
GENDER-NET Plus

Report on national & regional plans & initiatives promoting gender equality & structural change

A study of 13 European countries, Israel and
Canada

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Author: Anne W. Rødland (RCN)

Report's scope

Gender equality has been a crosscutting issue in Horizon 2020 with 3 objectives in perspective: **gender balance in decision-making, gender balance and equal opportunities in project teams at all levels, and the gender dimension in research and innovation content.** This report is based on a study undertaken as part of the GENDER-NET Plus project (2017–2022) and, complementary to the studies summarized in D6.2 and D6.3, it focuses on the first 2 objectives and intends to provide an update to a first work and report produced under the frame of the GENDER-NET initiative in 2015¹.

GENDER-NET Plus partners differ somewhat from the partners and observers whose initiatives formed the basis of the 2015 GENDER-NET

report. The aim of this new report is therefore to provide relevant update to the data collected through that 2015 study as well as to introduce additional inputs based on new participants' data sets. **It summarizes national and regional initiatives in participant countries that stimulate gender equality in the research ecosystem and enact structural change towards gender equality in research institutions².**

This report covers the themes documented by the initial one. It therefore sheds light on best practices connected to **decision-making structures and procedures; anchoring gender equality issues at leadership level; recruitment, retention and advancement of women researchers (including leading positions); work environment, work-life balance and dual careers; and in-/outgoing mobility for women researchers.**

¹ *National plans and initiatives promoting gender equality and structural change* available here:

[GENDER-NET D2-5 - National plans and initiatives promoting gender equality and structural change e.pdf](#)

² The aim has not been to describe exhaustively all the existing initiatives but to identify pro-active and innovative initiatives that can serve as a basis for

recommendations for transnational activities. Partners in the GENDER-NET Plus consortium share a common commitment to the promotion of gender equality in research and are regarded as key players at European and international levels. Hence, the scope has been limited to the 16 GENDER-NET Plus consortium partners, who were asked to report on selected initiatives in their country.

Summary

This report describes a wide range of national measures promoting gender equality in institutions of higher education and research. As national contexts vary, so too does the design of measures. Both the 2015 report and this GENDER-NET Plus recent assessment show that many countries have come far as regards gender equality legislation, plans and regulations, and there are some good examples of mechanisms that contribute to the implementation of laws and plans. In addition, there are many examples of targeted, comprehensive initiatives for enhancing gender equality through institutional change.

Leadership commitment and involvement is considered to be vital to structural change, and is a goal or a prerequisite in many, if not most, of the reported initiatives. Still, methods for involving and committing management at different levels are in an early phase. A few more examples of gender equality training for leaders have been found, as well as leadership committees, but **there is still potential for developing new methodologies to improve leadership involvement.**

Structural change must take place at national, institutional and systemic level. In the 2015 report it was noted that the material contained relatively few examples of measures specifically aimed at structural

change, such as measures aimed at improving international mobility and work-life balance. This is still true to a certain extent, but **some improvements can be observed. For instance, this 2019 assessment revealed several additional initiatives that help researchers achieve work-life balance, mitigate family issues and take non-linear careers into account.** There are also a few more examples of mobility schemes that include provisions to make research stays more compatible with having caring responsibilities. **However, it may still be hard to pursue a successful research career if you do not have the flexibility to work extra hours to keep up with research publication production, travel to international conferences or conduct research stays abroad.** The quantity and quality of publications have become decisive factors in the provision of incentives because they measure research production. Hence, **it has become increasingly important for researchers to publish extensively at early stages in order to have a successful career.** They are also expected to network nationally and internationally, participate in international conferences and undertake research stays abroad, which can be difficult in particular phases of life. **There should be more attention paid to the potentially biased impacts of such structural constraints, and more willingness among RFOs and RPOs to implement flexibility in order to make it possible for researchers to combine work**

and personal life to prevent talents from quitting an academic career.

