

Usefulness, difficulties and risks in gender plans of European and Latin American Higher Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the main initiatives for the gender equality in Higher Education Institutions not also in Europe but in Latin America, too, by means of gender plans. Based on the need to move towards gender Equality in Latin America, 18 universities in the region have been working on the development and implementation of gender plans. Through the training provided by the cooperation project Equality between the European Union and Latin America, the universities have learnt from experiences of different European universities and the goals achieved by the European Union in gender issues. We present a comparative study on gender plans firstly developed in Spain and later in Latin America through Equality project. The usefulness of the gender plans, the obstacles in their execution and the results of their approval and implementation are analysed in this paper. We provide as well strategies to address the difficulties encountered during the development process, as they have been created and tested by Equality project in order to reach equity in the institutional structures, in the academic career and leadership positions. Finally, we point out the impact of gender plans in the universities of Equality Network.

KEYWORDS

Universities, Gender Plans, Gender Gap, Inequality

1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of the lack of equality between men and women in access to higher education and in developing a research career is being tackled in several countries in the world, each one of them choosing to promote different initiatives, at higher or lesser degrees of implementation. Gender plans in higher education institutions are just one of the actions specified in the policies originally developed in the European Union (EU), but currently spreading towards other territories. This is the case with 18 universities in Central and South Latin America which, through their participation in the Equality project are implementing their own equality policies with gender plans in order to achieve equality in within their institutional structure, academic career, employment and leadership positions. The present article describes the development of laws and gender policies within the European Union and Spain in the sphere of science and specifically, exposes the situation of women within Spanish universities. It also explains the level of implementation of gender plans and presents an analysis of the contents and usefulness of said plans, together with the difficulties they face in their execution and their potential effects. This is presented in the context of the Latin-American case, through an exposition of the work being developed within the framework of the Equality project for cooperation between Europe and Latin America. That makes it possible to build structures that allow the improvement of the situation of women and to implement the conditions to develop more egalitarian universities for both men and women.

2. EQUALITY INITIATIVES OF THE EUROPEAN COUNTRIES IN SCIENCE & UNIVERSITIES

The situation of women in science was first dealt with in Europe in the 1980's, and specifically, in the Nordic countries and Germany, where the first national report on the promotion of women in the scientific world was published in 1989. This can be considered the kick-start on the analysis of equality between women and men in science and technology. These initiatives started to become a reality and relevant in two member states of the European Union, being an example of them those documents published by different countries with the objective of contributing to building government policies and helping to increase the quality of science through the improvement of female situation within the scientific community. In the case of the United Kingdom, the publication of *The Rising Tide* (1994), Denmark with *Excellence in Research* (1995), or Finland with *Women in Academia* (1998), or Germany with *Recommendations for Equal Opportunities for Women in Science* (1998).

The introduction of the topic of gender mainstreaming into the European Union scientific community was a turning point visible in the "Women and Science" conference in 1998. The European Commission (EC) issued a Communication in 1999 titled "Women and Science. Mobilising Women to Enrich European Research", in which it proposed a consistent strategy

within the Fifth Framework Program¹ in order to promote research for, to and in relation with women, making emphasis in the need to keep a dynamic discussion on the situation of women in science, developing better inequality indicators and sharing experiences on these topics. In order to do so, the European Commission created the genderwatch system which would control and apply the integration of the gender perspective within the Fifth Framework Program.

Since the Fifth Framework Program was introduced, gender mainstreaming has been implemented in each European framework program (VI and VII). In the latest one, the European Commission had as an objective to support actions trying to achieve structural and cultural change in the way that gender and diversity are managed in universities and research institutions. And so, it was expected that universities and research centres cooperated in common actions to implement systemic strategies to increase participation and to advance the careers of female researchers, urging them to exchange good practices and to create action plans in order to achieve structural changes, to deal with specific organisation problems and to make better use of diversity. And thus, from the very European Union, it is recognised that the integration of the gender dimension in the design, evaluation and implementation of research is still too limited, so the challenge would be to improve all those aspects in order to improve the quality and relevance of research. It is for that reason that the European Commission has declared its commitment to dedicate the 40% membership of all expert groups, boards and committees to the under-represented sex, and will put it into practice under Horizon 2020².

