Towards Gender Equity in Academia: Strategies and Tools for Universities

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Abstract: Gender inequality in academia persists through the interaction of implicit bias and structural barriers. We combine a gender–career Implicit Association Test (IAT) and survey responses from 863 academic and administrative staff across four European universities with document analysis of Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) and 12 semi-structured interviews. The IAT shows an implicit association of men with careers and women with family roles (mean D-score +0.38). Women report more gender-based discrimination and perceived male advantage in permanent contracts, desirable tasks, leadership roles, and informal networks. Regression results indicate that being a woman and endorsing traditional work–family values are robust correlates of higher IAT scores. Across institutions, GEPs commonly include mentoring, leadership development, gender-sensitive recruitment and promotion procedures, monitoring, and, in some cases, targets; effectiveness depends on visible leadership commitment, clear indicators and review cycles, adequate resources, and broad participation. We argue that progress requires pairing training and mentoring with procedural reforms at key career junctures (recruitment, promotion, workload allocation, and leadership selection). Limits include cross-sectional data and the behavioural scope of the IAT.

Keywords: Gender bias, Gender perception, Gender inequality, Leaky pipeline, Survey, Research organisations

1. Introduction

Despite adopting workload allocation models and various institutional policies designed to promote equity, significant disparities persist, particularly affecting women, especially in male-dominated academic environments where institutional structures often reproduce gender hierarchies (O'Connor, 2020). Women in academia face challenges in recruitment, promotion, and funding, and are overrepresented in service and mentorship roles, which tend to be institutionally undervalued despite their essential contributions to community functioning and student development**.** These inequalities hinder professional advancement and contribute to dissatisfaction, stress, and health problems (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012; Monroe et al., 2008). The pressure to maintain high research productivity, combined with the demands of expanding student populations, further exacerbates gender inequities, particularly for women who already face structural barriers to career advancement (Monroe et al., 2008). Persistent gender disparities are especially evident in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields and in senior leadership positions (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012; García-Holgado et al., 2020). Unconscious gender biases continue to shape recruitment and promotion practices, limiting women's representation in these areas (Eddy & Ward, 2015). These challenges are compounded by structural obstacles, including the lack of gender-sensitive policies and limited access to leadership opportunities, particularly within male-dominated disciplines (Benschop & Brouns, 2003).

Gender Equality Plans (hereafter GEPs) have emerged as a vital tool for addressing structural inequalities in academia. They aim to integrate gender equality into institutional policies, governance, recruitment, and educational practices, providing a structured framework for organizational change (EIGE, 2020). These institutional efforts are rooted in broader international dynamics, building on the momentum generated by the transnational women's rights movement and its influence on global policy agendas during the UN conferences of the 1990s (Friedman, 2003). GEPs may also include gender budgeting tools to ensure that financial planning aligns with equity objectives (Addabbo, 2016; Addabbo et al., 2021; Elson, 2016; Polzer, Nolte, & Seiwald, 2023).

However, the success of these plans depends on multiple factors, including the level of commitment from leadership, the development of gender-sensitive policies, and active engagement from both academic and non-academic staff (Krefting, 2003). Universities increasingly adopt GEPs as part of their strategic objectives, aligning with international frameworks such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for gender equality in education and research (UNESCO, 2017; Achuo et al., 2025). These initiatives build on early European and international commitments to gender equality, including foundational policy frameworks for gender mainstreaming developed within the European Union (Pollack & Hafner-Burton, 2000), the broader political commitments established in the early 1990s (Vedovato, 1991), and key theoretical and institutional reflections on gender mainstreaming as a political and contested process in Europe (Verloo, 1999; 2001; 2002).

Although extensive literature addresses gender bias in recruitment, promotion, and funding, fewer studies examine the joint role of implicit bias measures like the IAT and institutional data from GEPs. This study contributes by systematically linking individual attitudes captured via IATs with institutional responses outlined in GEPs, thereby offering a dual perspective on the persistence and potential mitigation of gender inequality in academia. The study highlights how universities can mitigate gender biases through continuous monitoring and policy refinement, reinforcing their role as key actors in promoting gender equity within academia and beyond. By analyzing individual implicit biases via the IAT alongside institutional practices in GEPs, it aims to provide a comprehensive view of gender bias within European universities. The research includes a sample of 863 academic and administrative staff from four universities, evaluating attitudes and implicit biases as well as the implementation and monitoring of gender equity initiatives in GEPs. This dual approach, quantitatively measuring unconscious bias and qualitatively examining GEP structure, seeks to capture a complete view of gender bias and the effectiveness of institutional interventions.