To achieve structural change, gender equality has to be mainstreamed in all areas. In the 2015 report it was recommended to consider family commitments and dual-career constellations as the norm when developing human resources policies or reflecting on career development in general. This would also benefit researchers with fewer engagements, and the result would be a better work-life balance for all. GENDER-NET Plus recent assessment indicates that **there is a growing focus on these issues in human resources policies and career development, and the hope is that this will become widespread.**

This 2019 assessment revealed that **a growing number of research funding organisations have developed comprehensive gender action plans and strategies based on self-assessment.** It is also more common to have gender-disaggregated data and monitoring of funding instruments. This makes it easier to have more targeted and successful initiatives. It should be noted that EU projects have played, and still play, a significant role in elaborating the gender equality work for several organisations.

Another finding is that **the various stakeholders seem to learn from and be inspired by others' experiences and state-of-the-art knowledge when developing their measures.** One example in this report's material is the EU projects where research funding organisations collaborate with each other and with expert partners in developing targeted gender equality plans. Another example is how established instruments like Athena SWAN are adopted and adapted by new stakeholders in other countries. It is a promising trend that good practices and lessons learned seem to be spreading.

Last, but not least, **there seems to be a trend of adopting a holistic approach to solving gender equality issues.** Many of the initiatives described in this report are part of a larger package. Whether the package is in the form of an action plan, a legislative measure or a policy varies between partners and countries and is related to their understanding of, and culture for dealing with, measures and regulatory frameworks. But **the tendency to develop a framework that addresses different aspects of academic career development and that introduces a variety of measures to resolve equality issues seems to be stronger than in the 2015 report.**

Selected schemes & initiatives

1. Decision-making structures and procedures at national level

1.1 Legislation on gender equality

In Norway, some amendments have been made to the existing legislation on gender equality. The acts dedicated to *Gender Equality* and *Anti-Discrimination* were consolidated into a single act since January 2018 as the government wanted equal protection against discrimination on any grounds and decided to consolidate all of anti-discrimination legislation items.

In Spain, the *Organic Law for Universities* was modified by decree. In particular, it requires that procedures for recruitment and evaluation of researchers at universities and national-level public research organisations guarantee that career breaks due to work-life balance situations do not negatively affect how researchers' merits and CVs are evaluated. The government is still to provide further regulation on how to apply this provision. A local *Strategy of Science, Technology and Innovation* (STI) was implemented from 2013 to 2020 and included the gender perspective in STI policies as one of the five basic principles. A new Strategy of STI running from 2021 to 2027 insists on the need to integrate the gender perspective in order to guarantee

the principle of gender equality through the whole STI system, being one of the four basic principles of the Strategy. The promotion of gender balance in attracting and retaining talent will be also part of the actions. The aim is to avoid the loss of human capital in the public and private sector due to gender imbalances and to enrich the creative process and research results through the integration of a gender perspective in the research and innovation content.

Austria's *Universities Act* contains laws to promote gender equality in universities. For instance, existing performance agreements between the universities and the Ministry for Higher Education have to include measures to increase the number of women in leadership positions and provide targeted support for young female researchers. In 2009, a 40-per-cent quota for women was introduced for collegial bodies. The quota was raised to 50 per cent in 2015.

1.2 National gender equality plans

One of GENDER-NET Plus participating institutions approved its first gender action plan in September 2018. It includes measures based on the following 3 pillars: human resource management, decision-making, and research content. The action plan was formulated in the context of a sister European Project. It is foreseen that 7 institutions have their new action plan or

strategy implemented, monitored, self-assessed and evaluated during the time of the project. At the time of GENDER-NET assessment, this institution was in the process of implementing measures. All its funding programmes and calls for proposals now include a gender-sensitive statement to encourage more women to submit proposals as coordinators, as well as explicitly stating that research teams should be gender-balanced as far as possible.

Another participating institution's gender strategy and action plan was described in the 2015 report. One of the key initiatives was the introduction of gender-blind assessments in 2014. In the majority of its funding programmes, any gender-identifying information - such as personal names - are hidden from assessors and panel members when they are assessing the applications. The aim is to mitigate any conscious or unconscious gender bias in the evaluation process. The organisation now reports that the initiative has resulted in a significant improvement in the representation of women researchers across disciplines. The percentage of women awardees rose from 35 per cent in 2013 to 44 per cent in 2014 and to 57 per cent in 2017. The most striking changes were seen in STEM postdoctoral programmes. However, this measure did not resolve the issue of the relatively low number of advanced or large-scale grants being awarded to women. It is assumed that this is a product of the low number of applications

from female applicants, which reflects the number of females in top-level research positions. This institution also notes that it is a challenge to conceal applicants' gender completely, as some element of the application will often 'give away' identifying information, especially when it comes to applicants at advanced career stages. But gender blinding still sends an important signal to researchers and evaluators regarding the importance of eliminating gender bias. In addition to gender blinding applications, a gender balance requirement was introduced in assessment panels. In 2017, 46 per cent of experts on the RFO's panels were female.