With regards to the introduction of the gender dimension in the contents of research and innovation, it has been announced that there are two strategies within the new framework program: the first, to correct the lack of equality in participation in research in all stages of the scientific career and in different fields of research; the second, considering gender as a research dimension taking into account the biological, social and economic differences between women and men in all research processes. In fact, all programs included in Horizon 2020 have to contain information on how to deal with the lack of equality between men and women and how to integrate the gender dimension. This is also reflected on the projects that will be presented due to the fact that the commitment of the research institutions ought to be included in the clauses of the agreement. There are as well four specific programs of research and support to gender structures. In this way, Horizon 2020 represents a step forward within the European strategy on incorporating the gender dimension.

¹ The Fifth Framework Program established the priorities for research activities, technological development and demonstration of the European Union for the 1998-2002 period. These priorities are set following common criteria for member States, the European Parliament and the European Commission.

² Horizon 2020 is the financial instrument for research and innovation within the European Union which is being implemented from now on to 2020. The program combines funding for research and innovation that until the moment came from the Framework Programs for Research and Technical Development, the Framework Program for Competitiveness and Innovation and the European Institute for Innovation and Technology.

Besides the strategy in scientific policies, sensitisation towards the need for equal treatment and opportunities between women and men in the first decade of the XXI century took the EU to pass a new law that made it possible to develop policy actions with important results. This is the case of Directive 2002/73/CE by the European Parliament and Council, on September 23, 2002, which modifies Directive 76/207/CEE by the Council regarding the application of the principle of equal treatment of men and women to the access to employment, training and professional promotion, and work conditions, and to Directive 2004/113/EC by the Council which applies the principle of equal treatment between men and women to the access to goods and services and its supply.

To this we have to add the fact that in 2006, the European Commission created the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) as an instrument to disseminate information, exchange good practices and develop new methodological instruments that promote gender mainstreaming (integrating the gender dimension in all policy areas). It was in 2010 when the *Strategy for equality between women and men 2010-2015* drawn up by the European Commission was adopted by the EIGE, including six lines for action: 1. Equal economic independence; 2. Equal pay for equal work and for work of equal value, 3. Equality in decision-making processes; 4. Dignity, integrity and eradication of gender violence; 5. Gender equality in external actions; and 6. Horizontal aspects.

The diagnosis of the situation of women in science and the evaluation of the impact of gender has run together with the development of policies. Starting with the Fifth Framework Program, the *genderwatch* system established statistics collection and diffusion, the promotion of female participation in assessment groups and advisory assemblies and the elaboration of studies to determine the impact of gender in research programs.

The EU Council joined the strategy and its response to the communication by the European Commission on Women and Science from 1999 was the publishing of a Resolution that same year. It invited member States to revise the mechanisms used to collect gender-based de-aggregated statistics, to commit themselves to the dialogue proposed by the European Commission on the policies applied by states and to pursue the objective of gender equality in science using appropriate mechanisms.

In the year 2000 the European Commission published the ETAN report³ on the promotion of excellence through the integration of gender equality, by means of which it wanted to improve the situation of women in science and the development of scientific policies. The report tried to influence policies with two objectives: integrating equality in the different institutions teaching and funding science, and that train and hire scientific personnel, both male and female; and also

³ Report on women and science in the EU that the EC asked from the European Technology Assessment Network (ETAN) in 1999. It has had the same continuity through the Helsinki Group on women and science that the EC established that same year with the mission of promoting the participation of women in scientific careers and in research and in developing related indicators.

achieving equality in the scientific and academic structures, in peer reviewing, funding, academic leadership and priority setting, and science policies.

Starting with the ETAN report, the three-yearly publication of *She Figures. Statistics and Indicators on Gender Equality in Science* started, being a publication by the European Commission and Helsinki Group that collects data on the situation of women in science in order to monitor the situation and the advances towards gender equality in the spheres of higher education and the labour market within all EU States, and also in its area of influence (Croatia, Iceland, Norway, Switzerland and Turkey). *She Figures* allows to observe the evolution of the situation of women in science and to compare it both in time and geographically.

