

CALL ABOUT GENDER

"Gender Equality Plans. Processes, potentialities, contradictions and resistances in contexts of science production"

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At a European level, the promotion of gender equality in research and innovation is regarded as a key element, especially since the launch of the European Research Area (ERA) in the 2000s. In its Communication "A reinforced European research area partnership for Excellence and Growth", the European Commission (2012) has emphasised the importance of gender equality, as well as detailed the areas in which Member States are invited to invest: removing gender inequalities in recruitment and career progression; promoting gender balance between men and women in the decision-making processes and leadership positions; strengthening the gender dimension in research programmes. Within the Communication, among the tools suggested to deal with existing gender inequalities, reference is made, for the first time, to the Gender Equality Plans (GEP).

In 2015, EIGE (European Institute for Gender Equality) developed and shared the so-called GEAR (Gender Equality in Academia and Research), a tool for tackling gender inequalities within institutions through a set of actions and tools that universities and research organizations can implement to promote change (EIGE 2022). In its document, EIGE mentioned GEPs as one of the tools. However, the implementation of a Gender Equality Plan became mandatory only in 2021, with the launch of Horizon Europe, i.e. the European funding program that followed Horizon 2020, for any higher education or research organization that wants to get access to the funding program.

As the name suggests, the Gender Equality Plans contain a set of actions aimed at preventing, reducing and opposing gender imbalances and inequalities in research and innovation. Five main areas of intervention are identified by the European Commission: recruitment and career progression; work-life balance; leadership and organizational culture; gender perspective in research and educational practices; gender violence.

A GEP is a planning instrument within the European universities' planning cycle, and, as such, it is part of a broader framework of policies and interventions that are already implemented by universities and research institutes for organizational well-being and gender equality. A GEP is not about the mere planning and implementation of measures and policies. It is rather understood as an instrument for changing processes, cultures and organizational structures as a whole, from a *gender mainstreaming* perspective. The Council of Europe defines gender mainstreaming as a strategy of "(re)organisation, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy-making" (European Commission 1996). It is, thus, a horizontal approach which highlights the need to reorganize the processes of policy-making which are usually presented, within institutions, as gender-blind; a strategy which focuses on gender equality rather than on women as a "special category" (Vingelli 2005).

GEPs fit into this strategic framework, together with other tools: as already mentioned, various strategies have been pursued over time by the institutions to promote changes in terms of gender equality. Implementing such equality policies, however, poses a few difficulties: Roggeband (2018) describes how implementing gender equality policies is the result of a power play between resistance and counter-resistance, where efforts to change policies and practices collide with a constant opposition (Verloo 2018; Waylen 2014) which aims to maintain the status quo (Lombardo and

Mergaert 2013). At the same time, those actors who promote gender equality develop actions and practices to overcome resistance and push towards a feminist institutional transformation (Chappell and Mackay 2020; Eschle and Maiguashca 2018; Eyben 2010). The relationship between gender and institutions is currently at the centre of a critical interpretation from the perspective of *Feminist Institutionalism* (Mackay *et al.* 2010), which sheds light on what we can define as the “rules of the game” (Krook and Mackay 2011) inside the institutions and on how these formal and informal rules have gender implications. Within this theoretical framework, positive changes towards gender equality in institutional processes are highlighted and analysed (Chappell 2002; Mackay 2006, 2010; Mackay and McAllister 2012), as well as all those practices of resistance and opposition to these changes (Chappell 2014a, 2014b, 2015; Kenny, 2013; Mackay 2014; Mackay and Waylen 2014). Feminist institutionalism, therefore, is not limited to integrating a gender perspective into the understanding of new institutional processes but questions the foundations of the institutions themselves (Kenny 2007), which are deeply intertwined with the socio-cultural construction of masculinity and femininity (Krook and Mackay 2011; Acker 1992). This theoretical approach is therefore useful when investigating the dynamics developing around instruments such as GEPs: feminist institutionalism helps us to understand the outcomes – or lack thereof – of certain gender policies, the relationships between institutions and actors, and the experiences of men and women within such institutions (Chappell 2010), none of which are gender-neutral aspects.

