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Gender Equality Policies and Their Implementation in Higher Education

Eleanor Catherine Winslow
Department of Education and Social Policy, Westbridge International University, United Kingdom
Email: eleanor.winslow@westbridge

Abstract
Gender equality in higher education requires more than balanced enrolment or formal commitments to nondiscrimination. It involves equitable access to academic employment, professional development, institutional leadership, research resources, and safe learning environments. This article examines how gender equality policies are translated into university practices and why implementation frequently remains uneven. Drawing on twelve scholarly and institutional sources published before 2023, it presents a narrative review of organizational structures, policy instruments, implementation barriers, and approaches to evaluation. The analysis distinguishes formal equality, which emphasizes consistent treatment, from substantive equality, which addresses unequal conditions and opportunities. It argues that policy effectiveness depends on the relationship between institutional authority, financial resources, administrative responsibility, and everyday academic decisions. Particular attention is given to recruitment, promotion, curriculum development, caregiving arrangements, and accountability. A proposed implementation matrix identifies responsible institutional actors and measurable indicators, while a graph presents published European data on women's representation among doctoral graduates and senior academic staff. The article concludes that sustainable progress requires coordinated structural reform, meaningful participation, and evaluation that examines both numerical representation and the distribution of institutional power.

Keywords: *Gender equality, Higher education, Policy implementation, Gender mainstreaming, Academic leadership, Institutional accountability, Intersectionality, Organizational change*

Introduction

Higher education institutions occupy an influential position in the production of knowledge, preparation of professionals, and formation of public values. Their commitment to gender equality therefore carries significance beyond the boundaries of individual campuses. Universities can promote equal opportunities through teaching, research, and employment, while also reproducing inequalities through their own administrative practices. The central policy challenge is to connect institutional commitments with decisions about recruitment, promotion, funding, workload, and leadership. Increased participation by women should not automatically be interpreted as evidence that these decisions have become equitable. UNESCO IESALC's examination of women in higher education highlights the persistence of inequalities despite advances in educational participation (UNESCO IESALC, 2021). UNESCO Clearinghouse on GCED Understanding implementation requires attention to the practical meaning of a policy. A university may adopt an equality statement while leaving selection procedures, departmental budgets, or complaint mechanisms largely

unchanged. Alternatively, it may establish measurable objectives, assign responsibility, and revise the processes through which opportunities are distributed. These different approaches reveal why the presence of a policy is an incomplete indicator of institutional progress. Equality must be assessed through both procedures and outcomes, including the experiences of individuals whose opportunities are shaped by gender alongside disability, socioeconomic position, ethnicity, and employment status. This article asks how higher education institutions can move from formal commitments toward sustained implementation. It uses a narrative review of twelve sources published before 2023 rather than reporting original fieldwork or claiming a systematic review. The discussion develops five main sections: conceptual foundations, policy design, implementation barriers, monitoring and evaluation, and institutional reform. The table presents an author-developed implementation framework, while the graph uses published European statistics. The article's central argument is that gender equality becomes institutionally meaningful when it influences routine decisions, receives adequate resources, and remains subject to transparent review.

1. Conceptual Foundations of Gender Equality in Higher Education:

Gender equality policy can be understood through the distinction between formal and substantive equality. Formal equality requires that individuals encounter consistent rules and protection against discriminatory treatment. Substantive equality asks whether those rules operate under conditions that provide comparable opportunities. For example, an identical publication requirement may appear fair while overlooking differences in research time, access to laboratories, or periods of caregiving leave. Substantive equality therefore requires institutions to examine how opportunities are created and how apparently neutral criteria affect different groups. Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organizations provides a conceptual foundation for this examination. It directs attention to the ways organizational hierarchies, job expectations, and interactions can embed assumptions about gender. Applied to higher education, this perspective encourages scrutiny of the ideal academic worker: someone presumed to possess uninterrupted availability, geographic mobility, and considerable freedom from responsibilities outside employment. The article uses this framework to question whether academic expectations reflect the conditions necessary for good scholarship or a narrower model of professional life. Gender mainstreaming extends this analysis across institutional functions. Equality becomes a consideration in staffing, budgeting, teaching, research management, and student services. Its practical value depends on whether it changes decision-making authority and resource allocation. Benschop and Verloo (2006) question whether mainstreaming can overcome the gendered character of organizations, indicating that incorporating equality language into existing structures does not necessarily transform those structures. Universities consequently need to examine the institutional arrangements through which mainstreaming is implemented. tandfonline.com Policy language also shapes institutional priorities. Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo (2009) examine how the meaning of gender equality changes through policy discourse. In a university, equality may be framed primarily as balanced representation, equal treatment, protection from harassment, or redistribution of opportunities. These objectives can complement one another, but each requires different actions and evidence. An institution should therefore state what its policy seeks to change and why particular measures are appropriate. Clear objectives make it possible to distinguish broad endorsement from an actionable commitment. routledge.com An intersectional approach strengthens this framework by avoiding the assumption that all women encounter the same institutional conditions. A permanent professor, a doctoral researcher, and a contracted administrator may possess very different levels of security and influence. Policy design should recognize these differences without treating any group as internally uniform. This article proposes that equality assessments examine gender alongside relevant employment and social characteristics, using voluntary disclosure and privacy

