Assessment and implementation of Agriculture and Life Science Universities' first Gender Equality Plans in widening countries

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Implementing Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) in Higher Education and Research in widening countries: The case of agriculture & life sciences

How to foster the capabilities of widening countries' Research Performing Organisations in Agriculture and Life Sciences for successful GEP implementation?

1. Objectives of the document

The current document briefly analyses the challenges that several higher education and Research Performing Organisations (RPOs) from widening countries are likely to have faced in developing and implementing their first Gender Equality Plan (GEP). We aimed to collect the most challenging aspects, highlighting their background and presenting some hints on how to address the needs where support is required to advance the gender equality (GE) status of widening RPOs, especially in the subsectors of the STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), the agriculture and life sciences.

This specific focus on agriculture and life sciences in the document (and also in the project) is justified by a number of studies that show that the gender challenges in this sector are different from those in STEM fields in general[1,2,3]. They require a GEP implementation strategy that takes into account the specific challenges of the sector and is able to provide tailored responses to address them.

The objectives of this policy brief, drafted after one year of implementation of the AGRIGEP project[4] in three widening countries' universities, are thus threefold: First, to illustrate the double challenge of advancing GE in RPOs located in those domestic contexts and with a specialisation (although not exclusive) on agriculture and life sciences. Second, to highlight the need for context- and area-specific, tailored solutions to complement the more generic tools and insight brought by cumulative efforts carried out in this realm, notably as part of EU-funded initiatives. Third, to identify key cultural and organisational hindrances to change, and the potential ways to overcome them.

2. The case for gender equality

Promoting gender equality in higher education and research is deemed crucial to achieving social progress, economic development, sustainability, justice, and equity[5]. There is a robust case to sustain that GE fosters social diversity, leading to fresh perspectives, ideas, and solutions to various challenges and problems in general[6]. However, higher education and RPOs, bound to deliver the common good, have a particular role in upholding the highest management, teaching, and scientific standards[7] and striving for scientific progress and innovation through diverse research and student communities[8].

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[1] Gender Action. (2021). Caring for soil is caring for life. Mission Boards No 4. https://h2020.genderaction.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/GENDERACTION_Mission-Boards_4_Soil.pdf

[2] Egge, S. (2022). Gender and agriculture. A Companion to American Agricultural History, 229-243.

[3] Pyburn and van Eerdewijk. (2021). Advancing gender equality through agricultural and environmental research: Past, present, and future. Intl Food Policy Res Inst. https://doi.org/10.2499/9780896293915

[4] See project details: https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101094158 and on the AGRIGEP website https://agrigep.eu/

[5] Rosa et al. (2020). Gender equality in higher education and research. Journal of Gender Studies, 31(1), 1-7. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09589236.2022.2007446

[6] Subactagin-Matto. (2022). Gender equality, diversity, and social inclusion. Pasai.org blog. https://www.pasai.org/blog/2022/3/29/gender-equality-diversity-and-social-inclusion

[7] See: RESET Joint Statement for Equality, Diversity, and Excellence in Research: https://wereset.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Joint-statement-RESET_website.pdf

[8] https://undsci.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/UndSci_101_TheSocialSideofScience-1.pdf

Despite women outnumbering men in higher education in the European Union[9], significant challenges have remained in achieving GE in STEM fields regarding the low proportion and equal opportunities of women. Women make up only one third of the researchers in the EU, and they are also under-represented in leading positions. Female researchers are more likely to be employed under precarious working contracts and part-time than their male colleagues (*see Figure 1*). Highly gendered masculine organisational culture alienates women and other minority groups pursuing careers in STEM professions, particularly after obtaining PhD[10]. Beyond retention-related problems of STEM careers, improving GE in the fields of life science and agriculture is particularly challenging, due to their strong relation to the business sector with high levels of both horizontal (by type of activities) and vertical (in terms of seniority and power) segregation[11]. Ensuring a diverse workforce and equal opportunities for all appears to be a precondition for those sectors to effectively tackle defining challenges in the realm of health, food security, and climate action.