1.3 Gender-disaggregated statistics and gender budgeting

One interesting example comes from Israel. Every year, its Council for Higher Education distributes a survey for completion by all universities to collect gender-disaggregated data on students, staff, boards and heads of institutions, etc. The universities must complete the survey in order to receive the council-sponsored budget for their gender equality advisor's activities and to be allowed to submit proposals to the council call for large projects to promote gender equality.

Another example in the consortium comes from Italy and relates to the national

legislation requiring public administrations to produce all staff statistics broken down by gender. In addition, they should provide budgetary analyses that highlight how much and which parts of their budget directly or indirectly address women and men, with the aim of making gender budgeting a consolidated practice in the social reporting activities of administrations.

2. Anchoring gender equality issues at leadership level

2.1 Top-level leadership committees

In 2015, a French participating institution reported 2 kinds of leadership committees within its structure. One was a 'Committee for Equality' established by the Ministry of Higher Education and Research in 2011 to make top-level leaders of institutions of higher education and research more committed, and to make them contribute to the advancement of national gender equality measures. The other committee was the organisation's 'Steering Committee for Gender Equality'. It consists of all key top-level decision-makers and it is chaired by the institution's president.

In 2018, this second Committee has been replaced by an advisory body, namely the Parity-Equality Committee, composed of 9 women and 9 men. 15 members are

appointed by the directors of local scientific institutes, 2 members represent the local Gender equality unit and the last one is the Human Resources Director of the organisation. The committee meets every 2 months and makes recommendations to the CEO, especially regarding the recruitment and advancement of female researchers.

2.2 Training on gender equality

In the 2015 report, a training programme developed by this organisation was described³: Acting for Gender Equality. Targeted data-driven training sessions and workshops for various decision-makers were designed by local Gender equality unit and carried out across the institution since 2011. For example, training sessions were held for the organisation's management and for the institutes' leadership teams, as well as annual events or seminars for affiliated laboratory directors, high-potential future managers, management teams in regional delegations, members of the National Committee for Scientific Research and members of the organisation's Scientific Council. Annual one-day events have also been arranged for new recruits.

The organisation reports that since then, awareness-raising and trainings on gender equality have been increasingly embedded in more general training sessions for leaders.

³ Described in section 2.1

Even though some external experts are sometimes invited, most sessions are run by the gender equality unit itself or its network of contact points at regional and local level. Post-training feedback is being collected, overviewed and saved. According to this organisation, these awareness-raising and capacity-building training sessions have been key drivers for change. They led to increased awareness on gender equality and social stereotypes, better understanding of the issues at stake, proposals for new measures and implementation of measures at leadership level. Thanks to a locally designed new e-learning module, the training sessions will be continued and the intention is to expand the audience to include all the staff. The module can be made available to other research organisations and universities.

In Canada, an agency was created for *'Equity, Diversity and Inclusion'*, federating funding agencies for Natural Sciences and Engineering Research, Health Research and Social Sciences and Humanities Research. Its aim is to promote dedicated cultural change throughout the research community. This 3-headed agency includes gender equality training for leaders. To ensure fair access to research support, the 3 research funding agencies involved provide unconscious bias training as well as Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA+) training to their staff and to governance committee members and reviewers, as appropriate. The GBA+ training

module provides an overview of the analytical process to assess how diverse groups of women, men, non-binary people and other socio-cultural groups may experience policies, programmes and initiatives. The training contributes to a research funding system that is less influenced by unconscious bias and systemic barriers and challenges faced by equity-seeking groups. But at the same time, these trainings can ensure that senior leadership is aware of and addresses equity issues, including those related to women.

