LeTSGEPs Leading Towards Sustainable Gender Equality Plans in research performing organisations

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Final Process Monitoring Report

Individual and Institutional Factors for Successful Implementation of Gender Equality Plans

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	
GB	Gender Budgeting
GE	Gender Equality
GEP	Gender Equality Plan
RPO	Research Performing Organisation

Introduction

LeTSGEPs, or 'Leading Towards Sustainable Gender Equality Plans in Research Institutions', was a project funded by the European Commission's Horizon 2020 programme. It started in 2020 and ran for four years and aimed to address gender imbalances in science and research by promoting gender equality through the development and implementation of Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) and the use of Gender Budgeting (GB). GEPs are considered catalysts for institutional change towards gender equality in Research Performing Organizations (RPOs). The LeTSGEPs project concentrated on GEPs, which employ gender as a crucial factor in policy development and as a tool for monitoring gender equality. It also utilised GB, a technique that integrates a gender perspective into all budgeting stages to enhance gender equality.

LeTSGEPs involved a consortium of universities and research centres led by the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia (Italy), with other partners including Max-Planck-Gesellschaft (Germany), University of Messina (Italy), the Mathematical Institute of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (Serbia), CY Cergy University, Paris (France), University of Tirana (Albania), Institut de Ciències del Mar (Spain), and RWTH Aachen University (Germany).

The monitoring approach of LeTSGEPs was comprehensive, encompassing not only progress and compliance tracking but also the nuanced areas of influence and change within the RPOs. The methodology, which is not detailed in this report, was based on a mixed-methods approach that aimed to capture the nature and impact of GEP implementation at the institutional and individual levels.

An important aspect of this report is its focus on the individual and institutional supporting factors that are critical to the effective implementation of GEPs. These findings are not only fundamental to the accomplishments of implementing RPOs in LeTSGEPs but are also invaluable to other research organisations wishing to commence similar efforts. The monitoring work carried out during the four years of the project forms the basis for these findings.

This publication is complementary to the policy briefs 1, 2 and 3 published within the LeTSGEPs and the final output of the project, the Handbook for sustainable GEPs.

The LeTSGEPs project

The LeTSGEPs project, funded under the European Commission's Horizon 2020 programme, was a direct response to the SwafS-19-2018-2019 call, which aimed to promote gender equality in the research landscape. This call was an integral part of the European Commission's strategy to strengthen the European Research Area (ERA), recognising gender equality not only as a fundamental right but also as a necessary condition for research excellence and societal relevance[1].

At the core of LeTSGEPs was its alignment with the ERA's objectives to foster gender equality in research and innovation. The project addressed several key areas: reducing gender imbalances in research institutions, promoting women's career progression, and integrating the gender dimension into research content and teaching. By focusing on these areas, LeTSGEPs aimed to contribute significantly to the ERA's broader goal of creating a more inclusive, innovative, and reflective research environment across Europe.

The LeTSGEPs project has adopted a holistic methodology, combining the development and implementation of GEPs with a robust framework for GB, which involves gender-sensitive analysis of budgets throughout the budgetary process in order to promote gender equality. This combined approach, integrating both GEPs and GB, is based on the belief that budgets reflect an institution's real policy commitments and are crucial to the sustainability of gender equality initiatives. The project's monitoring and evaluation framework played a key role in assessing the effectiveness and adaptability of the GEPs, ensuring that they could evolve in response to the dynamic needs of the participating institutions. With a consortium made up of a diverse range of European universities and research organisations, each brought distinctive insights and expertise to the table, allowing for the bespoke design of GEPs that were as unique as the institutions themselves.

A strong emphasis was placed also on capacity building through specifically developed training materials. Training sessions were integral components, aimed at equipping the participating RPOs and their staff members involved with the tools and knowledge necessary to implement effective GEPs. To a certain extent, these activities fostered also the building of a community of practice, enabling institutions to learn from each other's experiences and challenges.

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[1] See: A Reinforced European Research Area Partnership for Excellence and Growth [25.1.2024]

LeTSGEPs not only sought to influence the institutions directly involved in the project but also aimed to have a broader impact nationally and on a European level. By developing training material, guidelines, and policy recommendations, the project aimed to inform and influence gender equality strategies beyond its consortium. This approach was crucial in ensuring the sustainability and long-term impact of the project's efforts. A major outcome to be mentioned here is the "Handbook on Sustainable GEPs", which was published by the consortium members.