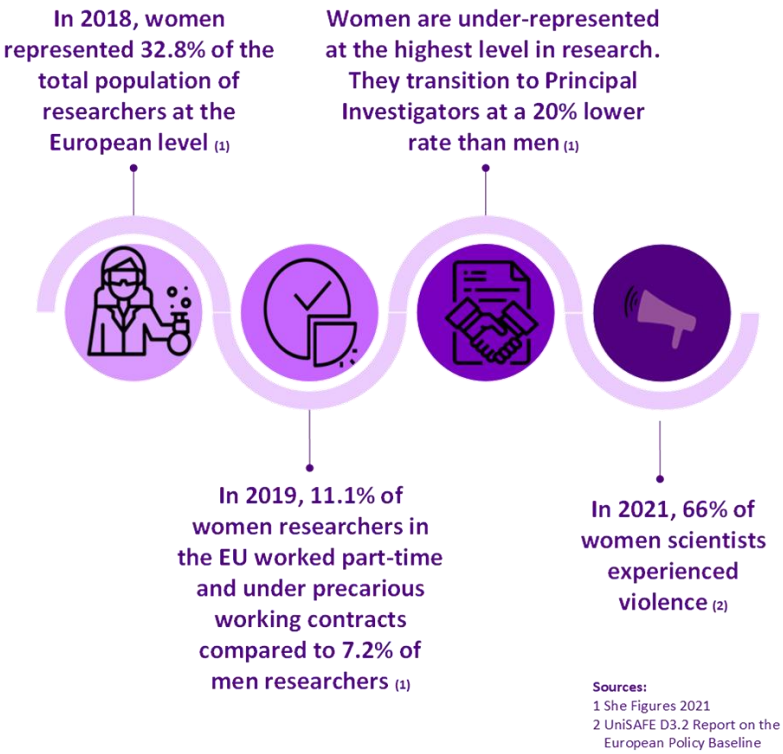

Figure 1 *– Gender Inequality in Science*[9,12]

Regarding fairness and equal opportunities, responsibly developed and implemented GEPs of RPOs can effectively promote equality by providing all talented and ambitious individuals with the chance to develop their skills and reach their full potential, regardless of gender[13]. By valuing diverse experiences and backgrounds and controlling for gender and other intersecting biases, gender-sensitive RPOs can tackle neglected research areas, and build innovative approaches and solutions to major societal and scientific challenges such as the green transition to carbon-neutral, climate-resilient economies.

[9] European Commission. (2021). She Figures 2021– Policy briefs, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/078011
[10] Xie et al. (2015). 'STEM education', Annual Review of Sociology, 41, 331. http://10.1146/annurev-soc-071312-145659
[11] See for instance Gender-SMART advocacy document for integrating the governance of research funding and teaching (with a focus on agriculture and life science). http://gender-smart.eu/?mdocs-file=1172
[12] Fajmonová et al. (2021). UniSAFE D3.2 Report on the European Policy Baseline. https://zenodo.org/records/5780037
[13] Ainscow, M. (2020). Inclusion and equity in education: Making sense of global challenges. PROSPECTS, 49, 123–134. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11125-020-09506-w

As acknowledged in the Ljubljana Declaration[14] adopted in 2021 under the Slovenian presidency of the EU Council, achieving sustainability and promoting GE in research and higher education institutions requires complex and strategic approaches, and policy initiatives from all member states to ensure equal opportunities at recruitment and in career progression, gender balance in decision making, tackling sexual harassment and gender-based violence, and integration of the gender dimension in research and teaching. Along with state institutions, RPOs have also a crucial role in steering domestic change and tailoring solutions to the cultural, social, and economic context[15] to ensure long-lasting impact. This, however, should entail attention to disciplinary and sectorial specifics.

3. The current situation in the widening countries

The status of gender (in)equality in each country is rooted in specific, socially and historically constructed arrangements described as "gender regimes" in the literature[16], to designate the combination of the sexual division of labour, the distribution of power, and patterns of social interactions deriving from cultural representations. It is also a path dependent on recent political and economic transformation processes, such as the transition from state socialism and authoritarianism to liberal market democracy, or the harmonisation of policies and polities with the EU, and influenced by broader processes of societal change such as those driven by the digital revolution[17].