Since the first time *She Figures* was published, EU countries control data referring to the situation of female scientifics. The most recent data at an European level are those published in *She Figures 2012. Gender in Research and Innovation*⁴ reflecting a similar situation. In fact, even when the number of women that finish their doctoral studies grows higher than its equivalent for men, they are still a minority within the scientific community: 33% of researchers in the EU in 2009 were women, three percentage points less than in 2006. The proportion of female researchers shows considerable differences between countries; there is a clear pattern of under-representation of women in all of them, nonetheless. *She Figures* provides the following data: with regards to doctoral studies, the number of women grows faster than that of men, as it is a mean of 3.7% between the years 2002 and 2010 when comparing it to the 1.6% in men, but this growth is not enough in order for it to correct the lack of gender equality, and in order to achieve this goal, it would take a long time. The proportion of women in the academic grade A (full professor) in 2010 has also improved in 2010 with respects to 2002⁵, even when there are noticeable differences between countries, from 10% to 30%, so even when observing an improvement, there is still a lack of equality in the representation by gender in most countries.

The European level results published in *She Figures*, together with the econometric analysis of White Papers in different countries, confirm the existence of significant differences in the processes of promotion to university chairs. They, in fact, reaffirm the bias found and described by Wennerås y Wold (1997): it is 2.5 times more likely for a male professor to become senior professor than it is for a female one, even when they have matching characteristics (same age, seniority as doctors, same field of knowledge, same publishing history). It is also observed how having children has higher negative effects on women than in men, so that a man with children is 4 times more likely to become a full professor than a woman with children and similar characteristics. In contrast, there are no significant differences between men and women on promotion to the status of professor (Sánchez de Madariaga [et alii], 2011). Zinovieva & Bagués (2010) showed the existence of gender-based biases in promotion processes to chairs,

⁴ Published by the General Directory for Research and Innovation from the European Commission on April 5, 2013.

⁵ In the EU-27 there is a mean of 20% of women in grade A (full professors) in 2010, according to *She Figures 2012*.

according to the sex of the evaluation panel and the rank of the position to which aspiring professors were applying to, so that an additional member of the evaluation panel that is male in a seven-member committee decreases the chances of promotion for a woman when compared to another male candidate in 14%. Even so, when there is an additional male member in a panel evaluation conceding the status of professor, chances for the promotion of a woman compared to those of a man with similar characteristics are increased in 5%. From this we can infer that the presence of women in the panel evaluating conceding the status of professor generates a negative effect for female candidates.

It is also noticeable the lack of women in several scientific field. *She Figures* quantifies this segregation on scientific fields and points out the existence of a glass ceiling for women who aim to achieve responsibility positions in universities. And so, in the field of higher education, female researchers are more than represented in the field of social sciences in 12 of the 28 countries, primarily on the Southern European countries and the most recent additions to the EU. Women are more represented in medical sciences in 11 of the 28 countries, basically those including the EU-15⁶ and Japan. In most countries (20 of 28), the largest difference is to be found in the field of engineering. On the contrary, leaving the agricultural field aside, the smallest difference is to be found in humanities.

It should be added to the analysis of *She Figures* with regards to the difference in leadership positions that the under-representation of women in decision-making positions and as highest positions in higher education are identified as one of the causes why the lack of gender equality in science has become entrenched. And so, in the EU-27⁷, the proportion of university presidents is 15.5% of the total.

3. MAIN WORKING LINES OF GENDER PLANS IN EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES AND RESEARCH ORGANISATIONS

Different international organisations, especially institutions belonging to the European Union, are developing policies and recommendations to face the challenge of changing structures in order to enhance gender equality in research and innovation through the integration of gender mainstreaming in research organizations.

For instance, the European Research Area (ERA) invites Member States, research organizations, and the European Commission to go towards a decreasing loss of highly skilled women by integrating the gender perspective into the design, the evaluation and the implementation of research, recognised as “still too limited” (COM, 2012, 392 final). That

⁶ EU-15 countries are: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

⁷ EU-27 consists of EU-15 plus Bulgaria and Romania. Since 1st July 2013, Croatia joined EU as the 28th Member State, although it happened after *She Figures 2012* was out.

document points out different measures to tackle the barriers to the recruitment, gender imbalances and under representing in committees, which has a practical translation into the Call for promoting Gender Equality in Research and Innovation under the scope of Horizon 2020.

