

WORKING PAPER

Implementing Gender Equality Plans through an action-research approach: Challenges and resistances

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Abstract: Achieving gender equality (GE) in science and research has become an important issue in the European Union (EU) and one of the objectives of the European Research Area (ERA). Progress in this area is sluggish and difficult, with several indicators showing that women tend to remain in a disadvantage position when compared to men, despite several efforts and initiatives to correct the situation. It is widely acknowledged that gender inequality may be leading to huge losses of talent, detrimental to organisations, to the economy and to the society (European Commission 2020). To overcome this situation, the European Commission (EC) has funded several action-research projects (through FP6, FP7 and H2020) in order to accelerate and/or stimulate effective and structural institutional changes through the implementation of tailor-made Gender Equality Plans (GEPs). Several GEPs have been implemented in Research Performing Organisations (RPOs) in many countries. Although the effective impact of these plans and their contribution to the creation of more egalitarian working environments in organisations has not yet been fully determined, it seems that resistance may be one of the main obstacles to their successful implementation. This study aims to analyse the organisational dynamics of resistance to the implementation of GEPs in Portuguese RPOs. Thus, drawing on the experience of key actors directly involved in the design, planning and implementation of the GEPs, the authors identify the main forms of resistance felt and discuss the reasons underlying this resistance, while analysing some potential strategies to overcome them and to ensure the success of both gender initiatives and national projects. To achieve the objective of the work, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the Principal Investigators (PI) of three projects developed in Portuguese RPOs. In an attempt to find ‘meaning-oriented regularities’ in the data, the interviews were analysed using the ‘interpretative qualitative’ approach. The authors conclude that resistance to GE initiatives is identified in all institutional contexts but it can assume different forms and configurations.

Keywords: Action-research approach, Gender Equality Plans (GEP), Portugal, Resistance

1. Introduction

Some international organisations report significant advances in achieving gender equality (GE) in higher education, science and research (European Commission 2019a, 2020). However, at the same time, it seems that progress in this field is not homogeneous within and between European Union (EU) Member States. Progress is slow, challenging, does not happen automatically and concrete results and achievements are not fully realised for many years (EIGE 2016).

GE in science and research has become an important issue in the EU and one of the priorities of the European Research Area (ERA) (European Commission 2019a, 2019b, 2020). Despite the progress made, several indicators show that women tend to remain in a disadvantage position when compared to men, with the phenomena of vertical and horizontal segregation persisting. It is widely acknowledged that gender inequality may be leading to huge losses of talent, detrimental to organisations, the economy and to the society (European Commission 2020). To overcome this situation, the European Commission (EC) has funded several action-research projects (through FP6, FP7 and H2020) to accelerate and/or stimulate effective and structural institutional changes through the implementation of tailor-made Gender Equality Plans (GEPs). In this context, several GEPs have been implemented in Research Performing Organisations (RPOs) in some OECD countries over the last years. According to the objectives set at EU level, GEPs intend to remove barriers to recruitment, retention and career advancement of women researchers, address gender imbalances in decision-making processes and strengthen the gender dimension in research programmes (ERAC 2018). Although the effective impact of these plans and their contribution to the creation of more egalitarian working environments in organisations has not yet been fully determined, it is possible to argue that resistance may be one of the main obstacles to their successful implementation.

This study aims to analyse the organisational dynamics of resistance to the implementation of GEPs in Portuguese RPOs. Thus, drawing on the experience of key actors directly involved in the design, planning and implementation of the GEPs, this paper aims at identifying and analyse the main forms of resistance felt throughout the implementation of GEPs and the reasons behind these. Additionally, one highlights and reflects on potential strategies to overcome such barriers and to ensure the success of both gender initiatives and national projects. The objective of this study was achieved through semi-structured interviews conducted to three PIs of the projects developed in Portuguese RPOs. In an attempt to find 'meaning-oriented regularities' in the data, the interviews were analysed using the 'interpretative qualitative' approach.