Training material on GB and GEPs, available in six languages, public reports and the handbook as a knowledge resource can be retrieved on the project website: www.letsgeps.eu

Gender Equality Plans

A GEP serves as a foundational framework and operational roadmap for organisations within various sectors to advance and embed gender equality throughout their operational practices and organisational culture.

The development of the plan begins with a comprehensive assessment of the organisation's current situation concerning gender equality. This may include reviewing gender representation at different levels, assessing pay structures for inequality, examining gender distribution in leadership roles, and addressing instances of gender discrimination or harassment. Based on this analysis, the organisation sets precise and quantifiable targets to address the challenges identified. A GEP then outlines specific, pragmatic actions to achieve these goals. These could include, for example, changing recruitment and promotion practices to promote gender balance, providing gender sensitivity and anti-discrimination training, and establishing policies to support better work-life balance.

In order to move from paper to practice, GEPs require substantial support in terms of financial resources, human resources and time allocation. The provision of a dedicated budget is particularly critical, as it underlines the recognition of gender equality work as a professional and valued effort, rather than relegating it to the category of 'care work' that might be expected to be undertaken voluntarily. Adequate funding serves as a powerful statement, confirming that gender equality work is as critical and worthy of investment as any other operational area within the organisation. With this financial commitment, along with the necessary human resources and time, gender equality initiatives are more likely to be vigorously pursued and woven into the

fabric of the institution. Such holistic support is essential to ensure that GEPs move beyond theory to become an active and integral part of the organisation's structure and culture.

An ongoing cycle of monitoring and evaluation of these initiatives is key to measuring their impact and effectiveness and involves collecting and analysing data, observing emerging trends and refining the plan to better meet the organisation's evolving needs and goals. Regular and open communication about the progress and achievements of the GEP and gender equality efforts facilitates the accountability of the organisation.

A successful organisational gender equality policy and a GEP require more than a superficial nod from an organisation's leadership; a profound commitment to embed gender equality in the institution's culture and to secure the commitment of the entire organisational community is crucial.

At its core, a GEP is a holistic and dynamic strategy aimed at eliminating gender inequalities and fostering an organisational culture that is both inclusive and equitable. It is an iterative and evolving process, underpinned by a strong commitment to creating a workplace environment where equality is one mission statement.

GEPs as Requirement in Horizon Europe

Horizon Europe, the EU's main funding programme for research and innovation from 2021-2027, has placed a strong emphasis on GEPs as a crucial element for research organisations and higher education institutions wishing to participate in the programme[2]. Within Horizon Europe, having a GEP is a mandatory eligibility criterion for public bodies, research organisations and higher education institutions to receive funding. The GEPs developed and implemented by the RPOs in LeTSGEPs were aligned with the content and process requirements set up by the EU Commission.

The GEPs of applicants are expected to be comprehensive and should cover five key areas: work-life balance and organizational culture, gender balance in leadership and decision-making, gender equality in recruitment and career progression, integration of the gender dimension in research and innovation content, and measures against gender-based violence, including sexual harassment.

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[2] See General Annexes to Horizon Europe 2021-2022 work programme [25.1.2024]

Organisations are required to implement GEPs with dedicated resources and efforts, and they must be publicly available documents. These plans should not be mere statements of intent but active, in-depth strategies with concrete steps and measurable targets. GEPs are expected to be living documents, subject to regular reviews and updates to reflect progress, new insights, or changes in the organisation.

The European Commission provides guidelines and examples of GEPs to assist organisations in developing and implementing their plans:

☐ [Horizon Europe Guidance on Gender Equality Plans](#)

Through the integration of GEPs into the Horizon Europe programme, the EU aims to promote structural change in research organisations and universities, encouraging them to actively pursue gender equality both within their institutions and through the research and innovation content they produce.