As acknowledged in various policy reports on progress in achieving the European Research Area's (ERA) objectives on GE[18], both difficulties and success are unevenly distributed across the EU. The gender gap in higher education and research largely coincides with the knowledge and innovation gap in less research-intensive widening countries. Mostly located in Central and South-Eastern Europe, these countries tend to rank low in EIGE's Gender Equality Index (GEI) and have lower access to research and innovation funding.

Whereas significant progress has been made in the widening countries concerning policy frameworks preventing gender-based discrimination, access to decision-making, and access to higher education and employment, some patterns of segregation and hierarchies remain. Moreover, bringing about changes in terms of the unequal distribution of care work or the gender pay gap tends to be slowed but still unevenly distributed among EU member states[19]. Their trajectories are best captured in EIGE's Gender Equality Index (GEI, Figure 2)[20].

Based on compounded Eurostat data in a variety of fields, the GEI gives more visibility to areas – measuring 31 indicators on 6 core domains (work, money, knowledge, time, power, health) – that need improvement and ultimately supports policy-makers in designing more effective GE measures. The index is published yearly and provides a comprehensive view of each country's progress in different areas. Although the EU has progressed toward GE, the GEI evidences a significant gap between the EU average and the performance of

[14] COM/2020/628, 13567/20, The Ljubljana Declaration
[15] OECD (2022). Advancing gender equality through the social economy. https://www.oecd.org/cfe/leed/social-economy/oecd-global-action/advancing-gender-equality-through-the-social-economy.htm
[16] Walby,S. (2020). Varieties of Gender Regimes, Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society, 27(3), Pages 414–431, https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxaa018
[17] Deloitte. (2015). From brawn to brains. The impact of technology on jobs in the UK.https://www2.deloitte.com/uk/en/pages/growth/articles/from-brawn-to-brains%2D%2Dthe-impact-of-technology-on-jobs-in-the-u.html
[18] See for instance Wroblewski, 2020 for Gender Action: https://genderaction.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/D3.2._MonitoringERApriority4implementation.pdf
[19] World Economic Forum. (2021). Global Gender Gap Report 2021. https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2021/in-full/gggr2-key-findings
[20] https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/about

most of the widening countries which have shown moderate progress since they joined the EU after the latest enlargements of the EU. Nevertheless, an analysis of the longer-term changes in the GEI, on average, the index improves and the variance decreases over the period 2010-2021 between the EU member states, indicating an upward convergence trend[21].