2. Theoretical Background

Gender bias is a complex phenomenon rooted in historical and cultural stereotypes that associate men with competence, leadership and "innate talent" and women with caregiving and support roles. These stereotypes permeate academic processes and contribute to the "leaky pipeline," whereby women face increasing barriers at successive career stages (van den Brink & Benschop, 2012; Leslie et al., 2015). They shape recruitment and promotion, assessments of merit and leadership potential, and everyday dynamics such as unequal speaking time and visibility in institutional settings (Shaw, 2000). Empirical studies document their impact on student evaluations of teaching and hiring: male professors are more often perceived as knowledgeable and authoritative, while women—especially those displaying "masculine" behaviours—are penalized as less likable (Boring, 2017; Lindqvist et al., 2021). Experimental evidence shows that, even with identical CVs, science faculty tend to rate male candidates as more competent and hireable, offering them higher salaries and mentoring (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012), though some regional evidence points to field- and context-specific patterns (Carlsson et al., 2020). Biases among teachers and peers also shape students' performance and aspirations in STEM: exposure to gender-biased math teachers or hostile peer norms lowers girls' self-confidence and weakens their STEM identity (Carlana, 2019; Robnett, 2016). Overall, this literature underscores the persistence of explicit and implicit bias and the need for institutional, multi-layered strategies that go beyond individual-level interventions (Ceci et al., 2023; Cislak et al., 2018; Llorens et al., 2021; Kapareliotis & Miliopoulou, 2019).

Within this context, universities have become key actors in advancing gender equality through GEPs. GEPs provide formal frameworks for addressing structural barriers by integrating gender-sensitive measures into human resources, career development, governance, research and student services. They operationalize gender mainstreaming—embedding gender equality into institutional processes—and can be reinforced through gender budgeting tools that align resource allocation with equity goals (Van Ewijk, 2011; Hannan, 2022; Sharp & Broomhill, 1990; Sharp, 2003; Addabbo, 2016; Addabbo et al., 2021; Elson, 2016; Polzer, Nolte, & Seiwald, 2023). Examples such as the University of Minho's GEP, combining diversity targets, work–life balance measures and gender-neutral recruitment, or the Universidad de Valencia's integration of gender studies and compulsory courses on gender relations, show how participatory and curricular approaches can foster institutional ownership and broader cultural change (Barros et al., 2018; Pla-Julián & Díez, 2019; Doneva et al., 2020). Recent overviews, including the work of the IPAZIA Observatory, stress that such initiatives are most effective when embedded in longer-term strategic frameworks and supported by systematic monitoring (Catuogno, Manzi, & Paoloni, 2022; Naciti et al., 2024).

Building on the literature on gender mainstreaming, institutional change and organizational logics, this paper examines how GEPs are implemented within academic institutions and how they mediate tensions between bureaucratic compliance and transformative gender equality objectives. The analysis is guided by three research questions: (RQ1) How do universities frame and justify GEP adoption in relation to their identity, mission and values? (RQ2) Which organizational and contextual factors facilitate or hinder effective GEP implementation in European higher education institutions? and (RQ3) How do actors involved in implementation navigate competing logics—such as accountability, legitimacy and a normative commitment to gender equality—in practice? By connecting micro-level manifestations of gender bias with meso- and macro-level tools such as GEPs and gender budgeting, the paper situates institutional strategies within a broader theoretical understanding of how universities can move from formal compliance toward substantive gender-transformative change.