The paper follows with a section (2) presenting the theoretical framework related to resistance and, more specifically, to resistance to GE initiatives, including a brief description of the Portuguese context. This is continued by an explanation of the methods used in the analysis and the results obtained (section 3). The paper concludes by suggesting some reflections on these questions and possible topics to deepen the reflection (section 4).

2. Resistance to change and resistance to gender equality initiatives: a brief theoretical framework

Organisational resistance is "a persistent, significant and remarkable feature of contemporary organizations" (Collinson 1994: 25). In relation to GE initiatives, resistance is an important form of opposition, which can condition or compromise their implementation, and may even render processes of institutionalization of GE policies' impossible (Lombardo and Mergaet 2013; Callerstig 2014). Nevertheless, resistance and opposition to GE policies have been a relatively new problematic in Europe (Verloo 2018).

Resistance to GE initiatives, as resistance to change in general, can take different types and forms. According to the handbook produced by FESTA project (Sağlame et al, 2016), ten forms of resistance can be identified: active, passive, implicit, explicit, gender specific, non-gender specific, individual, group, personal and institutional resistance (Sağlame et al, 2016: 17-19). Its manifestations/symptoms are also diverse and some studies show a panoply of methods and barriers used to prevent, inhibit, and/or obstruct the institutionalisation of GE policies in organisations (e.g. Pincus 2002; Sağlame et al, 2016). They can include not only 'hostility', 'sexist humour', 'interrupting', 'denial of access to resources' (symptoms of active resistance) but also 'inertia', 'making the procedures more difficult', 'giving less attention' and 'less access to institutional resources' (some examples of symptoms of passive resistance, also related to unconscious biases) (Sağlame et al, 2016: 17).

The reasons for resistance to change – and in particular resistance to GE initiatives – are not fully studied or understood. There is evidence, however, that some tend to have a more individual basis and others are more institutional. While the former are linked, for example, with 'sensitivities and risks', 'status quo', 'personal traits', etc., the latter are more related, for example, with available resources and/or the (in)existence of a gendered agenda (Sağlame et al 2016). In relation to organizational resistance to GE measures, attention should be drawn to the importance of 'organisational inertia' and/or 'bureaucratic inertia' as conservative forces that, in the public sector, may hinder the adoption of policies/measures in this field (Callerstig 2014). In this respect, it is argued that "the more bureaucratic an organisation is, particularly with respect to the division of labour and hierarchical structure, the greater the resistance to change" because "in organisations with a fragmented structure, information and knowledge flows will be limited both horizontally and hierarchically" (Callerstig 2014: 79). Change tends to be perceived, more or less explicitly, as a threat to existing power structures.

In this paper, the analysis of organizational resistance is based on discursive resistance, which Thomas, Mills and HelmsMills (2004) defined as: "contests over meanings, the articulation of counter discourses and 'the production of alternative forms of knowledge or where such alternative knowledge already exists, of winning individuals over to these discourses and gradually increasing their social power'" (Thomas et al, 2004: 6). Although resistance at the individual level is acknowledged, the main intent is not to characterise individual resisters' but rather to focus on resistance as a culturally available resource individuals have to give meaning to their organizational experiences (Thomas et al, 2004: 9; Dick 2004). Efforts have been made in recent years to identify strategies to avoid and overcome resistance in the implementation of GEPs in RPOs (cf. Sağlame et al, 2016 or EIGE 2016). Identifying and recognizing them is an essential requirement to ensure that the implementation of GEPs and other GE initiatives are successful. We know that knowledge and information are therefore determining power factors/resources that must be mobilised in attempting to overcome the obstacles encountered (Collinson 1994; Callerstig 2014), since without them "it is difficult for people to change their behaviour" (Callerstig 2014: 79). But resistance to GE initiatives are multifaceted and tends to be (re)shaped according to the framework in which the GEPs are placed. By bringing to discussion the specificities of the Portuguese situation, we intend to contribute to this debate through the identification of the main common challenges to RPO and exploring some of the most appropriate strategies to overcome them, considering their national specific context.