Further resources on GEPs, their design, implementation and monitoring:

☐ [LeTSGEPs Handbook on Sustainable GEPs](#)
☐ [Gender Equality in Academia and Research (GEAR)](#) ☐
[tool Report on Structural Change in Research](#)
[Institutions](#)

Supporting Factors for Implementing GEPs in RPOs

The dual focus on institutional and individual factors plays a key role in pursuing the implementation of the GEP, with individuals taking on the role of change agents for gender equality. This chapter aims to shed light on the support structures and personal dynamics that underpin the successful realisation of gender equality actions in RPOs. The analysis presented herein takes into account a spectrum of monitoring tools applied in the project that transcend traditional metrics, capturing not just quantitative outcomes but also the qualitative engagement of those at the heart of the process. Monitoring extends to the active participation and backing of the project team, with monitoring persons positioned as "critical friends"[3]. This designation is more than a title; it represents a philosophy that fosters a trusting and open relationship between the evaluators and the project team - an essential prerequisite for self-reflective monitoring. The supportive yet objective attitude of the evaluators

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[3] For the critical friend approach see: Balthasar, A. (2011). Critical friend approach: policy evaluation between methodological soundness, practical relevance, and transparency of the evaluation process. German Policy Studies, 7(3), 187+.

fosters a culture of self-reflection and accountability.

Based on the evaluation and experience of RPOs implementing GEPs involved in LeTSGEPs, the following considerations are made.

Institutional Supporting Factors

Implementing gender equality in academic and science institutions is a complex process that requires a multifaceted approach, encompassing a range of institutional success factors.

The establishment of **clear and comprehensive policies** is fundamental to promoting gender equality within organisations, particularly in order to achieve specific goals such as increasing the representation of women in senior positions and ensuring gender parity in recruitment practices. However, the mere existence of these policies is not enough. A major challenge is their enforcement. Weak or poorly enforced gender equality policies can significantly hinder progress. The effectiveness of these policies often depends on how well they are implemented, monitored and enforced. Without robust mechanisms to ensure that these policies are actively upheld and integrated into everyday practice, their impact will remain limited. Therefore, it's not just about creating policies, but also about establishing a strong framework for their effective implementation and enforcement. A strong and visible **leadership commitment** from the top of an organisation is crucial to these efforts. Managers must not only actively promote the values of equality, but also ensure that these values are deeply integrated into the organisational culture and daily operations, including their own.

Resistance to change is a significant barrier in organisations when it comes to altering traditional structures and practices, which can impede the progress of fostering a gender-inclusive culture. This resistance often stems from a deeply ingrained adherence to the status quo, making the transformation towards more gender-equitable practices challenging. Furthermore, the effectiveness of these changes is heavily dependent on the commitment from leadership. When senior management is not fully committed to promoting and supporting gender inclusivity, it can severely hinder the implementation of supportive policies and practices. Such a lack of leadership endorsement can lead to a half-hearted adoption of gender equality measures, reducing their impact and sustainability within the organisation. Therefore, overcoming organisational resistance and securing a strong commitment from leadership are crucial for the successful implementation and enduring effectiveness of gender-inclusive initiatives.

Access to and availability of **gender-disaggregated data** is a cornerstone for the effective development and implementation of a GEP. This type of data enables

organisations to gain a nuanced understanding of the gender dynamics within their structures, providing key insights into areas such as representation, pay gaps and career progression. Such detailed information is essential for identifying specific gender equality challenges and opportunities. However, in cases where existing data does not sufficiently capture these nuances, the **development and application of specific indicators** is required. By using gender-sensitive data and tailored indicators, organisations can ensure that their GEPs are grounded in reality, effectively aligned and able to drive meaningful change in gender dynamics in the workplace. Effective training and awareness programs are essential in overcoming the challenges of collecting and handling gender data within organisations. These programs play a crucial role in educating staff, particularly in administrative and human resource roles, about the importance of gender data. By enhancing understanding and skills, such initiatives address potential resistance from staff who might view data collection as an additional burden. This approach not only ensures accurate and sensitive handling of gender-related data but also fosters a supportive environment for gender equality measures, streamlining the data collection process as part of regular workflows.

