ACT ON DECISION-MAKING

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CONSORTIUM

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Introduction

Women's representation in academia decreases the higher up the academic ladder – culminating in the very small percentage of women in decision-making posts, on boards and in committees and as heads of institutions. In 2017 only 27% of board members (including leaders), and 21.7% of heads of institutions in the higher education sector were women (EC, 2019, p. 115). Women in the EU 28 made up only 24% of full professors (Grade A) in 2016 (ibid). Various policies and interventions have been developed at the European, Member State and institutional levels to foster gender equality in decision-making in research and innovation. At the European level, in the ERA Communication, 2012 framework, 'gender balance' in decision-making was identified as one of the three objectives of one of the six priority areas: Gender Equality and Gender Mainstreaming.

The European Council conclusions on *Advancing Gender Equality in the European Research Area*, adopted on the 1st of December 2015, invited "Member States and institutions to strive for guiding targets for a more even gender balance for professors" and "invite[d] relevant authorities to set up guiding targets, for example quantitative objectives, for better gender balance in decision-making bodies including leading scientific and administrative boards, recruitment and promotion committees as well as evaluation panels and encourage[d] research funding and performing organisations to reach these targets by 2020.

In 2018, *Guidance to facilitate the implementation of targets to promote gender equality in research and innovation* was published by the European Commission, the Helsinki Group on Gender in Research and Innovation (now the Standing Working Group on Gender in Research and Innovation, SWG GRI), in consultation with the ERA stakeholders platform. The following seven recommendations were developed (see below). In 2020 a report was published documenting the implementation of these recommendations encompassing actions and measures to support gender balance in decision-making and in Grade A positions. Below we can see the percentage/ number of countries that have partially or fully implemented each recommendation:

1. Collect and publish sex-disaggregated data on the composition of professorships and management/ leadership positions (92%: 23/ 25 countries)
2. Promote gender balance in decision-making positions and professorships with adequate awareness-raising and training (80%: 20/ 25 countries)
3. Institutionalise gender equality plans as an assessment tool in the accreditation of universities and make gender equality plans mandatory for universities and research organisations (48%: 12/ 25 countries)
4. Institutionalise the proportion of women in Grade A/ professor positions as an assessment criterion in institutional evaluations (higher education accreditation, performance contracts with universities) (16%: 4/25 countries)

5. Set and implement guiding targets and / or quotas for legislation (56%: 14/25 countries)
6. Evaluate regularly the implementation of quotas and /or targets (56%: 14/25 countries)
7. Introduce incentives for institutions adopting pro-active measures, and/ or sanctions for non-compliance, as necessary (48%: 12/ 25 countries)

The report highlights how many "Member States and Associated Countries have made progress and are developing their national as well as institutional policy frameworks" (SWG GRI, 2020, p. 3). We can see that almost all countries (23 out of 25) now collect and publish sex-disaggregated data on the composition of professorships and management/ leadership positions, whilst only 16% (4 out of 25) Institutionalise the proportion of women in Grade A/ professor positions as an assessment criterion in institutional evaluations (higher education accreditation, performance contracts with universities).

Targets and quotas are often the mechanism used to promote a greater gender balance on boards of funding agencies, research organizations and universities (European Commission & Helsinki Group on Gender in Research and Innovation, 2018). Gender equality in decision-making however does not only refer to an equal presence of women and men in all relevant boards and committees, but also the ability of their members to address their own biases, make informed decisions that are gender aware and gender-sensitive.

The assumption that increasing the 'descriptive representation' leads to 'improved substantive representation' leading to structural and cultural change must be questioned (Wroblewski, 2019, p. 181). Research has demonstrated:

"the extent to which the participation of women in higher education management also leads to structural and cultural changes is essentially a matter of chance. It depends on whether these women have prior gender or gender equality expertise or at least recognise and are open to gender equality issues. If this is the case – and other members of the rectorate share this awareness – women in rectorate positions can achieve a great deal for gender equality and trigger steps towards structural and cultural change." (Wroblewski, 2019: 181). This however is not necessarily the case.

Gender competence and expertise need to be embedded into decision-making bodies irrelevant of the gender of its members. Awareness raising and training initiatives – that demonstrate the benefits of a greater gender equality must therefore accompany targets and quotas (EC, 2018, p. 3).

Training and awareness raising does not only facilitate the adoption and acceptance of quotas and targets in the organisation in general but targeted at leaders, decision-makers and managers can also lead to a greater gender competence. This is key if decisions taken are to be more gender fair and institutional processes and procedures free from bias.

