Lessons learned and suggestions from AGRIGEP Horizon Europe project consortium- Implementation and assessment of first-generation Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) at agriculture and life sciences (ALS) universities in widening countries

Agriculture and life sciences (ALS)-focused universities and research performing organisations (RPOs) in the EU's widening countries indeed face a double challenge when developing and implementing GEPs. First, the gender equality gap at the societal level remains wider in the 15 widening countries compared to other EU member states, which conditions the overall progress that can be achieved within intrinsically gendered organisations[1]. Second, gender-related challenges and inequalities in agriculture and the life sciences – whether in academia or the broader agri-food production sector – differ from those encountered in other fields, including STEM[2]. Therefore, GEP implementation requires a strategy that addresses the double challenge posed by national gender equality (GE) contexts and sectoral specificities and can deliver tailored responses to address them.

Although widening countries from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) share several common experiences in their history, they differ greatly in many aspects, not least their respective paths from State socialism to liberal democracies and market economies. This has left a mark on how efforts to tackle social inequalities are framed. Divergence across these countries also prevails in the degree to which the political and social value given to traditional social roles has been amplified to emphasise the preservation of social homogeneity and social institutions, like the family. While these widening countries largely resemble other EU member states in terms of women's access to higher education and employment, differences persist in their access to leadership, participation in decision-making, gender pay gap, and the broader acceptance of social change. Yet, acknowledging cultural differences is key to approaching transformative agendas in higher education and research.

While their role in the agri-food system is widely acknowledged worldwide, women account for only 29% of farm managers in the EU, with only 4.2% under the age of 35 and 42% over 65. Demographics and ageing are the most significant challenges to the sector's sustainability, as most farms are run by farmers over the age of 55 (this data refers to both sexes), which foreshadows that the gender distribution is expected to change in this sector soon[3]. Women farmers in the EU face significant structural challenges, particularly in accessing land and inheriting it. Traditional customs and norms often favour male heirs, limiting women's land ownership. This restricts access to credit, as land property is a key factor in securing loans, which in turn limits farm investment and growth. Their underrepresentation in agricultural decision-making further worsens the issue, making it harder to address the systemic barriers to women's full participation in farming.[4]

Within the AGRIGEP, after analysing the relevant legal and policy frameworks, reviewing the relevant literature, stakeholder mapping and examining the results of previous EU-funded projects, we

[1] https://www.csun.edu/~snk1966/J.%20Acker%20Hierarchies,%20Jobs,%20Bodies%20--%20A%20Theory%20of%20Gendered%20Organizations.pdf

[2] https://doi.org/10.2499/9780896293915

[3] https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/news/females-field-2021-03-08_en

[4] SWIFT (2023): Gender and Agriculture: Policy tensions behind the EU gender gap. Summary report of a systematic literature review of the gender responsiveness of Europe's agriculture and rural policy. https://edepot.wur.nl/634564

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analysed the barriers and enablers of gender equality in the agriculture and life sciences higher education and research area, with a primary focus on the CEE widening countries. Furthermore, we conducted empirical research at the participating ALS universities through focus groups and analysed the collected data from the surveys with international students. Based on this research, we can already draw some intermediate conclusions that have significant relevance at the policy level regarding the implementation of GEPs and supporting gender equality in the ERA, such as:

1. **The lack of experts in gender equality** in the widening countries hinders institutional transformation and the effective implementation of GEP plans. In the widening countries, few organisations exist that train GE experts, so their absence is a significant constraint to institutional GEP planning and implementation. Organisations in most widening countries lack local training programmes, making it challenging to acquire the necessary skills.
2. **Intensive awareness-raising and capacity-building** are necessary to enhance skills for promoting GE at an institutional level. However, this process is resource-intensive, requiring significant human resource development and training. Language barriers can also be problematic as training materials from Western Europe are difficult to adapt. Additional resources are essential to adapting the training programmes to the context and overcoming language barriers.
3. **Engaging top management of universities** is crucial for advancing and sustaining the GE agenda and keeping it as a strategic institutional priority. Top management can ensure the integration of GE objectives into the university's broader mission, allocate internal resources effectively, and influence faculty leadership to create an enabling environment. In practice, engagement can be fostered by linking GE goals to existing institutional priorities such as excellence in research, internationalisation or staff retention. Demonstrating how GE aligns with quality assurance, sustainability, or funding opportunities could further increase buy-in.
4. **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 support development and implement the first GEP, while mentoring organisations can usually build upon decades of experience. Long-term mentoring will strengthen organisations to achieve genuine transformation.
5. **Internal monitoring tools for GE measures** are needed to address real needs**.** In many cases, the first GEP was developed in a relatively short period of time, resulting in an insufficiently targeted GEP that did not fully reflect local needs, capabilities, and/or capacities. Although mandatory areas are covered, the lack of baseline data prior to the development of the first GEP may have hindered the timely and effective implementation in many cases. Therefore, developing monitoring systems with SMART indicators[5] and supporting these efforts is an essential step.
6. **Structural change requires dedicated resources**. However, current EU-funded 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

[5] https://www.evalcommunity.com/career-center/smart-indicators/

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achieving and maintaining sustainable structural change, supporting changes in work culture, and improving working conditions. Further incentivising member states – even if they have already released some resources – to strengthen domestic policy frameworks for GEP implementation will be key to creating favourable environments for effective institutional change.

7. **Mobilise and engage stakeholders and intensify networking.** Promoting collaboration between academic institutions in widening countries, industry, and advocacy organisations is essential to maximise the impact of GEPs and share best practices. To this end, the network of local stakeholders should be strengthened, and RPOs' GE specialists require continuous training and support.
8. **Sector-specific measures to address gender inequality are essential in agriculture and life sciences (ALS) higher education and research**. Academic institutions need to be aware of gender-based discipline- and occupation-specific characteristics of their teaching and learning environment. In the ALS field, paying attention to gender-based safety risks during fieldwork and health risks during laboratory work is essential to be addressed, regulated, and monitored. Fostering GE and providing student safety also requires particular attention and a safety net in non-academic venues, such as internships. Furthermore, it is vital to explore and support the multifaceted gender culture of ALS RPOs, which attract a high proportion of international students and lecturers with often very different cultural norms and backgrounds.

These suggestions were formulated and published in a longer Policy Brief developed by the AGRIGEP consortium (2023): Implementing Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) in Higher Education and Research in Widening Countries: The Case of Agriculture and Life Sciences. *Policy Brief 1 of the AGRIGEP project (Horizon Europe 101094158) DOI:* 10.5281/zenodo.14793000

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