To design an **inclusive GEP** that transcends various status groups within an organisation, including differences in age, career level, and other dimensions of diversity, the establishment of a GEP Working Group can be instrumental. By bringing together individuals from different age groups, career stages, and backgrounds, the working group can ensure that a wide range of perspectives and experiences are considered in the development of the GEP. This diversity within the working group enables the identification and **addressing of a broad spectrum of gender-related issues**, ensuring that the plan is not only comprehensive but also sensitive to the unique challenges faced by different groups. By incorporating this wide range of insights and experiences, the working group can develop a truly inclusive plan with respective targeted measures that reflects the needs and aspirations of the organisational community. To support these efforts it is also useful to assess organisational members' perceptions of the existing workplace culture; here online surveys have proven to be an appropriate means of reaching a large proportion of the workforce. In addition, group discussions or workshops can help to discuss and analyse specific aspects with those concerned and to gain a deeper understanding of relevant issues and problems related to inequality.

Establishing **clear, specific, achievable, and measurable objectives within a GEP** is fundamental to its success. These well-defined goals provide a focused direction for the GEP and create a framework against which progress can be systematically tracked. This clarity in objectives ensures that the plan is not only targeted but also effective in addressing the specific gender equality issues pertinent to the organisation. However, while these objectives need to be clear and measurable, it is

also important to maintain a certain degree of flexibility within the plan, especially for newcomer organisations. Adaptability allows the GEP to respond to evolving circumstances and emerging insights. The gender equality landscape within an organisation can shift due to various factors, including policy changes, shifts in organisational culture, or broader societal changes. Therefore, having the ability to adjust goals and strategies in response to these dynamics ensures that the GEP remains relevant, effective, and aligned with the current needs and challenges of the organisation. This balance between clear, measurable objectives and the flexibility to adapt is essential for the GEP to be both effective in the short term and sustainable in the long term.

The above-mentioned availability of data is further crucial in setting clear objectives and measurable goals within a GEP. Regularly collecting and analysing gender-disaggregated data helps in ***monitoring progress*** and pinpointing areas that require improvement. The data serves as the basis for effectively assessing the progress and impact of the GEP. If clear, specific, achievable and measurable targets are set in the GEP, gender-disaggregated data will provide the necessary metrics for tracking these targets. Thus, data collection and analysis is critical to identifying areas that require particular attention and improvement, and ensures that efforts are targeted where they are most needed. In addition, the insights gained from gender-disaggregated data are central to informed decision-making. It enables decision-makers and the persons in charge of the GEP design to base their strategies on concrete evidence, leading to more targeted and effective initiatives under the GEP. This data-driven approach also provides a mechanism for ***ongoing evaluation*** of the GEP, allowing the organisation to adapt and refine its strategies in response to changing conditions or new insights.

In addition, target-group-specific ***training and awareness-raising programmes***, ideally mandatory, are a key element in the successful implementation of gender policy change. These programmes should be offered on a regular basis, not only to existing staff but also to inform new members to ensure continuous training and awareness. They aim, for example, to improve the understanding of gender bias and stereotypes among all staff and to disseminate knowledge about gender equality and the gender dimension in research. By tailoring these programmes to the needs of different groups within the organisation, they play a crucial role in fostering an inclusive and supportive environment for all genders. Integrating such educational initiatives as a regular and mandatory part of staff development ensures that the pursuit of gender equality is not only a strategic and management matter, but also an inclusive, organisation-wide educational concern.

It can also be beneficial to bring in **external experts**, either to develop a GEP in general, if the necessary knowledge is not available within the organisation, or for specific equality policy issues, such as GB. These experts often have specialised knowledge and experience in the areas of equality, diversity and inclusion, which can be helpful in introducing new knowledge and good practice. Their objective perspective is particularly valuable as it provides an unbiased view that can help identify areas of bias or omission within the organisation's existing framework. By tailoring strategies to the particular needs and context of the organisation, these experts can adapt successful models to address specific challenges, thereby increasing the effectiveness of gender equality initiatives. In addition, their involvement can lend credibility to these initiatives and signal a serious commitment to internal and external stakeholders.

While external experts can make valuable contributions in the initial phase of gender equality policy efforts by scientific organisations, **internal capacity building** emerges as a critical element, essential for the institutionalisation of GB and a GEP. The establishment of a specialised unit or committee that includes a range of departmental representatives from within the RPO is crucial. This structure not only ensures that GB and GEP are deeply embedded in the organisational cycle, but also underlines the importance of developing and nurturing internal expertise and knowledge.

