

Resilience and Gender-Structural Change in Universities: How Bottom-Up Approaches Can Leverage Transformation When Top-Level Management Support Fails

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Abstract

This article is a reflection on my involvement in SUPERA (2018–2022), a project funded by the European Commission under Horizon 2020, that aims at fostering institutional and structural change in academic and research institutions for integrating gender equality through the implementation of Gender Equality Plans (GEPs). For that, I take on my experience at the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM), which was both European coordinator and implementing partner in the consortium, during a period marked by global challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Each of the six SUPERA implementing institutions also faced local and national institutional changes of different kinds and natures, obliging, both for each partner and for the consortium, an adaptation and revision of strategies and former plans, whilst also resulting in a rich mutual learning experience. Presenting the theoretical bases of the European Structural Change Approach first, I analyse the different situations in which Higher Education and research related institutions participate as implementing partners in European structural change projects, which have been funded by the European Commission under specific calls since the 7th Framework Research Program. I reflect on the different responses given by the project Consortium and teams, and, in the third part of the article, focus on the UCM experience, and more concretely on the changing dynamics of top-management support and bottom-up strategies during the project. Therefore, I use the case of the SUPERA for illustrating and comparing different forms of institutional commitment to gender-related structural change and transformation, and the UCM for exploring the dynamics between top-level support and bottom-up approaches, arguing that these should be balanced and mutually supportive, and highlighting how one or the other might act as a substituting force in the absence of the other.

Keywords: Gender structural change; gender equality plans; gender equality in academia & research; European research projects; Spanish Universities.

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1 Introduction

The SUPERA (Supporting the Promotion of Equality in Research and Academia), a structural change in gender equality project funded by the European Commission (EC) under Horizon 2020, ran for four years from June 1st, 2018, to May 31st, 2022. As one of the projects funded through the H2020 programme “Promote gender equality in particular by supporting structural change in the organisation of research institutions and in the content and design of research activities”, within the topic of giving “Support to research organisations to implement gender equality plans,”¹ the project aimed at producing gender-structural change in Academia and Research through formulating and implementing 6 Gender Equality Plans (GEPs). The SUPERA Consortium was comprised of eight partners. Six of these were “implementing partners” of the GEPs; four universities — Central European University (CEU), the University of Cagliari (UniCA), the University of Coimbra (UC), and Complutense University of Madrid (UCM) — and two research funding organisations (RFOs) — the Spanish Ministry of Science (MICINN), and the Autonomous Region of Sardinia (RAS). Two other partners played supporting roles and were responsible for evaluation (Sciences Po) and providing technical assistance in methodology and capacity building (Yellow Window).

As the coordinator of the Consortium, I wrote a short article for the SUPERA newsletter, titled “Resilience and Gender Structural Change in COVID-19 times”, during the pandemic lockdown in April 2020 (Bustelo, 2020). This was less than two years since the project had commenced. In the article, I elaborated on how drastically and suddenly life in our institutions, where we were trying to formulate and implement the GEPs regarding transformation and gender-structural change, had itself changed. However, I also claimed that within SUPERA, before the pandemic and right from the project’s beginning in June 2018, we had discussed the need to adapt to contextual changes; not as a theoretical or conceptual exercise, but as an urgent necessity. At that time, it was already evident that, among the six implementing partners in our Consortium, we had encountered significant changes. Two universities, UC and UCM, had experienced changes in their leadership (rectorates) and there had been changes in the governments of the two RFOs, the Spanish Ministry² undergoing substantial structural changes. Furthermore, a third university, CEU, had decided to relocate to another country and was in the process of doing so. These changes and their consequences were not anticipated when we prepared the project proposal or when we initiated the project. Consequently, early on in SUPERA, in addition to the inherent challenges of structural change in gender equality, we found ourselves needing to be prepared to reassess certain diagnoses about our institutions, adapting to changing targets and stakeholders among top leaders and decision-makers.

The first section of this article discusses what can be considered the “European structural change doctrine,” which serves as its theoretical base. I focus on two aspects of the structural change approach: the need for, and convenience of, top management institutional support in

1. For the programme, see European Commission, 2014; for the topic, see European Commission, 2017.
2. The Unit of Women & Science in the 2017 Spanish Ministry of Economy, Industry and Competitiveness (MINECO) was the participating partner in the SUPERA proposal, with the aim of supporting the newly created *Agencia Estatal de Investigación* (beginning operations in January 2017), the main research funding organisation at the National level, in designing and implementing a GEP. In 2018, as the result of Pedro Sánchez (2018–) becoming Prime Minister, after a vote of no confidence against Mariano Rajoy (2011–2018), the Ministry changed to the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities (MICIU). One year later, as consequence of a second change in government after a repeated general election (in November 2019), the MICIU was split in two: the Ministry of Science & Innovation (MICINN, still our partner in SUPERA) and the Ministry of Universities.

research performing organisations (RPOs) (top-management commitment); and the need for a participatory bottom-up approach in the processes of diagnosing, formulating, implementing, and evaluating GEPs. In the subsequent section, I reflect on the varied responses provided by the project Consortium and its teams, focusing on the different institutional points of departure of each implementing partner. By comparing the different forms of institutional commitment to gender-structural change and transformation, I aim to address questions concerning the significance of top-management support within these institutions and the nature of such support required. Elaborating on the different situations, I conclude that, under certain conditions, having the highest top-level support as a starting point can yield paradoxical outcomes or even prove counterproductive if there are changes in the top-level positions within the institution during the project. Conversely, starting from a lower level of top-level support and engagement can be highly productive if there is an effective strategy of engagement and support. However, having individuals within the consortia with expertise and experience negotiating and engaging with different types of stakeholders is crucial.