protections. Such an approach supports more precise diagnosis while reducing the risk that aggregate improvements conceal persistent disadvantage.

2. Policy Design and Institutional Implementation Mechanisms:

Effective policy design begins with a diagnosis of institutional conditions. Universities need to identify where inequalities occur, which decisions contribute to them, and which organizational units can make changes. A general promise to improve women's participation offers limited guidance unless it is connected to specific processes. Recruitment policy, for example, should address advertisement, eligibility, shortlisting, assessment, and appointment. Promotion policy should address the interpretation of career interruptions, allocation of research opportunities, and recognition of different forms of academic contribution. Timmers, Willemsen, and Tijdens (2010) examined gender equality measures across fourteen Dutch universities and developed a framework for understanding different policy approaches. Their work supports consideration of measures aimed at individual development, organizational practices, and institutional culture. This article proposes combining these approaches: professional development can assist individuals, while procedural reform addresses the conditions under which their capabilities are evaluated. Neither training nor structural change should be assessed solely through the number of activities completed. Springer Nature Link Implementation also requires an explicit distribution of responsibility. Senior leadership should authorize objectives and resources; administrative units should establish consistent procedures; departments should apply them in local decisions. Equality specialists can provide expertise, but implementation should not depend entirely on a small office with limited authority. The institution should identify who can approve changes, who must report progress, and who will respond when an agreed action remains incomplete. Responsibility becomes credible when it is linked to time, expertise, and a realistic budget. The following table translates these principles into an institutional framework. It is a proposed analytical tool rather than a report of outcomes observed at a particular university.

Table 1 Proposed framework for implementing gender equality policies

Policy area	Recommended implementation action	Responsible institutional actors	Suggested monitoring indicator
Recruitment	Establish criteria before reviewing applications and document decisions	Human resources and selection committees	Shortlisting and appointment rates by gender and discipline
Promotion	Publish criteria and assess career interruptions consistently	Promotion committees and academic leadership	Application, success, and time-to-promotion patterns
Workload	Review teaching, supervision, service, and administrative assignments	Department heads and workload committees	Distribution of assigned duties and protected research time
Leadership	Provide fair access to development, sponsorship, and nominations	Governing bodies and senior management	Representation among eligible candidates, nominees, and appointees
Caregiving support	Provide leave, flexible arrangements, and support for return to work	Human resources and departmental management	Uptake, return rates, and subsequent career progression

Curriculum	Review teaching materials, assessment, and relevant gender perspectives	Programme teams and quality assurance units	Documented curricular changes and student feedback
Safety and reporting	Provide accessible reporting, support, and fair procedures	Student services and designated investigation units	Accessibility, response times, and confidence in reporting
Accountability	Establish a budget, review timetable, and corrective actions	Executive leadership and equality committees	Completion of agreed actions and documented responses to gaps

A policy should also explain how people can contribute to its revision. Staff and students can identify implementation problems that administrative records may overlook, such as inaccessible reporting systems or inconsistent departmental interpretations. Consultation should include people outside permanent academic employment, whose dependence on supervisors or contract renewal may limit their ability to raise concerns. Participation becomes meaningful when institutions explain how feedback has influenced decisions and provide accessible reasons when proposals cannot be adopted.