Why is this Important?

The lack of women in decision-making posts, boards and committees in R&I is problematic for a whole range of different reasons. Firstly, diversity in decision-making bodies has been linked to better quality decisions, research has been mainly carried out on corporate boards and in terms of outcomes has been linked to increased revenue (Reguera-Alvarado et al, 2015). Secondly, achieving parity in representation on decision-making bodies can be seen as a basic principle of democracy - "democracy and equality require, that each gender have a minimum level of representation and, in fact, that they be comparably represented" (Rodríguez Ruiz and Rubio Marín, 2008). Thirdly, decision-making posts and positions are invested with the power to influence how things are carried out and the future agenda (Dahl, 1957; Bachrach and Baratz, 1962). Taking an institutional change perspective means that decision-making can be explicitly recognised as exercising power: "The power to allocate resources, in terms of positions and funding is an exercise of power, potentially favouring the interests of some individuals or units over others…It is predominantly men who dominate the upper echelons of society and also indeed of higher education and research organisations and these are the controllers of resources" (O'Hagan et al., 2015, p. 9).

Recent and New Insights from Research

Tackling the under-representation of women in decision-making and leadership has shifted from a perspective framed by a women's deficit approach (with a subsequent focus on capacity building interventions for women, e.g. mentoring, leadership training etc.) to institutional change strategies that recognise how institutional processes, procedures and cultures need to be transformed from a systemic approach "re-visioning work cultures" (De Vries and Webb, 2005). A holistic approach to gender equality in decision-making and leadership from an institutional transformation approach targets and quotas as well as gender competence for decision-makers and leaders.

Lukes' three dimensions of power is relevant to decision-making arenas: the first dimension conceives of power as decision making, the second dimension as decision making and agenda setting and the third dimension as decision making, agenda setting and preference shaping.

Power as understood in the critical leadership studies tradition builds on Luke's third dimension of power (O'Connor et al, 2019; Collinson, 2019) and understands leadership as involving 'asymmetrical situated power relationships', thereby acknowledging 'that leaders holding formal positions of power can limit the decisions made by other participants through the use of 'stealth power' (Lukes, 2005; Webb, 2008)'.

"*Leaders in positions of formal power have access to resources that are not simply the 'carrots and sticks' that affect individuals. Thus, Lawrence (2008:174) argues for a more explicit focus on systemic power as an 'automatic form of regulation that enforces compliance without involving episodes of actions'. For Webb (2008) and Lukes (2005), a key issue involves the exercise of what the former calls 'stealth power', i.e. power which is not seen as such. Leaders occupying formal positions of power can create structures which give the illusion of participative decision-making. They can create contexts (Cunha et al, 2013) through which stealth power is enacted, i.e. they can set agendas, so that power is exercised subtly without the awareness of those subject to it.*" (O'Connor et al, 2019a:725.)

This focus on stealth power is interesting for gender equality in decision-making arenas and leadership positions in R&I and HE for a variety of different reasons. Firstly, it makes us question the simple assumption that the decision-making arena can be equated with the exercise of real power. Secondly, it makes us problematise the link between gender balance in decision-making arenas and institutional change. The less explicit and more subtle workings of power dynamics can manifest through 'non-actions' and resistance to change which often accompany an institutional transformation process. How do we then deal with these 'non-actions' and resistance? Raising awareness of how to detect resistance as well as building gender competence to deal with resistance can prove to be effective strategies. Thirdly, it brings into focus leadership positions as a key strategic area where gender competence needs to be developed.

Competence building in decision-making bodies and leadership positions must form a key component of the institutional transformation agenda.

The Role of Communities of Practice

This provides an opportunity for CoP members to lobby policy makers at the national/ institutional levels to push for the following recommendations identified by the Helsinki Group:

- Collect and publish sex-disaggregated data on the composition of professorship and management/ leadership positions
- Promote gender balance in decision-making positions and professorships with adequate awareness raising and training.

- Institutionalise the proportion of women in grade A/ professor positions as an assessment criterion in institutional evaluations (higher education accreditation, performance contracts with universities).
- Set and implement guiding targets and/or quotas through legislation.
- Evaluate regularly the implementation of quotas and/ or targets.
- Introduce incentives for institutions adopting pro-active measures and/ or sanctions for non-compliance, as necessary.

