referred to hereafter as PAP). Therefore, all 96 Italian universities have a PAP”⁹. Other countries could face similar situations, changing the overall image of the GEPs distribution in Europe.

As previously mentioned, *Horizon Europe* is now asking all public bodies applying for funding to declare having a GEP, that must follow some characteristics de minimum. While the EU does not provide a common template for GEPs, it has indicated five minimum requirements and the concrete measures and objectives (that are in fact covered by most GEPs at European level).

As regards creating and implementing a GEP, the EU currently requires¹⁰ a senior figure to sign a formal document which is published on the University's website, outlining i) the human resources involved and the gender competences allocated to implement the GEP; ii) collecting and monitoring sex/gender-disaggregated data for staff and the student body; iii) indicator-based annual reports; and iv) training for staff, including those in decision-making roles, to increase their awareness and understanding of gender equality practices and

⁹ <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/toolkits/gear/legislative-policy-backgrounds/italy>

¹⁰ The information given on these pages was taken from the EU website, specifically: https://ec.europa.eu/info/research-and-innovation/strategy/gender-equality-research-and-innovation_en

unconscious gender biases. The areas to be covered by the GEPs are a) the life/work and organisational balance; b) gender balance in leadership and decision-making processes; c) gender equality in recruitment and career development; d) gender integration in research and educational content; and e) action to combat gender-based violence, including sexual harassment.

In short, the EU's FPs have provided significant support for gender issues, funding gender equality initiatives within the research field for many years, from individual projects and consortia to wider actions involving the entire scientific community, RPOs and RFOs. A key feature of the initiatives is the importance not only of redressing the statistics of men and women taking part in research and development, but also of including different perspectives within scientific contexts. The latter has yet to find exhaustive responses: particularly in high-tech sectors, it requires academics to apply gender perspectives to the educational pathways and asks researchers to review and expand their knowledge and competences to include sex, gender and intersectional analyses in each step of the research process.

As the authors have shown, significant progress in gender equality has been made by the EU in recent decades thanks to equal treatment legislation, GM, and specific actions for the advancement of women. The current approach goes beyond gender, promotes equality, addresses discrimination, and manages diversity. The *Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025* identifies specific policy goals and measures designed to promote significant progress toward a gender-equal Europe. The strategy seeks a dual GM approach combined with specific actions, and intersectionality is a horizontal approach principle for its implementation.

The introduction of an intersectional approach¹¹ is particularly relevant. During Horizon 2020, among the critics to the programme, the focus on gender has been raised as a danger to reinforce binary approaches and a focus on a mono-dimensional strategy, concentrated mainly on gender. The *Gender Equality Strategy* has transposed these critics, formally introducing intersectionality:

“The intersectionality of gender with other grounds of discrimination will be addressed across EU policies. Women are a heterogeneous group and may face intersectional discrimination based on several personal characteristics. For instance, a migrant woman with a disability may face discrimination on three or more grounds. EU law, policies and their implementation should therefore respond to the specific needs and circumstances of women and girls in different groups. The forthcoming Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion and the EU strategic frameworks on disability, LGBTI+, Roma inclusion and children's rights will be linked to this strategy and to each other. Moreover, the intersectional

¹¹ In Horizon Europe, the requirement to address research in an intersectional dimension is explicit, and it is already reflected, to make only one example, in the Gendered Innovation website and repository of case studies, the key source for scientists seeking to integrate a gender dimension into their research, which includes a new section on intersectionality and strategies to apply it to research paths. <http://genderedinnovations.stanford.edu/>

perspective will always inform gender equality policies”(European Commission, 2020, p. 16).

Horizon 2020 was the first FP to contain a specific article on gender equality in its regulation and to establish gender as a cross-cutting issue. Horizon Europe goes beyond Horizon 2020. It introduces an inclusive concept of gender diversity and equality, as it urges consideration of the interconnected systems of power between gender and other social categories and identities (social class, gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, and disability). Expanding the perspective from the “single axis analysis” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139) of gender, intersectionality will allow the research and innovation players to more effectively tackle the multifaceted and interrelated factors of inequality experienced by themselves and by the subjects of their research.