In conclusion, the successful implementation of GEPs in academic and scientific institutions requires a comprehensive approach. This includes strong leadership, effective policy enforcement, data-driven strategies, inclusive working groups, and continuous training and awareness efforts. These elements combined create a conducive environment for gender equality, driving meaningful and sustainable change within the organisation.

Individual Supporting Factors

A change agent for gender equality in RPOs is typically an individual or group who actively drives and facilitates the implementation of gender equality initiatives, influencing and inspiring systemic and cultural change within the organization. The role as an agent of change in relation to gender equality in public organisations can be particularly challenging in the absence or underdevelopment of gender equality policies, as it often involves developing new strategies and overcoming entrenched institutional norms and prejudices. Often, these change agents gain visibility for their commitment to gender equality, which is sometimes met with mixed reactions from colleagues, ranging from support to scepticism or resistance.

Capacity building for change agents is key in fostering gender equality within organisations as it equips them with the necessary skills, knowledge, and tools to

effectively drive and sustain transformative initiatives and cultural shifts. Change agents need a deep understanding of gender issues, encompassing knowledge of the specific challenges and barriers to gender equality within the research context. This expertise is critical as it enables change agents to identify key areas for action and develop informed, context-specific strategies that are both targeted and relevant to their organisation's unique needs. In this case also continuous learning and improvement are essential. Change agents must be open to new ideas, willing to learn from experiences, and continually seek ways to enhance the effectiveness of GEP implementation.

Empathy and cultural sensitivity are foundational for understanding and addressing the varied perspectives and needs within an organisation, playing a crucial role in fostering an inclusive approach to gender equality. Recognizing and valuing the diversity within is essential for creating a GEP that resonates with all members. Alongside this, possessing an in-depth knowledge of the organisation's culture is vital for change agents. It enables them to effectively tailor their strategies and interventions, taking into account the specific dynamics, values, and norms of their RPO.

Continuous and effective communication in the implementation of equality plans is also crucial. Successes and difficulties in implementation need to be visibly communicated to maintain transparency and promote collective understanding.

Change agents require not only ***communication skills*** to articulate clearly and persuasively the meaning, objectives, and benefits of equality plans to a wide range of stakeholders, but also ***negotiation skills*** to effectively resolve conflicts, align differing viewpoints, and achieve consensus among these groups. This includes tailoring messages to resonate with different groups within the institution, from faculty and researchers to administrators and management. Effective communication and negotiation are critical to ensuring a broad base of understanding and support, as they help to align the institution's diverse interests and perspectives with the goals of the GEP. By continuously engaging with stakeholders, celebrating successes, openly addressing challenges, and tailoring the communication and negotiation strategies to different audiences, change agents can foster a more inclusive and participatory approach, which is essential for the successful and sustainable implementation of equality initiatives in this complex environment.

In addition to the key role of effective communication, the concept of allyship becomes particularly important in challenging situations. ***Networking and relationship building*** are essential components of a change agent's toolkit. By building strong connections both within their own organisation and with external entities, change agents can create a supportive community that shares best

practices, provides

mutual empowerment and learns from collective experiences. These networks are not only platforms for exchange, but are crucial in fostering a sense of allyship. In difficult times, when there is resistance or obstacles to gender equality initiatives, having allies can be a source of strength and resourcefulness. Allies can offer different perspectives, share strategies that have worked in similar situations and provide moral support. This collaborative approach, underpinned by strong relationships and allyship, is invaluable in advancing the gender equality agenda, making it a shared goal rather than a solitary pursuit, and increasing the impact of initiatives in complex and dynamic institutional environments.

In the dynamic and complex environments of universities and research organisations, adaptability and problem-solving skills play a key role for change agents implementing GEPs. These environments, characterised by different cultures and complicated hierarchies, often pose unique challenges for GEP implementation. Change agents need to be ***flexible and innovative*** in developing solutions, as they may encounter unforeseen problems ranging from institutional resistance to political constraints. Their ability to adapt strategies to these specific contexts while finding creative solutions is essential to the success of gender equality initiatives.