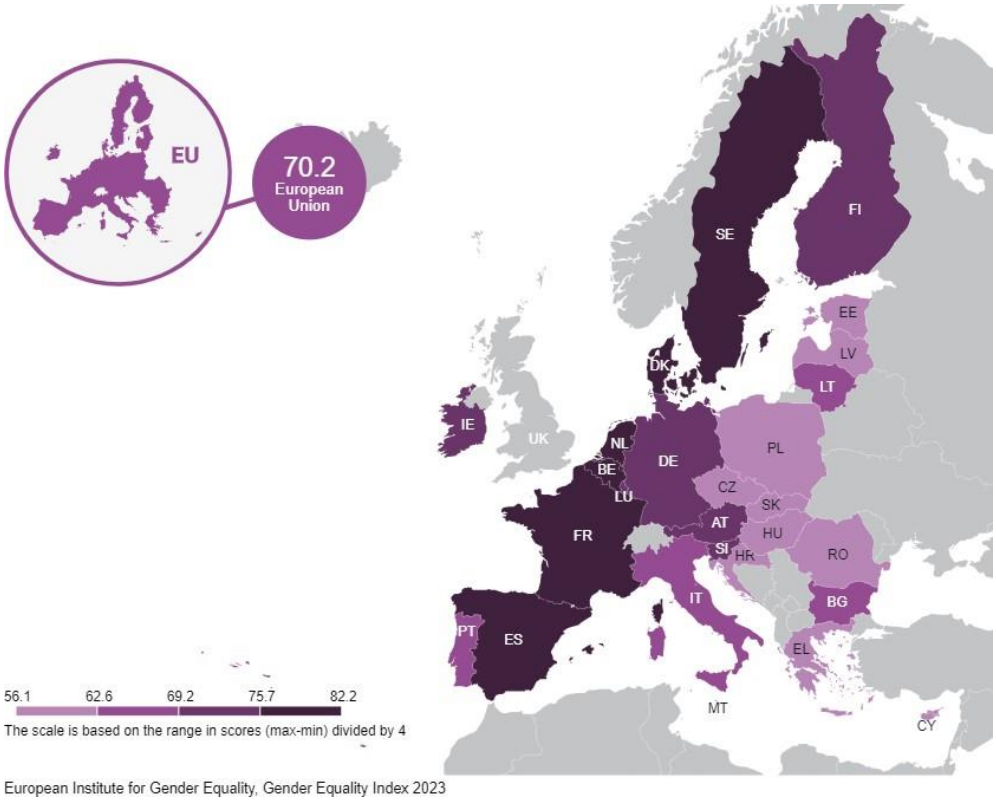

***Figure 2** – Gender Equality Index in the EU, 2023*[21]

More specifically the current GEI average of the EU is 70.2, with Sweden (82.2), Netherlands (77.9), Denmark (77.8), Spain (76.4), and Belgium (76.0) as the top five countries with the highest scores. Romania (56.1), Hungary (57.3), the Czech Republic (57.9), Greece (58.0), and Slovakia (59.2) have the lowest scores. Some member states such as Cyprus, Bulgaria, Lithuania, and Malta are catching up with the gap, while others such as the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, and Slovakia are slowly improving their GEI scores, leading to growing disparities over time compared with the EU. The AGRIGEP project mentor organisations come from Spain, an outperforming country, and Belgium, a flattening country, which also has a high score but with more moderate improvement. Among the project's widening countries, Slovenia performs above the EU average, while the Czech Republic and Hungary are among the lagging countries[21].

4. Why do we focus on agriculture and life science?

A recent FAO report shows that globally, 36 percent of working women and 38 percent of working men work in agrifood systems as of 2019. For both women and men, this represents a decline of about 10% since 2005, driven almost exclusively by a reduction in employment in primary agricultural production. FAO estimates that closing the gender gap in farm productivity and the wage gap in agrifood-system employment would increase global gross domestic product by 1 percent (or nearly USD 1 trillion). This would reduce global food

[21] EIGE, (2023). Gender Equality Index 2023. Towards a green transition in transport and energy, Publications Office of the European Union. https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/gender-equality-index-2023-towards-green-transition-transport-and-energy

insecurity by about 2 percentage points, reducing the number of food-insecure people by 45 million[22]. If we look at the EU, the proportion of women farm managers is only 29%, and only 4.2% of them are under the age of 35 which data projects a more gender-segregated share of this sector soon[23].

Empowering women and ensuring equal opportunities in agriculture is crucial, for numerous studies show that women play a vital and prominent role in global food production, especially in developing countries[15,24]. In rural and impoverished areas, access to land, agricultural resources, and education significantly impacts food productivity and security, where women make up a significant portion of the agricultural workforce. Due to social and cultural specificities, women in rural communities are more likely to maintain their own traditional agricultural practices, which can be a valuable tool for developing sustainable farming systems. The participation of women in agriculture also enhances the diversification of agricultural production, thus increasing stability and resilience[25]. Through backyard farming, women's agricultural activity in vulnerable rural communities can boost economic and social stability, local employment, and reduce poverty[26,23]. Overall, empowering and supporting women in agriculture can significantly contribute to sustainability, inclusiveness, climate change mitigation and adaptation, and economic development.

Two of the AGRIGEP consortium members have strong expertise in agriculture for development, contributing to numerous projects overseas while receiving students and scholars from over 100 nations. More than 7,500 foreign students study in the three RPOs, and a significant proportion of them arrive from African and Asian countries. Through their engagement with multilateral funding agencies and local actors pursuing a gender transformative agenda, our RPOs are thus both in need and capacity to build topical gender expertise. Moreover, although applied differently to the context of agriculture in Europe, patterns of gender segregation and the role of gendered social norms and dynamics in the functioning and sustainability of rural communities are also important on our continent[27], just as the unequal contribution of men and women across different disciplines and research areas in the agriculture[28].