3. Integrating the gender dimension in research: an uneasy path

We have summarised the numerous strategies adopted by the EU in a praiseworthy path that has led to undoubted progress toward the integration of a gender dimension and a gender equality in science. However, “progress towards gender equality is part of a complicated process of interaction among different social and institutional forces, where feminist battles, either at EU or national level, must face gendered contexts and practices both in cultural and decision-making structures, which will influence policy outcomes and not always in the intended direction”. (Lombardo, 2003, p. 174). For each strategy or measure adopted, it is easy to find in the literature analyses of the negative consequences and the possible backlashes that can hinder their potential long-lasting impact on the individuals, the institutions, and society at large. “All provisions devised to progress in gender equality have negative retroactive effects on women, due to the patriarchal context in which they are applied. The path towards equality in a patriarchal system is not easy” (Lombardo, 2003, p. 159).

Positive-action mandates may encounter opposition because they challenge beliefs of individual equality and the careers of those already at higher levels, often men (Rees, 1998). In fact, as the successful implementation of positive action in political decision-making had challenged the gender distribution of political power over institutions and resources, GM has been used as an alibi for neutralising positive actions, leading to policy softening and institutional weakening (Stratigaki, 2005).

At its adoption, in the 1990s, due to the enthusiasm and the novelty, the concept of GM was often considered as rich of potential for the improvement of gender equality: “the gradual introduction of a gender perspective into existing policies has the potential to transform the discourse, procedures and participants of EU and, ultimately, national policies, to the mutual benefit of the women and men of Europe” (Pollack & Hafner-Burton, 2000, p. 453).

Later, however, the enthusiasm died down and criticism began to appear, when the analysis of concrete situations allowed a more realistic appreciation of its impact on reality. The same

researchers who previously foresaw positive consequences, started advancing criticism of the way the EU have supported the implementation of GM, for example criticising the use of “soft” incentives such as persuasion and socialisation not capable of mobilising sufficient interest among the bureaucrats working at the EU (Hafner-burton & Pollack, 2009). In some way, this criticism was anticipated several years before, when referring to the players involved in the implementation of GM: it “requires the adoption of a gender perspective by all the central players in the policy process – some of whom may have little experience or interest in gender issues” (Pollack & Hafner-Burton, 2000, p. 434). But the extent at which that little experience and lack of interest could impact on the results became apparent only with time.

Resistance to change is a well-known factor that helps comprehend the failure of policies on gender (Bergqvist et al., 2013) and the change promoted by GM is no exception. The effective implementation of GM has been hindered by various types of resistance, both explicit and implicit, both at the individual and institutional level: “although bureaucratic principles enshrined in law prescribe the mainstreaming of gender into EU policies, individual and institutional resistances contribute to an ineffective implementation of the strategy” (Mergaert & Lombardo, 2014, p. 2).

The more general critical observation is that the lack of incentives, sanctions or the obligation to certify the results obtained have pushed GM into the background compared to other transversal issues (European Commission, 2015).

A crucial passage, that took place between FP6 (2000 – 2006) and FP7 (2007 – 2013) can help us better understand the difficulties in implementing a gender perspective in established research schemes. As described in more detail in the previous section of this article, in FP6, to implement the objectives to increase female participation, reach a balanced representation and re-orient research, the EU required of the scientific community to deal with gender issues in two types of research proposals: Integrated Projects and Networks of Excellence¹². This needed to be documented in a short action plan on GM. But in FP7 the requirement was dropped, and dedicated programmes for GEPs were created. Mergaert and Lombardo (2014) examined the Commission’s documents and reports in an attempt to establish the reasons for this choice but did not find an adequate response.

Mergaert and Lombardo (2014), analysing this step, focus specifically on the staff working for the Commission. They showed that despite the significant steps taken in institutionalising GM in terms of tools, institution-building, and the content of policy documents, gaps in the implementation phase of the strategy slowed down the process. More specifically, the Commission did not set aside resources for training its staff on how to apply the new mainstreaming task effectively. Some reference documents have been produced, such as the Vademecum on Gender Mainstreaming (Directorate General for

¹² In FP6, according to the objectives, the size of partnership, and other criteria, the following instruments were made available: Specific Support Actions (SSA), Coordination Actions (CA), Specific Targeted Research Project (STREP), Networks of Excellence (NoE) and Integrated Projects (IP).

Research Unit c-5, 2003), a guide for scientists and project managers on concretely implementing GM from call publication to contract follow-up. However, the Commission has not planned any awareness-raising or capacity-building actions to enable project officers to acquire the essential knowledge to incorporate gender into their work as civil servants. This did not allow officials with the new task of incorporating a gender dimension into their work to have all the tools to meet the challenge.

An indirect confirm arrives from the *Monitoring progress towards Gender Equality in the Sixth Framework Programme. Synthesis Report* compiled by the *Centre for Strategies and Evaluation Services (CSES)* based on contributions by the Gender Monitoring Studies Contractors and the European Commission in May 2009. The Report declared that although FP6 paid attention to gender it did not generate significant advancement in gender equality.