2.1 Understanding the (un)changing Context in Portugal

Resistance to GEPs can only be understood within the context it is produced. Bearing this in mind, a reflection on the implementation of GEPs in Portugal necessarily needs to include a brief context analysis, which we will do next.

The notion of Equal Opportunities (EO) has been stated in Portuguese law for a long time. With the Democratic Revolution, in 1974, and the consequent design of a new Constitution, any kind of discrimination based on gender was defined in need to be eliminated. More specifically, article 13 defines the right to equality between women and men, freedom to choose a job or a profession and the conditions to eliminate all kinds of obstacles in access to any job, occupation or professional rank based on gender. The right to have the same salary for the same work and protection during maternity were also considered. The definition of this general law was highly influenced by the international organisations like the OECD or ONU, which at that time, were particularly active in calling attention to women's rights. Later on, and mainly influenced by Sweden's EO policies, a Commission for the Equality in Work and Employment (CITE) was created in the Ministry of Work to assure equality in law for women and men at work (Monteiro 2010).

When Portugal joined the EU, in 1986, it was required to comply with its directives on EO. Other important legal changes have included: equality of opportunity and treatment at work in the public sector (1988), establishing a Commission for Equality and Women Rights (1991) and legislation addressing direct and indirect discrimination in the workplace (1997). More general legal rules to promote equality at work were also established in relation to part-time work (Laws 103/99); parental leave (Law 7/2000); applying the principle of equal remuneration for women and men in the workplace; and equal treatment of men and women to access employment, training, promotions and working conditions (Carvalho, White and Machado-Taylor 2013).

The tendency in Portugal has been to promote GE as a general principle in the legislation, avoiding the use of explicit Affirmative Actions (AA). The only exception is Law 3/2006, imposing quotas for female candidates in political parties and, more recently, law 62/2017, it was established that all public sector companies should have at least one third (33.3%) of women in their administrative and supervisory bodies. In listed companies,

this proportion cannot be lower than 20% after the first elective general assembly on January 1, 2018, and one third (33.3%) from January 2020 onwards.

Policies and practices based on AA are even more absent in Higher Education Institutions. Actually, the discourse on GE is undervalued, being signified as a threat to the culture of excellence and meritocracy. Empirical studies have acknowledged the way higher education culture is based on a vision of the University as a 'neutral organisational field', founded according to universal merit and equity principles (White, Carvalho and Riordan 2011; Carvalho, Özlem and Machado-Taylor 2012). In this context, there is also a dominant discourse that sees gender-equality interventions as unjust due to their break against the meritocratic values (Carvalho and Machado 2010). Only recently, and mostly as a result of EC funding support to research (through FP7 and H2020), some institutions started designing and implementing GEPs.

3. Methods, data and discussion of the results

This study aims to reflect on the organisational dynamics of resistance to the implementation of GEPs in Portuguese RPOs. To achieve this objective, in depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with three PIs of the projects developed in Portuguese RPOs. In an attempt to find 'meaning-oriented regularities' in the data, the interviews were analysed using the 'interpretative qualitative' approach, which has been used in similar studies (e.g. Acker and Wagner 2019).

Then, based on the analysis of the interviews conducted, the main forms of resistance felt by the key actors directly involved in the design, planning and implementation of the GEPs are identified, the reasons behind them are discussed as well as some strategies with potential to overcome them and to ensure the success of both gender initiatives and national projects.

3.1 Main forms of resistance in Portuguese RPO

The projects aiming to implement GEPs in Portugal intend to contribute to the institutionalisation of GE in European science and research and all of them include actions and measures to proactively address the main goals defined by the EU (presented in the previous section). The Portuguese projects in this field are all coordinated by women (PI) who were already committed to the GE theme when they started to be involved in these projects.

