



ACT ON RESISTANCE TO GENDER EQUALITY

Rachel Palmén

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Introduction

Research has identified how gender equality initiatives and policies in R&I can often fail during the phase of implementation (Palmén and Kalpazidou Schmidt, 2019) thereby resulting in an absence of deep-seated change and the failure to effectively challenge gender norms (Powell et al, 2018). In the phase of implementation resistance has been identified as one of the main reasons as to why gender equality initiatives in R&I may fail to create and sustain effective change. This often manifests itself through the all too discernible gap between 'saying' and 'doing' (Powell et al, 2018). Whilst there seems to be a general consensus as to the benefits of a greater gender equality at the level of discourse it is often at the level of actions or practice that these initiatives begin to run into a series of problems that stymie their potential to effect real change, one of the most important being resistance.

But what is resistance? In the context of the implementation of gender mainstreaming in EU research policy Mergaert and Lombardo (2014) discuss the concept: *“Resistance generally means the refusal to accept or comply with something....it specifically means opposition to the change that gender mainstreaming promotes (Benschop and Verloo, 2011; Lombardo and Mergaert, 2013). Resistance is thus meant here as a phenomenon aiming to preserve the status quo rather than question a particular dominant social order (see NORA: Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research 2013 Special Issue on ‘Feminist Resistance-Resistance to Feminism’).”*

Resistance to change can be intentional and 'explicit' or subtle and 'implicit'. The latter is often difficult to detect as it can be deeply embedded and engrained within the gendered organisational structures and stem from gender blind organisational bureaucracies, processes and procedures (Acker, 1990). Resistance can therefore take the form of 'non-action'- thereby reinforcing the status-quo by merely doing nothing to further gender equality. It may manifest in a failure to allocate sufficient resources to enable real change, other issues may be deemed more important and gender equality slips down the list of priorities, it can disappear altogether from the institutional agenda or be trivialised as an unimportant topic (Verge et al 2018). So if resistance is not necessarily an 'action' or 'behaviour' but better characterised as an apathetic approach towards gender equality or a failure to get on board and promote gender equality how do we a) identify it? b) measure it? and c) tackle it?

The mere acknowledgement of resistance however is the first step in tackling it. Articulating and identifying how it manifests in the specific context in which GEP implementation occurs is key. The GEAR Tool provides various examples of different types of resistance and links them explicitly to gender equality plans (GEPs):

Types of resistance	Example from GEP
Implicit individual resistance	Can be expressed by an individual's insufficient action or lack of action or disengagement in a process or a Gender Equality Plan.
Explicit individual resistance	Can be expressed by an individual's overt actions or statements which can target a Gender Equality Plan or actively seek to discredit or dismantle it.
Institutional resistance	Consists of a systematic, on-going, sustained pattern of non-engagement with the issue of gender equality and a pronounced lack of support for a Gender Equality Plan. Some forms of actions in such Plans, like proposed quotas or changing promotion mechanisms, may be particularly vulnerable to resistance. When a Gender Equality Plan is seen as unachievable or too prescriptive, or if there has not been sufficient information and consultation on the Plan, resistance can also emerge."

Why is this important?

Despite a great deal of research examining the causes of gender inequalities in research and innovation and numerous policy interventions to tackle this situation, the progress that has been made is slow (Caprile, 2012). Available evidence points to a whole range of reasons that may begin to explain its' persistence, from its intransigent nature rooted in institutional and cultural androcentric norms to the mis-targeting of policy interventions i.e. 'fixing the individuals' when structural or institutional policies have proven to be more effective. This is coupled with a recognition that real transformation takes a great deal of time and evaluations of these often short-term policies cannot begin to measure or demonstrate the long term impact. Resistance may be one factor that can begin to explain why gender equality interventions in R&I are so difficult to effect real change and why this change apparently remains so elusive.

Recent and new insights from research

Thomas and Hardy (2011) build on Foucault to show how "organizational change should be viewed as an outcome of the dynamics of both power and resistance". This conceptualization of power relations is necessary as it transforms the focus point from 'who enacts change' – often a designated 'change agent' and who 'resists change' to how "relations of power and resistance operate together in producing change, and in what ways." (Thomas and Hardy, 2011). This enables a reflection on how different actors may either support and participate or resist according to a range of factors, including position, responsibilities, timing, resource needs. In Powell et al's 2018 study they

recognized how support for the project was greater in the early stages – before real demands and commitments regarding budget needed to be decided. This is important as it recognizes how change propelled by actors’ participation and resistance- is a time influenced, relational process which can be configured establishing new understandings, new practices, and new relationships (Thomas, Sargent, & Hardy, 2011, cited in Thomas and Hardy, 2011)- which in effect constitute the change process. There is a general recognition in the literature that change is more effective if those it affects have been involved and engaged in processes and negotiations that result in the new understandings, practices, procedures and relations that the change process seeks to embed. Participation, engagement and consensual decision-making are therefore often portrayed as effective strategies which are able to minimize resistance. This has been criticized by some as a strategy of ‘co-option’ – where key decisions have been taken else-where and participatory processes are developed to bring on board dissenters and stymie resistance (Anisur Rahman, 1995). Despite these criticisms - organizational change scholars conceptualize resistance as a “system concept that indicates that organizations have feedback loops that push back to equilibrium when confronted with change (Dent and Galloway, 1999: 40; Lewin, 1946).” (Bleijenbergh, 2018).

The role of communities of practice

So Communities of Practice are useful to either combat resistance and foster engagement to implement a gender equality plan for a variety of different reasons.

- The very basis of communities of practice are **participation** so the logic is that those who have been involved in the decision-making process (i.e. regarding what actions to develop as part of the GEP and what institutional structures, procedures and processes to foster to steer the change process) will more likely embrace, accept or at least not resist the change process.
- A **consensus approach based** on bringing on board different perspectives and agreeing a least worse solution for all is less likely to trigger resistance.
- A **collaborative approach** which fosters mutual learning can help to create awareness on the need for change.
- A **co-construction** approach to meaning can also provide a solid approach for a change process.
- Resistance can in some instances mean that the change process needs to be better articulated, defended, and justified – in some cases this can in fact **lead to a better quality and more solid change process** and communities of practice can provide the forum for this discussion.
- The focus on practice in day-to-day institutional activities means that the implementation process is key, i.e. what actually happens, i.e. practice as oppose to focusing on what should happen becomes the key focal point.

Recommendations and institutional best practice

Organisational resistances due to gender blind bureaucracies can be tackled in the following ways:

1) Sex/ gender disaggregated statistics

Establishing an automated system to gather sex/ gender disaggregated data to enable an empirical analysis of all processes and procedures in order to identify those that are gender biased. The process of establishing a data gathering system may also pinpoint those areas of key of resistances within the institution.

2) Simple evidence based communication messages

Use the data gathered above to develop evidence-based simple but effective communication messages that are able to dispel the myths that often mask resistance and may be an effective tool.

3) Awareness actions

Use the data to develop raising awareness actions within the institution. These may include focused meetings as well as trainings. Greater understanding based on empirical evidence of the gendered inequalities within an institution may convince staff of the need for action. This is likely to dissipate resistance based on a lack of knowledge of the situation.

4) Inclusion of representatives from equality unit in decision-making bodies

Include representatives from the equality unit in all recruitment and promotion decision-making bodies. This could be complemented by a dashboard that shows data on progress made/ lack of progress. Making a top-level institutional commitment to include representatives from the equality unit on key decision-making bodies shows that top-management are taking gender equality seriously. This sends a strong message that gender equality is an institutional priority.

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