Similarly, ***persistence and resilience*** are important qualities for change agents, as the path to institutional change in these environments is often slow and fraught with obstacles. Setbacks, whether in the form of delayed implementation of policies, varying stakeholder commitment or changing organisational priorities, are not uncommon. In such cases, change agents must demonstrate unwavering commitment and perseverance. Continued advocacy for gender equality, a focus on long-term goals and a continuous push for progress, even in the face of slow and incremental change, are essential for meaningful and lasting change in these institutions.

Senior management support is critical to the success of change agents in academia and research institutions, particularly when implementing a GEP, as they typically lack formal authority despite their commitment and expertise in driving gender equality initiatives. Leadership endorsement provides legitimacy and influence, which is essential in environments that are often dominated by hierarchical norms. Through their support, change agents gain access to critical resources, including funding and staff, which are essential for effective GEP implementation. In addition, executive involvement is key to overcoming institutional resistance, embedding gender equality as a strategic priority and fostering a supportive organisational culture. This top-level support not only amplifies the efforts of change agents, but also ensures the sustainability and effectiveness of gender equality initiatives within the institution.

To summarise, the role of a change agent for the implementation of a GEP within an

RPO is complex and requires a combination of knowledge, skills and personal characteristics. It involves not only a deep understanding of gender issues, but also the ability to communicate effectively, lead, influence, collaborate and adapt strategies to the unique context of the organisation. With these skills, change agents can effectively drive the adoption and successful implementation of GEPs, leading to more inclusive and equitable research environments.

Recommendations

The following recommendations can be offered to newcomers in the field of gender equality in science and research based on insights derived from LeTSGEPs partners' experiences with GEP implementation:

- ☐ Gender equality should be integrated throughout institutional policies and practices. It is important to take deliberate steps to identify and address gender gaps and inequalities, tailoring actions to the specific needs and priorities of women in the institution. Therefore aim for enduring change by embedding gender equality deeply within the institutional culture, ensuring that it remains a permanent and valued aspect of the organisation.
- ☐ It is important to create an organisational culture that actively supports gender equality, led by encouragement and facilitation from the institution's leadership. To reinforce this culture, it is important to encourage collaboration among all stakeholders.
- ☐ Leadership needs to demonstrate a firm commitment to gender-specific policies, as this shows the institution's commitment to promoting an equitable and inclusive educational environment both internally and externally.
- ☐ GEPs must be supported with adequate long-term resources, including funding and staff, and clear responsibilities for GEP-related tasks must be defined to ensure effective implementation.
- ☐ It is recommended to develop a structured schedule for GEP implementation, along with a robust monitoring and evaluation system that employs gender-sensitive indicators to measure progress and impact objectively.
- ☐ It is recommended to embrace GB as an integral component of the GEP from the outset. GB offers a critical lens through which to view budget allocations, ensuring that gender equality objectives are not only set but also financially supported and strategically implemented. Begin with a thorough analysis of existing budget practices and policies through a gender perspective to identify areas for intervention.

By prioritizing GB in the early stages of GEP development, institutions set a strong foundation for sustainable gender equality advancements.

☐ To effectively implement GEPs, it's essential to focus on capacity building for both change agents and budgetary staff. This involves providing comprehensive training that imparts essential knowledge and skills for promoting gender equality within the institution. Training should cover gender equality principles, GEP implementation strategies, and the complexities of gender dynamics. Additionally, specialised training for budgetary staff is crucial to integrate gender considerations in financial decision-making. This dual approach ensures a well-rounded and informed commitment to institutional gender equity.

☐ For monitoring purposes it is essential to define clear output and outcome indicators for the GEP with the aim to meet or exceed them. These benchmarks are crucial for tracking progress and assessing the effectiveness of implemented gender equality initiatives.

☐ Challenges such as limited resources, institutional change or resistance will arise, and it is important to maintain adaptability and perseverance in overcoming these issues when they arise.

☐ To ensure the efficacy and holistic integration of a GEP, it is important that it is developed and implemented inclusively, embracing all status groups within the RPO, including scientific, technical and administrative staff.

☐ To foster widespread acceptance and commitment, the implementation of GEPs needs to be a collaborative and inclusive process with shared responsibilities. This approach, as opposed to a top-down mandate, ensures active participation in the development and execution of the GEP, thereby cultivating a shared sense of ownership and dedication to gender equality across the institution.