3. Recruitment, retention & advancement of women researchers (including leading positions)

3.1 Measures to improve the institutions' gender equality work

In Sweden, around 60 government agencies (including the research funding agencies) and all higher education institutions are instructed by the government to contribute to the country's gender equality goals. 2 gender mainstreaming programmes have been established, one for government agencies in 2014 and one for higher education institutions in 2016. All institutions must gender mainstream their activities and report on their work. Since 2018, after being first supported by the national Secretariat for Gender Research, the programmes' support have been scaled

up to the level of a national agency dedicated to Gender Equality. The institutions are offered support in both the planning and implementation phases of their development work. The programmes also coordinate training efforts, arrange forums for experience sharing, identify and disseminate best practices, and document the results of the institutions' work. A local web portal serves as a platform for disseminating the agencies' results and experiences.

In addition, since 1998, the government has set recruitment goals for each university and university college. The recruitment goals define a minimum percentage of women among grade A professors recruited for a 3- or 4-year period. The goals are reported in the research institutions' annual reports, and the National Agency for Higher Education monitors their fulfilment. Since the question of sanctions or rewards for failure or success in reaching the goals can be sensitive, the government has not introduced these so far. However, goal fulfilment is discussed with the respective universities and university colleges. The initiative seems to have had a positive impact on the share of women among grade A professors, since the increase in the share was slower before the goals were introduced.

3.2 Measures aimed at individual women researchers

An Austrian organisation offers highly qualified female scientists who are working towards a career in universities the chance of 2-stage funding for a total of 6 years. Its career development programme is divided into a programme for post-docs, which aims to support women at the start of their scientific career, and another programme for senior post-docs, which aims to provide the necessary qualifications to apply for professorial positions. In 2021, a new early stage postdoc programme has been launched that offers funding opportunities to female and male junior researchers. 50% of the funds are reserved for female researchers and additional measures will be included to support female researchers to build up their independent career.

In another organisation, various scholarships for women researchers are being offered. A first one is awarded to 4 outstanding female master, PhD and postdoc students in the field of exact sciences and engineering every year by the Ministry of Science and Technology. The ministry also awards scholarships for the advancement of women in hi-tech fields to 10 PhD students and 10 master students every year. They receive the scholarships for a period of 3 years. The goal for both scholarship schemes is to encourage more women to pursue a degree in fields in which they are underrepresented. A third kind of scholarship has been

introduced to help women scientists make connections in industry. The academic-industry scholarships for the advancement of women are funded by the Ministry of Science and Technology and awarded to female master, PhD and postdoc students who conduct research in collaboration with an industry body. The goal is to make it easier for the women to find jobs in the private sector, as well as help them advance to managerial positions.

4. Work environment, work-life balance & dual careers

4.1 General welfare schemes & parental benefits

Some participating countries have quite generous welfare schemes. In Norway, parents, for instance, are entitled to 49 weeks of paid parental leave, of which a minimum of 15 weeks is reserved for the father and a minimum of 15 weeks for the mother. Since 2009, parents in this country are also entitled to childcare facilities for all children aged one or older.

Canadian organisations report having a supportive culture for parental leave. Employment insurance maternity benefits are available for a maximum of 15 weeks. The 15 weeks can start as early as 12 weeks before the due date and can end as late as 17 weeks after the actual date of birth. In addition, employment insurance parental

benefits are offered to parents who are caring for a newborn or a newly adopted child or children. There are 2 options available for receiving parental benefits. Standard parental benefits are paid for a maximum of 35 weeks at a weekly benefit rate of 55 per cent of the claimant's average weekly insurable earnings up to a maximum amount. The 2 parents can share these 35 weeks of benefits. The other option is extended parental benefit, where the parents instead receive payment for a maximum of 61 weeks at a weekly benefit rate of 33 per cent of their average weekly earnings. These weeks can also be shared between the parents.

Another example is the Estonian's grant application procedures: pregnancy and parental leave extends the time frame where limits apply on the time between receiving a scientific degree and applying for a research grant. Similar extensions are allowed in cases of compulsory military service or 'for other serious grounds'. The same extension rules also apply for procedures where bibliometric data is used to evaluate applications or determine the eligibility of an applicant. Finally, it is possible to pause the research grant while on pregnancy, maternity or parental leave. Researchers can take pregnancy and maternity leave of up to 140 calendar days, and parental leave of up to 3 years, of which 435 days are paid. The law does not assume any state or local government organised

childcare facilities before the child is 1.5 years old, and in practice it may be difficult to find a place before the child reaches the age of two or even three. Hence, parents are in a situation where one parent must stay at home relatively long, even though he or she would like to return work earlier. In practice, most mothers stay at home until the child is at least 1.5 years old.