Simultaneously, the projects of each RPO have their own characteristics that arise from their specific context and/or their implementation phase (some are at an early stage, others at an intermediate stage, others are already completed). Therefore, it is important to draw attention to some specific features related to the thematic lines of action and the actors involved which may help to explain the great or less resistance to GE measures and initiatives in each RPO. Sexual harassment, for example, is perceived as a particularly sensitive issue in the national context. Institutional resistance to initiatives to combat and/or prevent sexual harassment appears to be particularly strong, and it tends to be avoided in the GEPs and/or deliberately excluded to make them viable. The initiatives promoted in this area are framed as a response to legal imperatives (referring, for example, to the obligations defined in the Code of Conduct) without, in practice, being effectively materialised:

In this project we have held a lot to the code of conduct, to the obligation of entities with more than seven people working to have codes of conduct preventing and combating moral and sexual harassment. It is an example, and it has served us to negotiate the legitimacy and relevance of bringing up the discussion around harassment to RPO. Because, by being obliged to make a protocol, they are obliged to reflect on it (...) (PI, female)

This, in fact, was somehow a censored subject, consensually censored (...) it is not something that institutions want to formally face or address (...) (PI, female)

It seems that the stakeholders' resistance may differ, depending on the RPO under analysis – this is what happens particularly in students' case. Although not all GEPs consider actions directly designed for them, it is verified that the student population can either offer great resistance to GE initiatives (undergraduate students, not committed to the topic of GE) or become actively involved, being 'strong allies' and functioning as pressure mechanisms (especially in sensitive areas such as sexual violence):

(...) students are effectively one of the keys to success, they are very relevant and strategic stakeholders and very strong allies in this work (...) (IP, female)

In any case, the information obtained through the interviews seems to show that, in general terms, institutional resistance to the implementation of measures promoting a more inclusive and egalitarian working environment is felt intensely and transversally in practically all Portuguese RPOs where GEPs are being (or have been) implemented. Institutional resistance "which occurs due to institutional culture or institution's legal or administrative procedures" (Sağlame et al, 2016: 1) also appears to happen in all implementation phases of national GEPs (including in successful projects/initiatives). The difficulties mentioned by the interviewees include, for example, the lack of statistics disaggregated data by sex and/or the lack of awareness of human resources services to the need and the importance of having such information:

Universities in Portugal don't have statistics segregated by sex, so we have to start from scratch. (...) with the aggravating factor that we have to convince the human resources services that this is important (...) This requires a dialogue with the leadership of the institution (...) (PI, female)

Organisational inertia is perceived as a particularly devastating form of resistance, perhaps the most demotivating, hindering and frustrating for the teams involved in these action research projects. In this regard, one of the interviewees mentioned:

(...) the [institutional] inertia, the lack of response to our structural initiative is (...) very visible here, and it is disturbing, and it wears the team down a lot (...). It consumes a lot of time, long time waiting, lot of e-mails, of excuses, of lies, there's a lot of hypocrisy in the way processes are managed and this is very exhausting (...) (PI, female)

On the other hand, it should also be noted that - as documented in the literature regarding similar projects (cf. Sağlame et al, 2016) – the lack of resources is a frequently used argument to condition the implementation of initiatives. Such resource limitations, both human and financial, are undoubtedly forms of resistance that, although may not be explicit and/or gender-specific (Sağlame et al, 2016), easily compromise the implementation and/or success of GE promoting measures. In this sense, the lack of specific structures related to the promotion of GE seems to be a difficult handicap to overcome:

In the absence of these structures, we continue to count on the good will of a group of feminist women and men, activists in this area (...) there is yet a very serious problem of people's lack of availability due to work overload and it is very difficult to involve people (...) (PI, Female)

As previously mentioned, resistance can take different forms and configurations (Sağlame et al, 2016). In addition to the institutional type of resistance that was just mentioned, there are also manifestations of a more individual and implicit nature, including, for example, the removal/disappearance of signage related to gender equality or "standing up and going out in the middle of an interview" (PI, female).

