

PARALLEL SESSION 1

STRUCTURAL CHANGE: GENDER EQUALITY PLANS AND EFFORTS

Session chaired by Charikleia Tzanakou, Tullia Gallina Toschi
University of Warwick, University of Bologna

Enhancing gender equality in STEM research Institutions: some experiences across Europe

Maria Nadia Postorino¹

Aims of the contribution

GEECCO project (financed the EU Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, grant agreement 741128) focuses on establishing tailor-made Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) in four European Research Performing Organizations (RPO) and to implement gender dimensions in two Research Funding Organizations (RFO). One of the main features of GEECCO is that all participating RPOs are STEM institutions, where gender equality is still a serious problem. This presentation wants to contribute to gender issue discussion in STEM fields by summarizing successes and failures encountered by the partners during the implementation period.

Description of the experience

While most of the gender issues are similar among the GEECCO RPO partners (e.g., gender imbalance at high decision-making levels, poor female involvement in the academic life, scarcity of specific rules/commitment to obtain effective results for female career advancement), their experiences in implementing GEPs, though tailored on their specific needs, are rather different as actions and practices adopted by a RPO cannot be *sic et simpliciter* adopted by another RPO, although sharing the same problems, because the cultural context and the regulatory context are different.

GEPs are a well-known tool used to define a set of actions to obtain gender balance, or at least reduce gender imbalance, in a given context. In GEECCO, GEPs are designed in order to consider the specific features – both the external cultural contexts and the internal context – of the STEM institution through a process that includes:

- 1) awareness and knowledge on gender equality issues;
- 2) communication processes within and beyond the implementing institutions;
- 3) improvement of gender equality in human resource management (e.g. career development, staff retention and training) and decision-making processes;
- 4) introduction or strengthening of gender equality dimensions in teaching and research activities.

¹ Department of Civil, Chemical, Environmental, and Materials Engineering (DICAM,)University of Bologna.

Some of the involved RPOs had to set their GEP for the first time, while some other had already adopted a GEP, which should be improved and updated. The different GEP implementation steps represented a good opportunity for the RPOs to exchange experiences and to learn from one other. From one side, results – included suggestions on dos and don'ts - obtained by RPOs that had already established at least once their GEP were used by RPOs that had never implemented a GEP. On the other hand, the need to adapt their GEP to (mainly) internal contexts represented a challenge for all the RPOs. This important step has been encouraged, supported, and evaluated, in a trial-and-error approach, by the *facilitators*, which are also partners of the project.

Their role has been not only the one of supervisors, they have been also actively interacting with the RPOs by providing both general and customized training sessions, adapted to the RPOs main needs.

As the goal of the project is to start structural changes, the RPOs have been encouraged to develop their own training sheets, prepare materials, organize the training and possibly act as trainers.

This trainer experience is particular important for RPOs with no GEPs or gender offices, because it could represent the first step for a structural change within the institution.

Two important elements of the GEP strategy at the RPOs, as planned in GEECCO, are the communication activity and the required commitment by the high-level decision makers.

Communication, not only at external events but mainly within the institution, has contributed to increase awareness about gender issues. On the other hand, commitment by high-level decision makers has been required and stimulated during the implementing step. Commitment is one of the most important aspects for starting structural changes and the role of the facilitators in supporting the RPO GEECCO team in soliciting commitment at their institution has been crucial.

As GEECCO is still ongoing, it cannot be said which are the final results of the GEP implementation process. However, some intermediate results are encouraging, above all at the RPOs that faced gender issues for the first time and have been forced to use a systematic approach that involved several levels – from decision making bodies and process to recruitment procedures and introducing gender aspects in research and teaching. This holistic approach is proving to be positive for starting changing people attitude towards gender issues at the involved STEM institutions.