ERA provides five priority areas for action: 1) more efficient national systems, 2) optimal transnational cooperation and competition, 3) open labour market for researchers, 4) gender equality and gender mainstreaming in research, and 5) optimum circulation and transfer of research results. It is quite important that one of these points is specifically referred to gender equality. In the framework of ERA, Horizon 2020, at the same time, establishes four areas of action linked to equality: 1) gender equality in research teams, 2) gender equality at the level of decision making, 3) integration of gender/sex analysis in the contents of research and innovation, 4) gender equality in the monitoring and evaluation processes

Furthermore, the Call for promoting Gender Equality in Research and Innovation aims to support systemic institutional changes through the implementation of Gender Equality Plans, which shall conduct impact assessment, address gender bias through family-friendly policies, gender planning and budgeting, training in human resources management, integrating gender dimension in research content and HEI curricula. This working line of the EC and ERA stems from the *Seventh Framework Programme* (2007 to 2013), which has funded a wide range of projects.

Besides, research institutions and universities consortiums address the gender issues in their working lines such as the League of European Research Universities (LERU) and the European Universities Association (EUA). LERU⁸ suggested some actions to be conducted in universities in order to overcome gender inequality through four different areas: 1) leadership, vision and strategy, 2) types of measures universities can take to achieve structural change, 3) implementing and ensuring effective uptake of measures taking into consideration transparency, accountability and monitoring, and 4) address the lack of a gender dimension in research. On the other hand, EUA has been holding European Women Rectors Conferences, resulting in recommendations for academic leaders, national authorities and supra-national organisations.

It is also worth to mention that Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has a Higher Education Programme which released a statement focused on the need to close the gender gap in higher education seeing that although women have overtaken men in education in OECD countries, they are still at a disadvantage in careers and earnings.

The different organisations mentioned above tend to agree about the key factors causing the gender bias in research and higher institutions, and, to some extent, their proposals may be comparable. An overview of the measures to tackle gender imbalances in research suggested by them is outlined in the following table.

⁸ LERU (2012). *Women, research and universities: excellence without gender bias*.

Table 1. Measures to tackle gender imbalances in research by ERA, LERU, EUA and OECD

Main areas of intervention	ERA and H2020	LERU	EUA	OECD
Leadership and strategy	Addressing gender imbalances in decision making processes	The ultimate responsibility for achieving change is shouldered by university's highest leadership, who have direct access to the university rector and/or vice-rector with specific responsibility for gender/equality.	It is needed strong leadership that is well-informed, engaged and willing to act in gender equality issues, as it plays a crucial role in change processes.	Promoting more women into senior management roles.
Recruitment and career progression	Remove legal and other barriers to the recruitment, retention and career progression of female researchers while fully complying with EU law on gender equality.	Measures can be adopted as (usually) gender-specific career development measures: Funding programmes to focus on research; mentoring and training programmes; a renewed discussion of the criteria for quality can help raise or reinforce awareness about possible bias; publication quality vs. quantity at the middle stages of women careers (maternity leave); support grants to prepare applications for research funding.	Providing / taking care of transparency in promotion and recruitment processes; securing equal opportunities for research funding and regularly monitoring success rates by gender.	Ensuring that recruitment, tenure and other HR policies do not put women at disadvantage.
Gender dimension in research contents	Foster gender equality and the integration of a gender dimension in Horizon 2020 programmes and projects from inception, through implementation to evaluation, including through the use of incentives.	Universities should actively promote and support a gender dimension in science, taking into account the specificities of particular research fields.	Providing extensive funding for research on gender equality in higher education, science and research.	-
Monitoring and assessment	Conduct impact assessment / audit of procedures and practices, including relevant data on HR management, teaching and research activities. Set targets and monitor progress via indicators at organisation level.	Universities should have gender-specific statistics about the division of all resources and the developments should be monitored and acted upon. It is important to disaggregate gender ratio figures by research fields to investigate and address the causes of such imbalances.	Monitoring the change process, measuring the impact of the strategy applied for structural changes to improve the conditions for gender equality and making the necessary adjustment for further steps.	Strengthening gender awareness across the institution, with appropriate accountability mechanisms.