3.2 Exploring the reasons for resistance to initiatives promoting gender equality in the RPOs in Portugal

Identifying the causes/reasons for the resistance to GE initiatives in the RPOs is a challenging exercise. It is, however, a necessary effort to enhance success and to ensure effective institutional change. From the empirical analysis it is possible to infer that the biased perception by the academic community regarding the institutional situation on GE – identified by all the IPs interviewed – is a bias that affects the acceptance of the project. Inequality tends to not be recognized as a problem in most Portuguese RPOs where GEPs are being (or have been) implemented, thus reinforcing the results of some previous studies (Carvalho and Machado 2010; White, Carvalho and Riordan 2011; Jordão et al, 2020). On this, one of the interviewees refers:

(...) the mirage of equality was the dominant note in all interviews carried out by me (...). They all began (...), 'we believe that somehow equality is already guaranteed', 'we already have women in engineering', 'we already have women in medicine', 'we already have women in decision-making bodies' and therefore, even if they had only one [woman] among twenty people, their mere presence was already extrapolated as representing a balanced situation in terms of gender. This was constant (...) (IP, female)

One of the most immediate consequences of this vision is the devaluation and questioning of the work developed/produced within these projects. This idea that gender equality is not a problem within the RPO seems to coexist with the proliferation of a neoliberal discourse that permeates the entire organizational structure and tends to praise merit, uncritically assuming it as a guarantee of equal opportunities (and not as a social construction). This perception, widely shared by the PIs interviewed, leads to organisations unaccountability for possible gender imbalances by the academic community (professors, researchers, TAGs), considering that they stem from individual choices and decisions. Any corrective action in this area is therefore perceived as unnecessary and shifted outside the scope of RPOs. According to one of the interviewees, there are several pretexts used "in the common discourse about equality to disclaim responsibility" (PI, female). Still regarding this subject, another interviewee mentioned:

(...) it always appeared in the people's speeches the idea that if there was some inequality, some gender imbalance, it was due to personal choices (...). If inequalities exist it is not because the institution discriminates against anyone, it does not discriminate. Then, the argument about merit follows, because in the academia, what is valued is merit, and merit is a guarantee of equal opportunities for everyone, because everyone has the opportunity to demonstrate that is brilliant (...) (PI, female)

3.3 From strategies to combat resistance(s) to the sustainability of projects in Portuguese RPOs

So far, one of the main conclusions allowed by the analysis is that the lack of awareness, information and knowledge about gender inequality seems to be the source of all the identified resistance forms:

They [the causes of resistance] are based on a great lack of information and knowledge. And (...) that is why it is important for institutions to have disaggregated data by sex and to monitor indicators of the situation in terms of GE, because this makes inequalities visible (...). If we don't have that (...) people will assume a reality which is the one they see with their eyes, but their eyes are biased from their personal experience, from their individual subjectivity, and, therefore, they will always deny it (...) (PI, female)

This idea is at least partially supported in the speeches about strategies used to combat resistance and by those who report on the success of the initiatives:

(...) besides resilience, which is a cross-cutting feature, unequivocal data and evidence must be presented based on numbers that partially contradict the rejection that there is a problem. Then, (...) you must resort to studies that indicate the causal relationship between that data and institutional action (PI, female)

I think we managed to get adherence from almost everyone (...) adherence to the need to define policies, actions for the equality plan (...) I started by reading the results of the gender audit questionnaire [in the interviews] (...) (IP, female)

Providing the academic community with knowledge on the institutional situation regarding gender inequality appears to be an essential strategy in the fight against resistance, as suggested by several studies in this field (Collinson 1994: 27; Callerstig 2014). It is a way to make imbalances visible and to foster adhesion and involvement, namely of leaderships. In fact, all the PIs interviewed stress the importance of leadership(s) involvement, considering it decisive for the success (or failure) of the initiatives:

(...) To have the institutional leaderships collaborate in the project, I think it is an absolutely indispensable condition. And then the project itself, through the interviews, can make an effort to conquer the various levels of leadership (...) (PI, female)

Top leadership support is essential at all times (...) (PI, female)

As examined before, the manifestations of resistance are diverse, as the reasons behind them are, being equally complex. The speeches analysed in this research show that the reluctance to be involved in measures promoting GE occurs in all RPOs, are led by both men and women, occur at different hierarchical levels and in

different professional categories. The RPOs continue to be viewed as non-gendered structures, ignoring all the structural and cultural barriers that women continue to face, including in academia (Acker 1990; Leathwood and Read 2009). The need for actions and measures that aim to eliminate gender inequalities in academia and research is perhaps more evident than ever. These action-research projects, aimed to implement GEPs are not only important, but also necessary in Portuguese RPOs. It is feared, however, that they will not be enough to guarantee real institutional change and their sustainability/effectiveness beyond the projects' length. In fact, this is a concern shared by all the women interviewed, who consider that an effective institutional change will not be achieved without the support of national policies. Furthermore, they draw attention to the need for greater national consistency in this area, ensuring compliance with the determinations issued by the EC, and to the need for greater concern with the evaluation of the efficiency of these projects.

(...) a lot of money is given and there is no concern to evaluate efficiency (...) How is it possible that, in Portugal, we have evaluation agencies, both FCT and A3ES, that simply ignore the criteria the EC puts forward, in terms of the percentage of women in the evaluation panels, in terms of integrating the gender perspective in research? (...) we are all pretending that it exists, aren't we? And so, we're throwing some things, the EC throws money, countries make some little legislation every now and then, but deep down nobody wants this to change, it's my feeling (...). (PI, female)

Some of the interviewees also consider that, in Portugal, the creation of a network of national projects and a structure that concentrates information on RPOs with GEPs could contribute not only to strengthen the projects individually, but also to fill, in a more or less direct way, the gaps detected (and mentioned).

4. Conclusion

This paper started by presenting a brief theoretical framework related to resistance and, more specifically, to resistance to gender equality initiatives. The analysis of the data obtained through interviews with PIs of European funded projects to implement GEPs evidenced that institutional resistance is the most intense, occurs in all RPO and coexists with other forms of resistance. It was also found that some stakeholders (students, for example) can assume different behaviours in different institutional contexts, opposing or supporting GEPs implementation. Levels of resistance also seem to fluctuate depending on the themes addressed (being particularly visible regarding sexual harassment).

It was also found that inequality tends not to be recognized as a problem within RPOs, and the lack of knowledge and information on gender in/equality from the academic community emerge in all RPOs as the main reason for resistance to GE initiatives. The most commonly used strategies to combat such resistance were identified and they point to the commitment and involvement of institutional leaders and other important/relevant stakeholders; implement affirmative actions; oblige institutions to have and provide disaggregated data by sex in order to provide awareness of and about RPO human resources; etc. These strategies also apply or relate to the weaknesses of the national projects. In a broader perspective, some considerations were made about the weaknesses/limitations of national projects, particularly in regard to their sustainability and efficiency.

The study allows to conclude that there is a resistance to GEP implementation in all institutional contexts, assuming different forms and configurations (as the forms of overcoming it). Therefore, the results of this study draw attention to the need to adopt additional measures that, in national terms, can guarantee that institutional change fostered by this typology of projects (promoting GE as a differentiating factor) will last. We cannot forget that GE is indispensable not only to achieve scientific excellence but also to overcome the major social challenges of the EU, being a matter of justice as well.

To make the results of this analysis even more robust, this study could be extended to all RPOs with GEPs implemented and/or ongoing in Portugal. This is one of our research objectives to be developed in the future.

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