3. Methodology

This study follows the research agenda of the IPAZIA Observatory, which calls for empirical analyses of institutional practices and their effectiveness in reducing gender inequalities in public organizations (Catuogno et al., 2022). It adopts a multiple case study of four European HEIs in France, Italy, Albania and Germany, all partners in a Horizon 2020 gender-equality project and actively designing and implementing GEPs, making them suitable for examining how the EU agenda is interpreted in different national and organizational contexts (RQ1–RQ2). The methodological approach is grounded in action research and an interventionist perspective (Berg, 2004; Jönsson & Lukka, 2006; Lukka & Vinnari, 2017): researchers collaborated with institutional actors to design and implement measures such as unconscious-bias training, revised recruitment and promotion procedures, and mentoring, allowing observation of how stakeholders negotiate compliance, accountability and normative commitments to gender equality in practice (RQ3). Data were collected through a mixed-method design combining a survey with a gender–career IAT (863 academic and administrative staff), document analysis of GEPs and related policies, and twelve semi-structured interviews with key actors. Interviews, conducted between May and September 2024 under Horizon 2020 ethics approval, were recorded, transcribed and anonymized. Triangulating these sources provides a nuanced picture of how GEPs are designed, implemented and experienced within universities.

4. Data

Participants were recruited via email invitations sent through each institution's universal mailing list, targeting both academic (professors, instructors, graduate students, and postdoctoral researchers) and administrative staff across all departments and disciplines. After the initial email, a reminder was sent approximately one week later. To protect respondent anonymity, we do not disclose the identities of the participating universities. Given the close-knit nature of certain academic fields, revealing specific departments could pose ethical concerns due to the sensitive nature of some survey questions.

In total, 6,791 individuals were contacted. Of these, data from 863 respondents (a response rate of 12.38%) who completed the survey were analyzed. While participants could indicate a preference not to disclose their gender, our analysis is limited to respondents who identified as either male or female. The final sample distribution by institution is provided in Table 1.

In two institutions, the achieved sample size was sufficient to ensure a 5% margin of error at the 95% confidence level, whereas in the remaining two institutions the sample size corresponded to an approximate 10% margin of error at the same confidence level.

Table 1: Sample characteristics and key frequencies

Gender, N = 863 (%)		**Academic Staff, N = 541 (62.40%)**	
Women	581 (67.32%)	Full Professor	56 (10.35%)
Men	282 (32.68%)	Associate Professor	105 (19.41%)
Age		Assistant Professor	27 (4.99%)
21-34	263 (30.48%)	Instructor	41 (7.58%)
35-44	220 (25.49%)	PhD Student	57 (10.54%)
45-54	231 (26.77%)	Post-Doc Student	78 (14.42%)
55-64	130 (15.06%)	Researcher with tenure	27 (4.99%)
65 and over	12 (1.39%)	Researcher with fixed-term contract	24 (4.44%)
No answer	7 (0.81%)	Research Fellow	45 (8.32%)
Education		Other	2 (0.37%)
High school diploma or less	38 (4.40%)	No answer	31 (5.73%)
Undergraduate degree	212 (24.56%)	Research Areas	
Master's degree	283 (32.79%)	Arts, Humanities and Education	84 (15.53%)
Ph.D. degree	321 (37.19%)	Medical and Health	50 (9.24%)
No answer	9 (1.04%)	Economics, Business and Finance	99 (18.30%)
Children		Chemical Sciences, Biology and Earth Sciences	22 (4.07%)

Gender, N = 863 (%)		**Academic Staff, N = 541 (62.40%)**	
None	379 (43.92%)	Engineering and computing	70 (12.94%)
1	160 (2.18%)	Law and Political Science	39 (7.21%)
2	238 (27.58%)	Maths, Statistics and Physical Sciences	40 (7.39%)
3 or more	72 (8.34%)	Sociology	23 (4.25%)
No answer	14 (1.62%)	Other	16 (2.96%)
		No answer	81 (14.97%)
Living with the partner		Non-Academic Staff, N = 326 (37.60%)	
Yes	519 (60.14%)	Grade A	66 (20.24%)
Not all days	36 (4.17%)	Grade B	28 (8.59%)
No	54 (6.26%)	Grade C	137 (42.02%)
No answer	254 (29.43%)	Other	20 (6.13%)
		No answer	55 (16.87%)

4.1 Measures

To isolate the role of stereotypes, we administered a survey that included an IAT to measure gender biases. The IAT, a widely used computer-based tool developed by social psychologists, is designed to minimize social desirability bias in self-reported answers and is commonly applied in various contexts. The resulting IAT D-score indicates the level of implicit bias each participant displays, comparing in-group preferences to out-group associations.