Structural barriers to GE and women's professional advancement are heavily rooted in the masculine environment and view of science in STEM fields which contributes to the low representation of women in academia. Biased evaluation of women's scientific achievements, negative stereotypes towards their professional knowledge and competence, as well as negative discrimination of women, particularly mothers all contribute to the chilly environment in STEM fields. Although there have been some positive changes between 2010 and 2020, the European Commission's report[23] highlights several inequalities that still exist in various fields of Research and Development (R&D). Women are still under-represented among doctoral graduates in several STEM fields, particularly in knowledge-intensive activities in business industries. Though they represent a greater share of researchers in the youngest age groups in the higher education sector, the pattern is reversed in favour of men in the over-55 researcher population. Men researchers are also more

[22] FAO. (2023). The status of women in agrifood systems. Rome. https://doi.org/10.4060/cc5343en
[23] European Commission. (2021). Females in the fields. Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/news/females-field-2021-03-08_en
[24] FAO. (2021). Statistical Yearbook – World Food and Agriculture 2021. https://www.fao.org/3/cb4477en/online/cb4477en.html
[25] UNCTAD. (2019). The role of rural women in traditional farming systems as guardians of biodiversity and agents of food security and resilience. https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ciem8d2_en.pdf
[26] Salazar and Fahsbender. (2019). Improving Food Security through Women's Empowerment. https://blogs.iadb.org/sostenibilidad/en/improving-food-security-through-womens-empowerment/
[27] Gumucio et al. (2020). Gender-responsive rural climate services: a review of the literature. Climate and Development, 12(3), 241-254. https://doi.org/10.1080/17565529.2019.1613216
[28] European Commission. (2022). Monthly Focus – Gender equality in research and innovation. Horizon – The EU Research & Innovation Magazine. https://ec.europa.eu/research-and-innovation/en/horizon-magazine/gender-equality-research-and-innovation

mobile than women researchers in more advanced career stages. Gender gaps in active authorship are particularly noticeable in the fields of Natural Sciences Engineering and Technology.

A recent report concluded that secondary education provides the best time to close the gender gap in terms of attracting interest in STEM careers and choosing STEM subjects at the university level[29]. Closing the gender gap in STEM would help to address labour shortages and recruitment difficulties in STEM-related jobs in the academic and private sectors[9]. However, the labour market has a strong relation to how students react to trends and their willingness to choose STEM fields when it comes to choosing an institution and field of higher education. Women make up almost half (49.3%) of total employment across non-STEM occupations, but just 29.2% of all STEM workers are women, which showed progress in the last period with more than 1.5%. However, females graduating with a STEM degree tend to change their work area, as the number of women working in STEM fields with STEM diplomas is lower than the number of women graduating with STEM diplomas[19]. In STEM courses, female students and researchers require exceptional support and guidance to overcome challenges posed by stereotypes and social traditions[30,31]. However, while agricultural education can be viewed as part of STEM, it presents unique gender-related challenges that require tailored strategies[32]. Unlike STEM courses, the central challenge in agricultural education is not low participation or progression rates but rather ensuring inclusiveness and equal opportunities during tertiary education and in later career development as well[33,34] to empower students to tackle the labour market challenges. Therefore, it is essential to recognise the specificities of agricultural education and formulate sector-specific GEPs and strategies.

5. Bridging the gaps: a path toward encompassing institutional transformations

These strategies, we argue, should be embedded into a broad transformational agenda. Social, economic, and technological transformations rarely happen in isolation from each other. Global inequalities, uneven development paths, or different degrees of contributions to climate change are rooted in power relations among nations, notably along with colonial heritage and gender inequality patterns. Similarly, digital transformations impulsed by technological revolutions such as the fast development of artificial intelligence (AI), both reflect existing biases and inequalities[35] and trigger new types of challenges. Higher education and research organisations are bound to navigate these transformations from their specificities and resources and shall strive to ensure that diverse needs and experiences are addressed and mobilised.