Source: Own elaboration from the information provided by European Commission, LERU, EUA and OECD reports and communications.

4. TOWARDS A COMMON EQUALITY POLICY IN LATIN AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES THROUGH EQUALITY PROJECT

The European Union is not the only region that works in the direction of implementing policies for the promotion and access of all women in every sphere; Latin America is already developing an agenda in this sense. Even when there is not a supra-national political structure, as in the case of the European Union, there are some work lines and international projects at which different countries from South and Central America are working together. This is the case of project *Equality – Strengthening leadership of women in higher education institutions and in society in Latin America*⁹, in which 18 Latin American universities and 4 European ones took part, and besides, the constitution of the Equality Network, that will guarantee the continuity of the objectives and the work line of the project in the coming years once the project finishes in 2014.

Equality aims to improve Higher Education in Latin American countries by promoting gender equality and contributing to the visibility and participation of women in the scientific, academic and labour spheres in order to generate positive economic effects through the improvement of the use and integration of female talent within national economies on the long term. More specifically, this is given shape in the modernisation of the management of universities with regards to promotion of gender-based equality in education and employment through the establishing of permanent structures that support the objective of achieving equality. This is the case of the creation of gender units in institutions that integrate the project's consortium, and the development of policies that integrate equality of opportunities between men and women in the access to higher education and the development of an academic and research career, and training programs.

Through the Regional Network of Female Leaders in Latin America (Equality Network), the ability to work in networks in universities to the south of the continent is sought to be fortified, looking for a platform that is both permanent and sustainable in order to support the efforts in gender-based equality and in promoting the interest of women for science, academia and the labour market. The objective of the project is to involve 18 Latin American higher education institutions and thus, falls in line with the priorities in gender of the European Union.

Amongst its specific objectives we find the creation or reinforcement of gender-based equality policies in Latin American universities, in line with the trend in Europe; this is specified in the planning and approval of institutional gender plans, being the Universitat Rovira i Virgili the coordinating institution with regards to that objective.

The starting point situation of the different universities involved can be seen in the following SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats), which would be followed both during the training process, as well as in the recommendations and the following of the planning.

⁹ Reference DCI-ALA/19.09.01/11/21526/279-455/ALFA III(2011)-132.

Figure 2. Equality SWOT



Source: First draft of comparative study, presented by the Gender Equality Office – Technological Institute of Costa Rica in the 2nd Equality Training Workshop.

It was decided to apply the successful strategy for equality in European universities, this is: 1) elaborating a diagnosis of the situation of those universities stemming from the analysis of data de-aggregated by sex, 2) writing and implementing a gender plan and 3) creating a gender unit that, on one hand, leads the topic generating information and knowledge dealing with gender and on the other, watches and follows discrimination cases. Given the situation of those universities taking part, available resources and the previous existence or not of some of these factors, universities could choose how to impulse these three activities: in successive stages, in parallel or in reverse order in function of the context of the university, always within the planning of the project.

The existence of a department, be it a gender unit, observatory or even a centre for studies, allows to achieve the permanent diagnosis of the situation of women and the development of indicators that will make it possible to revise and update plans. From existing experiences, it is also observed that some universities have managed to create a male and female teaching and researching critical mass that have incorporated the gender perspective in their disciplines, both in research projects and in training programs.

The planned strategy is useful so that the topics of gender and equality of opportunities between men and women in universities become central points over which the decision-taking organs of these institutions must be held accountable in a periodic way. Especially when gender units, be it formal or informal, participate in these decision-taking organs. The existence of the three issues Diagnosis – Gender Plan – Gender Unit described before is also influencing in the debate of the way the universities should be governed, in order for it to become more transparent and meritocratic.

Training strategy

In order to implement equality policies within the scientific sphere and specifically to write and pass a Gender Plan, a training based methodology was used, focused on the key members of each university that should lead the technical and policy process. The training process, started in 2012 allowed to build the adequate conditions in each university in order to elaborate the plan and successfully impulse it, taking into account the institutional, social and economic context of each partner university within the Equality consortium. In fact, training and the rest of Equality activities have been used in 47% of the cases to train those taking part in the writing of the Gender Plan.