Participants were presented with two sets of stimuli: the first set included typical national male and female first names, and the second set comprised terms related to business (e.g., "Manager") and family (e.g., "Marriage"). Words appeared one at a time in the center of the screen, and participants were instructed to categorize each word as quickly as possible to the left or right side of the screen according to labels displayed at the top (e.g., "Female" on the right, "Male" on the left).

Two types of categorization tasks were used to calculate the score. In the “order compatible” task, participants were instructed to categorize male names and career-related terms to one side of the screen, and female names and family-related terms to the opposite side. In the “order incompatible” task, participants categorized female names with career terms and male names with family terms. The order of these tasks was randomized for everyone. The underlying idea is that if participants hold implicit associations between men and career roles, they will perform the compatible task faster than the incompatible task. Implicit bias is measured by the difference in reaction times: faster response times in the “compatible” task suggest stronger implicit associations between “Males-Careers” and “Females-Family.” A positive D-score indicates this bias, while a negative score suggests the reverse (“Females-Careers” and “Males-Family”). A score of “0” indicates no implicit bias, although none of the participants received an exact score of “0.”

4.1.1 Survey structure

The survey included the gender-career IAT alongside several question blocks on demographics, profession, work-life balance, social values, and leisure activities. To minimize selection bias, both the order of the IAT and the question blocks were randomized across four groups. Each respondent was randomly assigned to one of the following groups at the start of the survey:

- Group 1: Leisure questions, IAT, followed by a randomized order of remaining blocks.
- Group 2: Demographics and work-life balance questions, IAT, then remaining blocks randomized.
- Group 3: Professional questions, IAT, and then remaining blocks randomized.
- Group 4: Social value questions, IAT, followed by a randomized order of the remaining blocks.

Random assignment to different groups helps reduce selection bias by equalizing treatment and comparison groups.

4.1.2 Analysis

A cross-sectional OLS regression model was used to analyze the relationship between key characteristics and outcomes, including IAT D-scores, perceptions of inequality, and experiences of discrimination. The model structure is defined as:

$$y_{ig} = g + X_i + u_{ig},$$

where y_{ig} represents the outcome variable, X_i is a vector of socio-demographic characteristics of individual i (e.g., gender, age, profession, education, marital status, and social value attitudes), and g is a fixed effect term that accounts for the average effect of individuals in group g (for g = 1, 2, 3, 4). The error term u_{ig} captures unexplained variation in y_{ig}. This approach allows us to assess the explanatory power of socio-demographic variables on implicit bias and perceptions of inequality in career opportunities and resource distribution.

5. Results and Discussion

Table 2 reports OLS regressions of respondents' IAT scores on individual characteristics. Gender is the most stable correlate: women score higher than men (β = 0.194, p < 0.001), and the association remains after adding controls and group fixed effects (column 9: β = 0.223, p < 0.001). Agreement with the statement "A family is more important than a job" is also consistently associated with higher implicit bias (column 9: β = 0.031, p < 0.05). Other covariates (children, age, education, academic status, partnership status) are not robustly related to IAT scores in the fully specified models.

Table 2: Correlation between respondents' characteristics and IAT

Dep. Var.: IAT score	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Woman	0.194***							0.221***	0.223***
	(0.026)							(0.028)	(0.028)
Children		0.067**						0.050	0.049
		(0.025)						(0.036)	(0.037)
Academics			-0.033					-0.019	-0.020
			(0.026)					(0.030)	(0.030)
Age group:									
35-44				0.005				-0.043	-0.042
				(0.033)				(0.041)	(0.041)
45-54				0.071*				0.024	0.024
				(0.032)				(0.044)	(0.044)
55-64				0.087*				0.058	0.056
				(0.039)				(0.053)	(0.053)
65+				0.109				0.156	0.171
				(0.102)				(0.126)	(0.127)
Education:									
High school degree					-0.105			-0.030	-0.028
					(0.152)			(0.158)	(0.155)
Undergraduate degree					-0.132			-0.026	-0.016
					(0.146)			(0.151)	(0.148)
Master school degree					-0.178			-0.091	-0.084
					(0.147)			(0.152)	(0.149)
Ph.D.					-0.150			-0.029	-0.021
					(0.146)			(0.153)	(0.150)
Living with a partner						0.006		-0.021	-0.020
						(0.029)		(0.033)	(0.031)

Dep. Var.: IAT score	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
"A family is more important than a job"							0.020** (0.011)	0.030** (0.012)	0.031** (0.012)
Group fixed effects	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES
Obs.	863	849	820	856	854	822	844	762	762
R^2	0.062	0.008	0.002	0.011	0.004	0.000	0.004	0.100	0.105

Note: Each column reports result from a separate OLS regression. Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses.