The choice of favouring a general GM approach and of financing GEPs but not to ask gender action plans to individual projects, as in FP6, may have contributed to the gap between what was funded in FP7 through GEPs at structural level, leading to positive changes, and the slower progress made towards gender balance in the research teams and gendered research paths by individual projects at a more general level. In FP7 and FP8 (Horizon 2020), dealing with gender issues was restricted to specific calls, while for the proposals submitted to the majority of calls the commitment to promoting gender equality remained a generic request the answers to which did not affect, in the real process, the selection process or the evaluation of the project path and results.

GM has been considered “an open signifier that can be filled with both feminist and non-feminist content” (Lombardo & Meier, 2006), while its concept is easily understandable, the difficulties in implementing it may be linked to an opposition to what is implied in the strategy, a change in power dynamics. If the latter is the case, little can be done, at least in the short term, as a passive resistance can be in some cases sufficient to slow down the process and delay or dilute the initiatives.

However, the same analyses that emphasised the negative aspects identified some strategies that could counteract the tendency to keep the status quo as long as possible. In the current situation, where in Horizon Europe renewed emphasis is put on gendering all proposals submitted to the EU calls, it may be important to recall what can be done to at least minimise the resistance to change observed in the past.

The first strategy is to provide those in charge of implementing new actions with resources, time, personnel decision-making power, adequate knowledge and training and the essential hierarchical support. Another important means for support could be through facilitating actors’ opportunities to effectively apply the plan through the everyday norms and practices implemented (Mergaert & Lombardo, 2014).

Other suggested strategies “underline the importance of top-level commitment and openness for change, especially in terms of “agenda setting” and transformational change. While these preconditions remain unfulfilled, feminists (femocrats and allies) can work to secure incremental change and the prevention of backlash thanks to the layering of gender mainstreaming over the mainstream governance architecture, underscoring the importance

of agency. Importantly, while layering (as identified in the European Commission) has not secured consistent, linear progress toward gender equality, it has protected gender mainstreaming from evaporating entirely, by leaving space for agency”. (Minto & Mergaert, 2018, p. 13)

Also, “feminist strategies may have to be revisited in terms of both modes of acting and modes of theorising. They may have to rely more on the knowledge of how power, structures and individuals interact and how this frames EU policies and discourse” (Stratigaki, 2005, p. 182).

If these are potentially successful strategies, the Gender Equality Plans that will be mandatory for all public bodies applying for funding from 2022 have all the necessary requirements, as they include all the above-mentioned strategies. At the same time, Horizon Europe requests all applicants responding to call for proposals, independently from the call, the topic, or the discipline, to include a gender observation that should be pervasive in the proposal, included in its logic, and corresponding to a specific gender-sensitive language. All these aspects will be subject to evaluation. In many cases, the appreciation of gender inclusivity will be an essential factor for the evaluation process and the final assessment. Therefore, researchers and applicants face a new challenge deriving from the attention to gender equality, diversity and also inclusive aspects necessary to succeed in the application. This cannot be underestimated, and the referral to gender can no more be based on a numerical division in the quota of male/female participants.

It is time for the academic world to approach gender equality, diversity and inclusion from a new and diverse point of view.

4. Conclusion

As this article shows, the way to gender equality, diversity and inclusion in academia has been neither simple nor linear. While behavioural and attitudinal change is needed at an individual level to proceed towards equality, respecting diversity and inclusion, organisational resistance to change and intrinsic gendered structures may indirectly undermine the actions promoted. The EU legislative frameworks and financing schemes have required disaggregated data gathering, academic staff training at all levels, promoting diverse leadership styles, gendering the research process. All these initiatives, where adopted and supported by the higher institutional levels, have offered tremendous help to those willing to move forward. However, modifying the prevailing wisdom, especially in institutions still highly gendered, can be challenging. More specifically, the authors have shown to what extent the numerous initiatives adopted and promoted by the EU to encourage gender-equality policies in higher education institutions have been hindered by passive resistance, for example, slowing down the processes or adopting formal strategies devoid of consistency.

Now that Horizon Europe is accelerating the process towards equality, with a new approach more respectful of diversity and interest in inclusion, we believe that being aware of past

conditions and strategies and their adverse effects on the process may help individuals and organisations in monitoring their actions at several levels and taking the necessary measures to proceed at a steady rhythm in the changing process.

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