In a first stage of the training strategy, members from each institution that were gender experts and had positions of responsibility were trained in the methodology to come up with gender policies and gender plans. It was taken as a foundation those gender policies already in place in the European Union and the analysis of statistics results that EU periodically publishes on women and science, which served to set the theoretical foundations.

After that, those same members integrating the Equality consortium were trained in the techniques in order to develop the strategic design of a gender plan, to create data typology to build indicators and to execute the statistical analysis. This technical and methodological training had as an end that universities elaborated their own diagnosis of the situation of women and men in higher education institutions, which was useful to detect and illustrate if there were any existing gender-based inequalities. The work on indicators had a prominent relevance, as they are several analysis variables that describe the situation of women and men in the institutions taking part in Equality. In this way, indicators make it possible to know social, labour, training and economic reality from a gender perspective in order to make it easier to compare women and men and to identify the differences that might contribute to stereotypes and indirect discrimination. The use of indicators and de-aggregation of statistical data on sex allowed observing the incidence of several factors that are related to differences in behaviour.

Once training finished, associated institutions in Latin American institutions started elaborating the diagnosis of the institutional situation with regards to gender that included three main content areas: 1) indicators de-aggregated by sex describing the situation in each university, 2) the relation of internal and external allies who could help those promoting the future Gender Plan to pass it, and 3) to identify internal norms, national laws and international conventions that could support the Plan. Even when not all institutions had de-aggregated data to elaborate the

indicators before the project, Equality included as an activity obtaining data for a Latin American integrated information system (GRIS – Gender Responsive Information System), so that from that moment de-aggregated data could be obtained by universities in order for them to systematize information and make it possible to compare.

This is a significant achievement in the Equality project, as the systematization of data on the situation of women in the academic and scientific sphere is slightly lower than in Europe or in the United States. In fact the *Equality in gender in science and technology in Latin America: Foundations and Projections in Building Knowledge, Agendas and Institutions*, written in 2004 by Gloria Bonder, the General Coordinator of the Regional UNESCO Woman, Science and Technology Chair for Latin America, pointed out that in that region, there are no consistent diagnoses over equality policies in the sphere of Science and Technology. This is due to several limitations such as the gap between the discourse found in documents from international organisms, policies proposed in each country and the practices that finally take shape, as well as the lack of anchor of the mainstreaming proposals that are based on ideal models in the specific situation of each institution, and the scarcity of policies assessments that learn lessons, among others.

This was reflected in the fact that universities reported difficulties in data collection when trying to elaborate a diagnosis, with the most difficult to obtain being the following: scientific activity and production of the teaching personnel, scholarship granting to students, job category of administrative and service personnel, ratio of grade A academic staff.

With the diagnosis complete, university institutions in Latin America started to write the Gender Plan, or in the case of those that already had one, to improve or re-edit it. The selected strategies in each case were different between each other, given that the institutional and social context was also different, even when there were some guidelines when taking into account the existence or not of the equality office or plan.

The strategic aspect where there was the highest level of divergence was in the choice between different types of leadership in order to follow all the process. 10% of the institutions could follow the recommended guideline on a methodological level, with the creation of an Equality Commission that would integrate a member of the university presidency or vice-presidency with delegation, a representative of the Gender Unit, Observatory or Centre, in case it exists, a representative of the technical office for planning or similar organism, a representative of the teaching and administrative or services staff or student meetings, and people invited by the same university, such as expert teachers on gender issues, worker or manager representatives. 40% of the universities handled the leadership to obtain a Gender Plan through a centre of studies or similar integrated by member of the same project. In the other 40% of cases, it was the Gender Unit the organism responsible for writing it, which links it with the importance of the existence of gender units in higher education.

Belonging to the Equality Network favours that universities link the activities programmed within the project to achieving the Gender Plan, such as the already mentioned data collection system,

the creation of a gender unit or centre of studies and organising workshops and training programs. In this sense, it is important to highlight that in 70% of the cases, there was no gender unit before the project started. But its link with the Plan is very important: in 36% of the cases they have a technical role, taking care of executing activities of the plan and in 18% of them they lead the implementation on a policy level. They are joined by a Following Committee in 12% of them and of an Advisory Council in 12%, and of the presidency team in 21%.