Bridging the gaps requires addressing and understanding context specifics. Although widening countries from Central and Eastern Europe share several common experiences in their history, they differ greatly in many

[29] European Parliament. (2020). Education and employment of women in science, technology and the digital economy, including AI and its influence on gender equality. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/651042/IPOL_STU(2020)651042_EN.pdf
[30] UNICEF Office of Global Insight and Policy. (2020). Mapping gender equality in STEM from school to work. https://www.unicef.org/globalinsight/stories/mapping-gender-equality-stem-school-work
[31] Froehlich et al. (2022). Gender Stereotypes and Expected Backlash for Female STEM Students in Germany and Japan. Frontiers in Education. https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2021.793486/full
[32] UNESCO. (2019). STEM education for girls and women: breaking barriers and exploring gender inequality in Asia. Bangkok: UNESCO Bangkok Office. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000375106
[33] Raidimi and Kabiti. (2019). A review of the role of agricultural extension and training in achieving sustainable food security: A case of South Africa. South African Journal of Agricultural Extension. http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?pid=S0301-603X2019000300010&script=sci_arttext
[34] Anderson et al. (2021). Economic benefits of empowering women in agriculture: Assumptions and evidence. The Journal of Development Studies. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/00220388.2020.1769071
[35] UNESCO. (2020). Artificial intelligence and gender equality: key findings of UNESCO's Global Dialogue https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374174

aspects, including their social development paths. This has left a mark on how efforts to correct social inequalities were framed, and durably amplified the political and social value of traditional social roles, placing the emphasis both on the preservation of social homogeneity and on social institutions like the family. Whereas these widening countries largely resemble other EU member states regarding women's access to higher education and employment and increasingly mirror EU-wide trends in terms of access to decision-making, differences remain in the acceptance of social change and the importance given to individual agency versus social determinism. Yet, acknowledging cultural differences is key to approaching transformative agendas in higher education and research.

Within this context marked by increasingly diverging dynamics, the AGRIGEP consortium faces several specific challenges in developing and implementing its institutional GEPs successfully. These challenges include a lack of internal experts with extensive experience in GE and agricultural higher education at participating universities. There is also a shortage of dedicated resources, particularly in terms of human and infrastructural capacities, to make the GEP sustainable for the long term which is more pronounced when research and higher education institutions face local or regional economic challenges. Over the past few years, they experienced several significant challenges, some of which have hit less resilient economies and societies in the region harder. The pandemic COVID-19 and its aftermath, the energy crisis, the high inflation, and the issues of EU resource allocation have all had and continue to have serious socio-economic impacts in the project countries. All university participants require external consultants for training on a range of GE topics, as there is a shortage of internal staff for GE training. Finally, there is a lack of relevant networking and partnerships in GE at national and international levels, across the CEE region. Figure 2 also highlights that the growth of the GE index in most widening countries is significantly slower than the EU average, which has led to a slow but steady increase in the GE disparities among the member states in recent years. Nevertheless, the three PROs could complement and support each other by sharing their local experiences and helping each other, in their common interests. They can also learn and build on each other's achievements to create a regional network that can strengthen their position and support their progress.

6. Low stakeholder engagement and hindering work culture

Achieving gender equality requires profound changes in social norms, which is a challenging, long, and difficult process necessitating the participation of a variety of stakeholders. In higher education and research, stakeholders include members of various communities (students, administrative, research and teaching staff), individuals in decision-making or gate-keeping positions, as well as people holding organisational knowledge or topical gender expertise. In widening countries, we observe the low level of engagement of most of these stakeholders on GE issues. They hardly recognise or acknowledge the potential and value of greater diversity and women's increased participation in the organisations.

Low engagement towards GE issues is path dependent on hierarchical, siloed, and bureaucratic structures and ways of doing things inherited from the past, but also towards more recently introduced managerial trends emphasising individual competition over cooperation, individual leadership versus participation, and strengthening the central position of the manager-expert[36]. Managerialism – along with the spread of the neoliberal agenda in universities – contributes to overall low participation in non-mandatory activities, RPOs' members to refrain from raising their voices and concerns, and collectively reduces work culture and conditions. Gender blindness is also rooted in vertical gender segregation, namely top management is mostly

[36] Black, S. (2015). Qualities of Effective Leadership in Higher Education. Open Journal of Leadership, 4, 54-66. DOI: 10.4236/ojl.2015.42006.

made up of senior academics sharing traditional gender norms[37]. Eliminating gender inequalities tends to be conceived as an individuals' responsibility rather than structural and cultural barriers or lack of institutional support. In the case of RPOs in our project operating in the field of life science and agriculture, broader ecosystems are involved, comprising, for instance, the pharmaceutical and agri-food-business sectors, whose stakeholders might demonstrate different degrees of readiness to engage with GE issues and challenge existing segregation and inequalities within those sectors.