3. Organizational Culture and Barriers to Implementation:

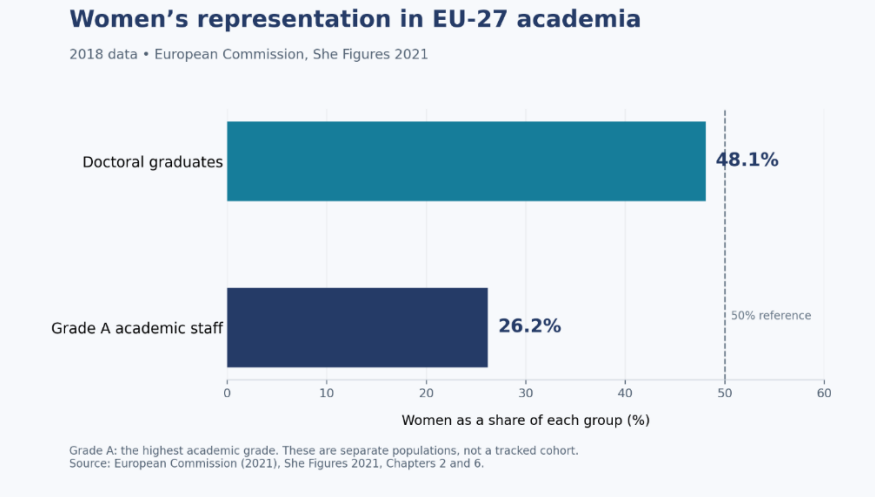
Formal procedures operate within organizational cultures. Universities may endorse equality while continuing to reward practices that restrict access to influence. Informal recommendations, professional networks, and assumptions about academic suitability can shape decisions before a formal selection process begins. Van den Brink, Benschop, and Jansen (2010) found limitations in transparency and accountability within Dutch professorial recruitment. Their analysis shows why published protocols alone cannot establish that selection practices are equitable. Implementation must examine how criteria are interpreted and how exceptions are justified. journals.sagepub.com Experimental evidence also illustrates the importance of evaluation practices. Moss-Racusin and colleagues (2012) found that science faculty assessed otherwise identical application materials differently when those materials carried a male or female student name. The study concerned a particular application scenario and should not be treated as a measurement of all university decisions. Nevertheless, it demonstrates that apparently merit-based assessment can be affected by gendered judgments. An institutional response should therefore include clearly specified criteria, documented reasoning, and review of decisions across selection stages. PNAS Caregiving and career expectations create another implementation challenge. Bailyn (2003), drawing on lessons from MIT, examines tensions between conventional academic careers and responsibilities beyond work. Her analysis raises questions about whether professional advancement depends on a model of uninterrupted commitment that many scholars cannot sustain. Universities should consider how leave, flexible arrangements, and return-to-work support interact with promotion criteria. A benefit has limited practical value if using it produces an implicit penalty in assessments of ambition or commitment. Wiley Online Library Resistance can also affect teaching. Verge, Ferrer-Fons, and González (2018) examine resistance to incorporating gender into higher education curricula. Their work suggests that curricular reform encounters both explicit objections and informal academic rules. This article proposes responding through disciplinary engagement, practical teaching resources, and adequate preparation time. Academic staff should be able to discuss how gender is relevant to their subject rather than receiving only a general instruction to revise a course. Institutions should distinguish reasoned disciplinary questions from repeated refusal to engage with an approved policy objective. journals.sagepub.com Finally, equality work may become an organizational symbol rather than a source of change. Ahmed's (2012) study of diversity work in institutional life, particularly concerning racism, offers a useful warning about the distance

between institutional claims and practitioners' experiences. Its relevance here is conceptual: a published commitment can coexist with limited authority to address the problems it names. Gender equality initiatives should consequently be examined through their effects on institutional decisions, including whether staff can challenge inconsistent practices and obtain a reasoned response. dukeupress.edu

4. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Evidence of Unequal Representation:

Monitoring should begin with a distinction between activities, procedural changes, and outcomes. Activities include training sessions and consultations. Procedural changes include revised criteria, new reporting arrangements, or budget allocations. Outcomes concern access, progression, security, and influence. These forms of evidence answer different questions. A completed training programme confirms that an activity occurred; it does not establish that appointment decisions changed. Similarly, improved representation may be encouraging without revealing which intervention contributed to it. Published European data illustrate why monitoring should cover different academic positions. The European Commission's *She Figures 2021* reports that women represented 48.1% of doctoral graduates and 26.2% of Grade A academic staff in the EU-27 in 2018. Grade A denotes the highest academic grade and generally corresponds to full professorship. Figure 1 presents these two proportions. They describe separate populations in the same reference year and do not track the progression of an individual cohort. kifinfo.no

Women's representation among doctoral graduates and Grade A academic staff in the EU-27, 2018