The support by governments and institutions is key in the process to achieve the creation of a Gender Plan. As even when they had been committed to passing a gender plan by joining the Equality project, in a 65% of cases, coordinators of the Equality project have looked for the reinforcement of the commitment before starting writing the plan and in 35% they have obtained it independently of the process of writing the plan. Even when more than half of the universities taking part in the project have an assessment of between 3 and 5 (in a scale of 0 to 5) the support from the university president in the process of writing the plan, in 24% of the cases, institutions failed when considering the support they gave.

As we pointed out above, universities have found difficulties within their own institution when trying to write the Plan. Overall, they can be summarised as a lack of interest in the gender topic and a lack of resources, even when having a project budget. Even though it is interesting to observe which types of difficulties are shared amongst many universities taking part in the project: 47% of them complain about the lack of economic resources and/or staff, both to write the plan and to execute and follow it, 41% of them have experienced a lack of institutional support and political interest, in 23.5% of the cases a lack of interest or the perception that there is already equality in the university community has been detected. 17.6% of them have found difficulties when trying to achieve a diagnosis, be it due to the lack of statistical data or to identification of discrimination.

Those responsible for executing development activities of a Gender Plan looked for solutions to the different problems found, especially when trying to reach a higher institutional support. In this sense, the most commonly followed strategy was to get at least a person from the highest responsibility rank involved in the commission that wrote the Plan that, moreover, would defend this policy in front of the decision-making organisms in the university. When dealing with lack of resources, a few universities decided to look for external funding.

5. THE IMPACT OF GENDER PLANS

It is too early to assess the impact of gender plans in Latin American universities, as they are yet to be passed, so the introduction of assessment indicators will be key. This is what happens in plans already in motion in European universities. The experience in the analysed institutions tells us that equal opportunities between women and men are not only achieved through the recognition and application of laws. The persistence of discriminatory attitudes, norms and social and culturally rooted habits make that putting into practice the principle of equality is not

always as successful as it is intended. It is for that reason that measures to promote equality require raising the profile of female contributions to defend their rights and to create knowledge about the inequalities and discrimination that still exist. Sexism violates the principles of freedom, democracy, justice, equality and solidarity in which universities are founded. Recognising that students, schools and researchers that form the community are part of the problem forces institutions to look for solutions.

Laws are clearly vital to achieve and guarantee equality between women and men in academia. It is important to keep in mind, however, that guaranteeing just the access of women to university under equal conditions is not enough. Strategies to achieve effective equality and to counter the obstacles women still face in developing their professional careers should be implemented, like balancing family and personal life, participating in representative and decision-making bodies, access to certain degrees and programs. Another objective would be the teaching of equality-related topics, promoting research in these fields and implementing the gender perspective in all study fields.

It is recommendable to reflect on the role of gender units and plans and their ability to transform a reality such as the one in universities. To date, as we pointed out, all universities members of Equality have their own Gender Unit, Observatory or Gender Centre of Studies. Five out of 22 institutions are already implementing a Gender Plan; 10 out of 22 have a draft or a Gender Plan pendant of approval; and seven more ought to have written their gender plan before 2014 ends.

The Diagnosis-Plan-Unit format is a joint strategy to impulse analyses about the situation of women in science, and to develop instruments that might improve said reality. They are instruments being developed not only in Spain and Europe, but also in South and Central America, as pointed out before, through the Equality Project. It is useful to analyse the specificity of these instruments when we want to propose and apply them in other countries. We can also assess their effectiveness and limitations.

The first reflection to expose is that there are differences between universities that might condition the development and shape of gender equality policies: the previous existence of gender study groups and their past trajectory; besides, the size and experience of universities are presented as variables that can help explain differences between them.

Which are the factors that give the most usefulness to the existence of gender units and plans? Where is the usefulness of gender units? We can answer these questions while exposing some of the difficulties that can arise when trying to implement each one of them.

Firstly, we can point out the existence of these units presupposes the possibility of being able to be watchful, alert and to denounce cases in which women, or some of them, can be harmed or discriminated against. The biggest difficulty associated to this potential usefulness stems, to our understanding, to being able to know these cases of discrimination that will mostly be underlying discriminations and thus, difficult to detect.