4.2 Anti-harassment measures

In Norway, 26 out of 33 universities and higher education institutions collaborated in a national mapping of harassment and bullying. The local Committee for Gender balance in Research has also worked to put sexual harassment in academia on the national agenda. Since January 2020, sexual harassment cases in this country are handled by the Equality and Anti-Discrimination Tribunal instead of by the courts, to give those subjected to such harassment the same low-threshold services that have been accessible to subjects of all other sorts of discrimination.

In its budget plan for 2018, the government of another participant country committed the equivalent of 4 million euros over 5 years to the local Department of Women and Gender Equality to work with stakeholders to develop a framework to prevent and address gender-based violence at post-secondary institutions (PSIs). At the time of GENDER-NET Plus assessment in 2019, it was

expected to be drafted and to be designed in a way that supports PSIs including universities, colleges and private colleges when developing or updating their GBV plans and policies.

5. Facilitating in-/outgoing mobility for women researcher

5.1 Economic incentives

In Israel, there are scholarships for female PhD graduates who pursue postdoctoral studies abroad. The scholarships aim to cover the expenses of moving a family, and for spousal lack of income. A postdoctoral study abroad is considered a minimum criterion by almost all higher education institutions to be accepted for tenure-track positions. Hence, the goal is to increase the pool of female candidates for such positions by economically facilitating a stay abroad for female researchers with family commitments.

This scholarship is the only reported initiative in GENDER-NET Plus' 2019 assessment that is explicitly aimed at improving mobility, and hence career opportunities, for women.

The Swedish research council's international postdoc programme allows the time frame for applications to be prolonged due to parental leave. The purpose of the grant is to give newly qualified researchers the

opportunity to expand their networks and their competencies by working abroad under secure employment conditions. Normally, the researchers who apply for funding should have completed their doctoral degree no more than 2 years ago, but time spent on parental leave can be deducted. Local statistics show that the success rate for women within the international postdoc programme tends to be more or less the same as that for men. Success rates of men and women are being monitored within different research fields (natural and engineering sciences, medicine and health, humanities and social sciences, educational sciences, and artistic research). If the success rates within one field turn out to be clearly gender imbalanced one year, this must be reported to the organisation's board together with an explanation for the imbalanced numbers, as well as a plan for rectifying the imbalance in future calls.

A Spanish participant organisation adjusts the requirements in its mobility programmes to compensate for career breaks due to maternity leave. One year of career break per child is considered.

5.2 EURAXESS

The European Commission considers researcher mobility of vital importance to the realisation of the ERA and the free movement of knowledge and people across

borders. To achieve a high level of mobility, the EC has introduced measures to fund researcher mobility, such as Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, and policy measures to remove barriers to mobility, including barriers that make it harder for one gender to pursue a research career.

Policy measures to secure researchers' rights are important in this context, such as the *Charter and Code* and the Money follows Researcher initiative. Horizon 2020 expanded the focus on mobility to include mobility between sectors in order to promote research-based innovation.

The 2015 report described the ERA initiative EURAXESS because EURAXESS is also used on a national level by participating countries to increase researcher mobility. It was stated that EURAXESS would address gender in future improvements to services by setting up career development centres and/or support for dual careers, by providing support to researchers' integration in SMEs and in industry in general, by encouraging better integration of researchers into the culture of the host country. Finally, by implementing mentoring programmes for researchers, including a focus on the career progression of female researchers.

It was anticipated that these initiatives would influence national-level programmes and policies as well. The service improvements are currently being implemented, though this process has come further in some countries than in others.

There is no full report of how developed these EURAXESS services are in the various GENDER-NET Plus countries, nor is it known to what extent researchers in the different countries are aware of the EURAXESS services.

All the same, important steps to overcome gendered challenges to mobility and career development are being taken by EURAXESS, although its services do not contain any funding schemes for mobility.