The difference between the two proportions is **21.9 percentage points**. This comparison indicates that near-balanced doctoral graduation can coexist with substantially lower representation in senior academic positions. It cannot independently explain the difference or establish the effectiveness of a particular equality policy. Career timing, disciplinary composition, appointment patterns, and historical conditions require further investigation. Its policy value lies in directing attention to the distribution of representation across academic levels rather than relying on a single institution-wide percentage. At institutional level, analysis should follow the decisions that shape academic careers. Recruitment monitoring can distinguish application, shortlisting, offer, and acceptance rates. Promotion monitoring should distinguish eligibility, application, and success, since unequal outcomes may arise before a committee evaluates a dossier. Workload analysis can examine access to research time alongside teaching and service duties. Where numbers permit, these measures should be considered by department and employment category, because institution-wide averages may conceal local differences. Quantitative indicators should be complemented by interviews, confidential surveys, and review of institutional procedures. These methods can help explain why eligible staff do not apply for advancement, why flexible arrangements are avoided, or why

reporting systems are distrusted. Data collection should minimize unnecessary disclosure and protect small groups from identification. Evaluation should also include a documented response: who will investigate an observed gap, what action is proposed, and when its effects will be reviewed. Evidence becomes useful when it informs a decision rather than merely populating an annual report.

5. Institutional Reform and Sustainable Policy Implementation:

Sustainable implementation requires equality objectives to become part of institutional planning. This article proposes a recurring cycle of diagnosis, action, review, and revision. During diagnosis, universities identify priority problems and assess the available evidence. During action, they assign responsibility and provide resources. During review, they examine whether procedures were followed and whether outcomes changed. During revision, they adjust interventions in response to findings. This cycle allows institutions to maintain direction while recognizing that an initially plausible measure may prove insufficient. Academic leadership is central because senior decision-makers influence the definition of achievement and the allocation of opportunities. Morley (2013) examines women's relationship to leadership and the rules through which leadership is recognized in higher education. Her analysis encourages scrutiny of assumptions about who appears suitable for authority. This article proposes that leadership development should therefore be accompanied by fair access to nominations, transparent appointment criteria, and review of how leadership contributions are recognized. Development opportunities cannot compensate fully for an appointment process that remains inaccessible. Get Access Recruitment and promotion reform should focus on consistency and justification. Committees should agree on criteria before examining candidates, document material departures from procedures, and evaluate achievements in their relevant professional context. Institutions can review whether temporary appointments, research resources, and acting leadership positions provide equitable access to future advancement. These measures aim to improve the quality and fairness of decisions. Any targeted intervention should have a clear rationale, an appropriate institutional basis, and an evaluation plan. Workload reform offers a further practical route. Universities should make visible the distribution of teaching, supervision, pastoral support, committee service, and administration. Duties that sustain the institution should receive appropriate recognition, while staff should retain realistic opportunities to undertake work required for promotion. Equality responsibilities should have allocated time and institutional support. Asking individuals to deliver extensive reform alongside an unchanged workload can weaken implementation and create another form of unrecognized labour. Sustainability also depends on adaptation to context. Institutions differ in resources, disciplinary composition, governance arrangements, and national settings. A comprehensive university may require different interventions from a specialist institution or a small teaching college. This article recommends retaining common principles—clear responsibility, participation, fair procedures, and review—while tailoring actions to local evidence. Reform should remain open to criticism and revision. The strongest indication of institutional commitment is a willingness to change practices when credible evidence shows that existing arrangements distribute opportunities unequally.

Summary

Gender equality policies in higher education acquire practical significance through the decisions they influence. Formal endorsement establishes an institutional position, but implementation requires clear objectives, assigned responsibility, financial support, and procedures that staff and students can use. This article has examined those requirements through a narrative review of twelve sources published before 2023. It has distinguished equal treatment from the substantive conditions that allow people to participate, progress, and exercise institutional influence. The analysis identifies several connected areas for action: recruitment, promotion, leadership access, workload allocation, caregiving support, curriculum development, and campus safety. Each

requires attention to both written procedures and informal organizational practices. Transparent criteria are valuable, but they must be applied consistently and supported by documented reasoning. Professional development is useful, but it should accompany changes to the conditions under which opportunities are awarded. The implementation table provides a proposed means of connecting policy objectives with responsible actors and observable indicators. The graph demonstrates that women's participation among doctoral graduates can coexist with considerably lower representation in the highest academic grade. These European figures describe an unequal distribution across academic populations; they do not establish its causes or measure the impact of an individual policy. The article recommends a continuing cycle of diagnosis, implementation, evaluation, and revision. Numerical monitoring should be combined with qualitative evidence, privacy protections, and participation from groups with differing levels of institutional security. Effective implementation ultimately requires universities to assess whether their practices provide equitable access to resources, recognition, advancement, and decision-making. Sustained progress depends on making that assessment part of ordinary institutional governance.

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