Secondly, the existence of gender units and plans allows institutions to generate a wealth of internal information from the gender perspective that had not been possible up until now. For example, the need to have permanent diagnoses of the situation of women requires a type of information that must be de-aggregated by sex. In many cases, this first requirement – data de-aggregated by sex – even when mandatory under the law is not really enforced. It is the time, thus to ask for information, to elaborate it by de-aggregating by sex, and make it known.

The existence of a gender unit or of a gender plan can also be the time to raise awareness among the scientific community; this is, among teachers and researchers that do not usually see the usefulness or in some cases, the urgent need to include the gender variable in their disciplines and scientific activity. In order to do so, there are many materials – increasingly elaborated – that make it possible to use instruments to put into practice what is called the cross-sectionality of the gender category in science. One of the practices that is related to this possibility is the offering of courses for teachers and researchers on gender topics. The biggest challenge is to overcome lack of knowledge currently existing in part of the scientific community of what research on gender issues and with a gender sensibility supposes.

Gender plans are also, in fourth place, a mechanism in order to reach a higher compliance with norms trying to achieve a gender-equal participation of men and women in specific representation, management and participation structures.

In fifth place, we want to highlight the fact that a certain critical mass of women and men that work within their fields to incorporate the perspective of gender in teaching and research is starting to be created around gender units. In some other cases, groups of women that had made the gender variable their object of study were already working in a more or less stable way. However, the fragility of those structures was and is significant. Therefore it is useful, in line with what some policy initiatives within the EU propose within scientific programs, to support all possible initiatives to guarantee the presence of women in different research groups and also include the topic of gender in all research proposals that are to receive public funding.

The existence of gender units makes it possible to make the topic of gender and the situation of women something that has to be accounted for in a constant way by different government bodies from universities. We understand this is a step forward to achieve that the issue of discrimination that many women face is included in the discussion of the way to govern universities and of the needs to guarantee mechanisms to have universities that are more transparent and meritocratic. Equality needs, through their participation, be it formal or informal, in different government bodies and the measures to develop within the framework of gender plans, guarantee that the topic will be on the table much more often and in different ways: in debates in teaching staff meetings, in reports by presidents of universities or by centres and departments, etc.

But all these chances we exposed above as potential effects of gender plans and units have to face, as we also exposed, to a series of difficulties. Some of these have to do with organisation

dynamics within universities, which would be shared with companies, whereas, some others are a product of the specific characteristics of universities: their organisation, structure, etc.

A difficulty to add to those already cited is the whole androcentric mindset of an important part of the people that form the academic community: teaching or administrative and services staff, students. In a higher or lesser degree, sexist prejudices and male chauvinism are present and condition the development of gender equality policies that will be implemented.

In a specific way, universities have a mostly decentralized way of working that, even if it is a useful dynamic in several management characteristics, makes it difficult to work on a new unit that has to spread a new message to all services and departments that, moreover, have deeply rooted habits and customs from previous organization dynamics.

In the same way, yet another characteristic of universities that can make it difficult to work in developing gender plans and units is the lack of discussion between academic fields. This academic practice, even when being built on the need to establish borders between fields of knowledge that make it possible for it to be cumulative, makes it enormously difficult that some knowledge, even when being necessary to improve the functioning of an entire organisation, reaches beyond the field in which it has been produced, and not even to that whole subset or scientific community.

And so, there are several difficulties to overcome. The biggest one is, perhaps, to our understanding, discourse of meritocracy that is the foundation of the academic structure of universities. We are, however, convinced that gender plans and units are part of a strategy that promotes equality policies that offer many possibilities of real change within university structures. We believe that the possibilities of change will be higher if equality policies are added to what should be the main objective of universities: a real practice of transparent processes that makes it possible to build a meritocratic university in which science is produced to serve the welfare of everyone.

From our analysis, one can extract that existing laws are not enough to achieve equality between men and women, because they present measures, but do not guarantee their enforcement nor how to get results out of them. Moreover, it is reasonable to assume that legal intervention in this topic will be needed given existing limitations within universities. Mechanisms to turn universities into more meritocratic universities can be used in equality policies. But to assure the success of this process it is equally necessary to reach a consensus on the indicators that can account for all progresses in equality policies, so the challenge is currently even more important both in Europe and Latin America.

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