The Table 2 results indicate that implicit gender–career associations remain salient among university staff and are patterned by both gender and work–family norms. The gender gradient suggests that implicit stereotypes are not only an "outgroup" attitude held by men, but a broader cognitive and cultural association that can be shared across groups, potentially through internalization and repeated exposure to gendered expectations in academic careers. The stable relationship between traditional work–family values and higher IAT scores further points to the role of normative beliefs in shaping perceptions of merit, commitment, and leadership potential—especially in settings where evaluation criteria are multidimensional and partly discretionary.

Importantly, the lack of robust associations for education, academic vs. non-academic status, and partnership status suggests that implicit bias is not confined to a specific occupational subgroup within universities. The weak and non-robust relationships for children and age (once fixed effects are included) are consistent with the idea that any observed differences may reflect institutional experiences or cohort-specific exposures rather than family status per se. While the cross-sectional design does not allow causal claims, these patterns provide a coherent empirical basis for linking micro-level attitudes to meso-level organizational processes.

From an institutional perspective, the results clarify why awareness-raising measures alone may have limited effects when "career-making moments" remain opaque. Effective interventions should therefore combine (i) individual-level tools (training, mentoring, role-model visibility) with (ii) procedural safeguards that reduce discretion in high-stakes decisions: standardized recruitment and promotion rubrics, transparent workload allocation and recognition of service, structured committee deliberation, and systematic monitoring with public reporting. The next section examines whether and how GEP design features (leadership commitment, indicators, resources, participation) create the conditions for these mechanisms to operate in practice.

6. GEPs and Institutional Actions

We complemented the quantitative analyses with document analysis of GEPs and interviews to assess how measures were implemented across four universities (Alfa, Beta, Gamma, Delta) and which contextual factors shaped these choices (RQ2). Across cases, actions fell into three clusters: career support (mentoring/leadership training), governance and accountability (equality officers, gender-balanced committees, monitoring), and work–life balance and safety (flexibility measures and GBV prevention/reporting).

Recurring constraints included resistance to gender-inclusive measures, weak gender-disaggregated data systems, limited family-friendly infrastructure, and resource constraints that reduced continuity. Where implementation was perceived as stronger, respondents highlighted visible leadership commitment, sustained communication, incentives to participate, clear indicators, and practical monitoring tools, alongside transparent criteria for leadership roles and trusted confidential GBV reporting. Together with the survey evidence, this points to a central mechanism for effectiveness: GEPs matter when they change procedures and accountability, not only when they exist on paper (RQ3).

7. Concluding Remarks

This study investigated gender bias in European academic institutions through integrated individual and institutional analyses. At the individual level, IAT evidence shows that implicit gender bias is widespread among academic and administrative staff, reinforcing stereotypes that link men to leadership and research excellence and women to service and caregiving roles (RQ1). At the institutional level, GEPs offer a framework to address these patterns, but their design, implementation and monitoring differ markedly across universities. Effectiveness is closely tied to robust data collection, visible leadership commitment and meaningful stakeholder

engagement, and to how institutions navigate the tension between compliance requirements and more transformative ambitions (RQ2–RQ3).

Effective gender equity interventions therefore require more than formal compliance. Embedding accountability cultures, participatory governance and transparent reporting, supported by regular audits, can help turn GEPs from procedural obligations into strategic tools for long-term institutional transformation. Our contribution is threefold: we propose a dual-perspective methodology that combines individual measures of unconscious bias with institutional policy analysis; we highlight the need to align GEPs with sustainable development goals, especially SDG 5 and SDG 4; and we offer policy-relevant guidance for improving gender equity strategies within universities.

This study has limitations: it focuses on four institutions, relies on cross-sectional data and uses the IAT, which cannot fully capture behaviour in real-world academic settings. Future research should extend the analysis to a broader set of institutions, employ longitudinal designs and develop comparative frameworks to evaluate which GEP components deliver lasting impacts. By addressing both individual and structural dimensions of inequality, universities can strengthen their role as key agents of change within the wider sustainable development agenda.

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