Adapting communication systems and work culture to enhance GE is another significant challenge[38]. While all the research and higher education institutions involved in the project have an organisational plan for GE, there is still a lack of integration in individual departments' communication and work processes. This is particularly true regarding education that caters to gender-specific needs. Gender equality efforts are more visible in research and project management, but are largely limited to improving gender balance in research teams. Various opportunities have not been fully utilised, including mentoring programmes, flexible work arrangements, accessible care services, GE and inclusion training, and involving women in recruitment and career development management.

7. Intermediate conclusions on transforming institutions in widening countries in agriculture and life science

In AGRIGEP, GEP implementing partners were invited to self-assess their skills and capacities to conduct a change process on GE. Coordinated by Yellow Window, one of AGRIGEP's mentoring partners, this process was completed by cross-analysis evidencing areas for capacity-building and support. The below needs were thus evidenced based on this assessment and the situational analysis described above:

1. There is a need for **intensive capacity development to enhance skills**. However, this process is resource-intensive, requiring significant human resource development and training. In particular, organisations in widening countries lack local training programmes, making acquiring the necessary skills challenging. Language barriers can also be problematic as training materials from Western Europe are difficult to adapt. Additional resources are essential to adapt training programmes and overcome language barriers.
2. **Long-term mentoring** is necessary to facilitate change. The current 36-month projects are too brief to adequately support organisations with little to no background in advancing GE internally. They require extensive mentoring to help develop and implement the first GEP, while mentors possess decades of experience. Long-term mentoring will help organisations achieve genuine transformation.
3. **Develop internal monitoring tools for GE.** In many cases, the first GEP was developed in a relatively short period of time, under time constraints, resulting in a non-targeted GEP that did not fully reflect local needs, capabilities, and/or capacities. Although mandatory areas are covered, in many cases the lack of baseline data before the first GEP was developed may have hindered timely and effective implementation. The need to develop monitoring systems and support these efforts is therefore an essential step.

[37] Paksi et al. (2022). Perception of Barriers to Motherhood: Female Phd Students' Changing Family Plans in the STEM Fields. Social Inclusion, 10(3):149-159. http://doi.org/10.17645/si.v10i3.5250
[38] International Labour Organization. (2020). Empowering Women at Work. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_ent/---multi/documents/publication/wcms_756721.pdf

4. **Structural change requires specific resources**. However, current GEP projects have limited budgets. Adequate financial support – both externally and internally allocated financial resources - is necessary to develop and sustain successful GEPs, which are crucial for achieving and maintaining structural change, supporting changes in work culture, and improving working conditions. Further incentivising member states to strengthen domestic policy frameworks to support GEP implementation will also be key to creating favourable environments for effective institutional changes.
5. **Support stakeholders and intensify networking** by providing resources for network development for the "newcomers" of widening countries. It is vital to build a network of cooperation between education and research institutions in the widening countries and their corporate and advocacy partners. This will ensure that the targeted resources are used efficiently and effectively and that their impact can be measured. At the same time, building a network will help showcase good practices and make them context-specific.
6. **Continuous awareness raising and training at the management level**. Continuous training is essential to facilitate capacity building, ensure adequate organisational resources and improve the institutionalisation of GE. To this end, the network of local stakeholders should be strengthened, as RPOs' GE specialists need to be continuously trained, and supported.

Multidisciplinary education and research in the agricultural and life sciences can play a vital role in promoting GE in widening countries. Professionals in this field address sustainability, and social and economic issues simultaneously. If GE can be increased in the field and become part of educational materials, it can also help to promote further changes. By ensuring equal access to resources, education, and information, productivity can be increased, demographic problems reduced and economic growth enhanced. Higher education institutions play an active role in providing leadership and coordination to meet changing qualitative and quantitative labour needs, which can lead to significant change. GEP implementation requires a complex strategy, including legal frameworks and enabling policies, as well as work-life balance. External funding and internal resources need to be allocated for capacity building, long-term mentoring, support for structural change and the establishment of international and national networks of partners to implement and continuously update GEPs.