CoPs can also:

- Establish a shared understanding of main concepts: decision-making, targets and quotas; evaluation, training for decision-makers.
- Provide the forum for competence development.
- Share institutional and national level best practices.
- Work on a shared project – on a specific element of gender equality in decision-making, i.e. gender budgeting i.e. developing gender budgeting at an institutional level or working to mitigate bias in evaluations processes and procedures.

Recommendations and Best Practices

Targets and quotas

Regarding gender balance, the setting up of targets or quotas at the national level has been shown to support the implementation of the EU policy objective related to gender-balance in decision-making.

In the realm of gender quotas in R&I in Austria a quota regulation came into effect in 2009 which stipulated 40% (increased to 50% in 2015) of members of a university body must be women. This was accompanied by hard sanctions and resulted in a palpable rapid increase in the share of decision-making body positions held by women – from 27% in 2008 to 40% in 2011 to 50% in 2018 (Wroblewski, 2019: 173/174).

To counter the slow rate of change seen in the private sector, in 2010, Iceland introduced 40 per cent quotas for both women and men on boards of public and private companies, obliging companies to report on gender diversity status and progress in annual financial statements, which resulted in a great increase (of 25 percentage points) in the proportion of women on company boards to 44% (WIP, 2014).

Other research has demonstrated the positive effect of board quotas on women's board representation in the corporate sector is higher when accompanied by hard sanctions (i.e. fines or dismissal of directors) (Humbert et al, 2019:459).

At the institutional level developing election rules to ensure a balanced representation has been an effective institutional strategy developed at Ghent University, Belgium.

"The new election procedure for the Board of Ghent University (Belgium) requires faculties to have at least one male and one female candidate for the elections. If the elections have an unbalanced gender outcome (not respecting the minimum 40/60 gender balance) the candidate with the least votes from the overrepresented sex (compared to other faculties) has to give way to the faculty's candidate of the other sex with the highest number of votes. Although it triggered some resistances, the new procedures paved the way for substantial changes: as a result of the 2014 election, the Board has now a 50/50 composition. There was no further need to implement positive measures to elect a female representative and the reformed election attracted the most voters ever in the history of the University" (EIGE, 2016:46).

Monitoring has also been recognised as a 'key driving factor' for an effective implementation of quotas or targets. It highlights how monitoring mechanisms which collect sex-disaggregated data should be applied both at the national and the institutional level (EC, 2018; 3). It also highlights the role that incentives (like award schemes) and sanctions (financial consequences) developed at national level can play in the effective implementation of targets (EC, 2018; 3).

Cascade Model

The cascade model debunks the argument that it's difficult to increase the number of women in higher positions as the pool from which they are selected is too small. It is a statistical tool to decide on a 'qualified' quota where the % at the next higher hierarchical level reflects the % at the level below. In Ireland, the cascade model was recommended by the HEA (2016, 2018) but 'it emerged that HEIs had implemented it EXCEPT at senior lecturer level – a critical gateway... showing bad faith by the HEIs and resistance'. (GenPORT: Online Discussion).

Gender Competence for Leaders

There is a general consensus in the literature that recognises that successful strategies for institutional change are intricately linked to increased gender competence of leaders.

The gender-integrated leadership programme (AKKA) at the Lund University (Sweden) is a programme whereby leadership is understood as something that can be learnt and developed, and that focuses on the individual´s competences, and not on personal characteristics.

"The AKKA programme aims at raising gender knowledge and awareness, and providing methods and tools for structural change in order to achieve sustainable gender equality. From 2004 to 2014, five AKKA programmes have been offered for 150 senior scholars in Lund University (Sweden) (of which 37 were men). The programme runs over a year with monthly meetings. Throughout the years, AKKA has increased the number of women in leading positions, contributed to an enhanced visibility of women as potential leaders, increased willingness of both women and men to assume leadership positions, raised gender awareness among female and male academic leaders, promoted networking and collaboration within the university, raised the knowledge about the university's politics and activities, developed tools to deal with resistance to gender issues and for change management, contributed to highlight discrimination, and developed concrete change projects." (EIGE, 2016, 46).

The National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions (2016) highlights another way to increase the gender competence of those at senior level by making 'demonstrable experience of leadership in advancing gender equality' a requirement of appointment to all line management positions including Rector/VC/President.

Other:

Ireland: "The proportion of women in Grade A/ professor positions is a key metric for the Higher Education Authority's assessment of progress as part of their Strategic Dialogue Process (performance contracts) with HEIs annually. All HEIs are required to have an institutional Gender Equality Action Plan including specific targets for recruitment and goals for structural change" (SWG GRI, 2020:23).

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