Feminist institutionalism’s perspective, therefore, provides important theoretical tools for analysing changes within research institutions, highlighting the limits of adopting a gender equality perspective within the framework of “academic performativity” (Blackmore and Sachs 2003). One of the pivotal aspects, in this regard, is trying to understand how certain programs, explicitly aimed at producing organizational change from a gender perspective, can succeed in obtaining an effective transformation of structures, cultures and working practices in scientific and academic contexts. The analysis of programmatic strategies for gender equality in these spaces has shown that their effectiveness is often invalidated by the gender practices enacted in everyday interactions within the academic and scientific institutions themselves (O’Connor 2020). An example of this is the renowned Athena SWAN program (Scientific Women’s Academic Network - AS), a sort of certification that Anglo-Saxon and Irish academic and research institutions are awarded based on their performance in terms of promoting equality. This program can be considered a sort of forerunner of the Gender Equality Plan. Several studies have shown that, although the AS has promoted a reflection on the topic, it has had very limited effectiveness in promoting gender equality in science production, even just from a quantitative point of view (for example, in terms of an increased number of women in leadership positions) (*Ibidem*). Furthermore, according to Tzanakou and Pearce (2019), these programs have introduced forms of “moderate feminism”, useful to respond to the accountability needs of the neoliberal university, based on measurable performances rather than on actual changes in the gender order. Yarrow and Johnston (2022) call it “institutional flaunting”, to describe the self-celebratory attitude deriving from having implemented policies for gender equality, regardless of the results that are obtained through these measures. Some authors also point out that, very often, when it comes to gender policies, the extremely bureaucratized processes of policy-making, implementation and evaluation actually add weight to the work of women and precarious components of universities and research institutions (Tzanakou and Pearce 2019; Drew 2022). Connected to this last aspect is another critical and equally central element, namely the lack of an intersectional perspective that takes into account the complexity and variability of the inequalities experienced by women as well as by other subjects with non-binary and non-heteronormative gender identities and sexual orientations, or by disabled or racialized people (Pearce 2017; Tzanakou and Pearce 2019).

Given their recent implementation, the literature dedicated to a critical approach to GEPs is still rather scarce. However, several contributions have highlighted some interesting aspects. First, some authors (Clavero and Gilligan 2021) have reflected on the reasons behind the implementation of the Plans, centred on economic grounds rather than social justice, and on their effects in terms of effectively promoting gender equality. Others (Laoire *et al.* 2020) have highlighted the critical aspects of the standardization of policies and the assumptions of transferability of policies from one context to another, which do not take into account the specificity of single institutions/universities and the wider, more situated, cultural context. An additional element is how policies integrate with *gender mainstreaming* and with an effective change in their organizational premises (Peterson and Jordansson 2022; Rosa 2022). Thomson and colleagues (2022) stated the importance of adopting a collaborative approach between individuals, as well as between institutions and countries, to effectively implement the GEP. Finally, except for rare, specially designed exceptions (Drew and Bencivenga 2017), we witness a lack of comparison of experiences between EU countries and countries that lie within the European continent, while not being part of the EU.

In light of the last year's adoption of GEPs by most of the Italian and European universities and research institutions, this call aims to make a first assessment, on the one hand by highlighting the potential, results, and processes set in motion thanks to the measures provided in the GEPs, and on the other hand by highlighting the aporias, challenges, and resistance regarding the implementation of the Plans.

The aim is, therefore, to enrich the critical reflections on the topic by analysing the different levels that GEPs intersect – in terms of contents, design and implementation process, stakeholders involved, and results – and by comparing them with other local, national, and/or international action plans.

We welcome empirical or theoretical contributions that critically address one or more of the following aspects:

- construction, implementation, and evaluation processes;
- feminist resistance or, on the contrary, "anti-gender" resistance;
- participation/involvement;
- motivations and premises: (not) a mere fulfilment of obligations;
- time and actions (short-, medium-, long-term);
- theoretical assumptions: matters of definition and intersectional perspective;
- what GEPs don't talk about: voids and absences;
- adopting a cross-cutting gender perspective and gender mainstreaming;
- rhetoric ("excellence", economic growth, etc.);
- equal opportunities and neoliberalism;
- opportunities for change; opening spaces for dialogue, new practices, innovation, and introduction of new analytical perspectives;
- awareness raising;
- risks and perverse effects;
- opportunism and pinkwashing;
- generalizations vs. situated dimensions;
- standardization vs. creativity;
- skills building;
- (im)possible dialogues (between different internal levels of the organization; internal/external; national/European);
- (neo)institutionalist logic;

- resources (economic, human).

Call timeline:

Deadline by which to receive proposals: **June 10, 2023**

Deadline by which to have confirmation of proposal acceptance or rejection: **end of September 2023**

Publication of the call: **end of November 2023**

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