In the third section, I reflect and elaborate on the UCM experience as implementing partner, specifically focusing on the changing dynamics of top-management support and bottom-up strategies during the four years of SUPERA. The UCM case serves as an illustrative example of how bottom-up approaches, which involve regular stakeholders in the university community in a participatory manner, can catalyse gender-related changes even in the absence of top-management and institutional support. The analysis highlights both how dynamics of top-level support and bottom-up approaches can be mutually supportive, and how one or the other might in fact act as a substituting force in the absence of the other.

2 The European Structural Change Approach and Doctrine as a Theoretical Background

The structural change approach towards gender and science has been promoted by the European Union since the late 1990s, and a vast amount of literature, knowledge, and knowhow has been accumulated during the last three decades. The EU's sustained and resolute commitment to gender equality in Research and Innovation (R&I), along with the substantial efforts and resources it has devoted to this cause, has given rise to a robust and comprehensive European "doctrine" on structural change, that encompasses both theoretical foundations and practical strategies regarding gender equality in academia and research contexts.

Lucy Ferguson, commissioned by the Finnish Government after its European Presidency in 2019, traces the evolution of the European Commission's policy approach to gender equality. She identifies several milestones in the development and implementation of the "structural change" approach while analysing how the discourse and framing of gender equality have evolved over the years (Ferguson, 2021). This evolution commenced with the 1999 Communication on "Women & Science" where the focus was on "fixing the women"; that is, on increasing the number of women as researchers and within decision-making bodies while implementing some additional measures that aimed to "enable women to combine family life and professional life" (European Commission, 1999). The most recent milestone in this progression occurred in 2022 when the European Commission introduced the requirement for a Gender Equality Plan (GEP) as an eligibility criterion for any public institution participating in Horizon Europe. Between these two milestones, discourse shifted towards a "fixing the system/institution" approach, which identifies the institutions themselves, and the ways things

are done within them, as the problem, serving to reproduce and maintain gender inequalities. It simultaneously shifted towards a “fixing the knowledge/science” approach, which recognises: a) the need to integrate the gender dimension in research for doing better science; and b) the need to reassess the prevailing model of academic excellence and its measurement and evaluation for greater inclusivity.

The timeline of European R&I gender policies features several milestones, as outlined by Ferguson (2021), leading up to the Horizon Europe GEP eligibility criterion in 2021–2022. These milestones include:

- 1) The establishment of the Helsinki Group on Women and Science in 1999, comprising representatives from Member States tasked with promoting equality and integrating the dimension of gender into science.
- 2) The creation of the European Research Area in 2000.
- 3) The 6th and 7th Framework Programmes (2002–2013), during which funding was allocated for certain gender-related initiatives, including gender-structural change projects in the 7th Framework Programme.
- 4) The 2012 Communication *A Reinforced European Research Area Partnership for Excellence and Growth*, which reinforced the structural change approach and established three key objectives (gender equality in scientific careers, gender balance in decision-making, and integration of the gender dimension into the content of research and innovation).
- 5) The Vilnius Recommendations of 2013, which were directed at the Council of the European Union, urging Member States to incentivize structural changes within their research organizations and universities. These recommendations also called upon the European Commission to adopt a recommendation on structural changes, the European Parliament to monitor progress, and research organizations to fund specific programs and initiatives for gender equality through structural changes.
- 6) Horizon 2020 (2014–2020), in which gender equality in R&I was considered as a cross-cutting issue throughout the programme, and specific funding was provided through the GERI (Gender Equality in Research and Innovation).
- 7) The 2015 *Council Conclusions on Advancing Gender Equality in the European Research Area*, which encouraged EU Member States to include in their national R&I policy frameworks gender policies on institutional change such as national action plans, gender mainstreaming strategies and/or gender equality plans (GEPs).
- 8) The launch of the GEAR (Gender Equality in Academia & Research) tool, commissioned by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) and the EC’s Director General for Research in 2016, and reviewed in 2022.
- 9) The establishment, in 2017, of the Standing Working Group on Gender in Research and Innovation (SWG GRI) under the European Research Area and Innovation Committee (ERAC), as the successor to the Helsinki Group, as a policy advisory committee to the Council of the EU, the European Commission, and member states.
- 10) The Helsinki Call for Action, endorsed in 2019 as a result of the Conference on *Research and Innovation Excellence through Gender Equality* organized as part of the Finnish

Presidency, emphasized the maintenance and reinforcement of the structural change approach. It was directed at EU Member States, Associated Countries, the European Commission, research and innovation funding agencies, R&I-performing institutions, private companies and stakeholders, and future EU Presidencies.

- 11) The EC Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025, which reiterates the EU’s commitment to being a world leader in gender mainstreaming and gender equality.

In addition to the milestones covered in Ferguson’s Report, another milestone before the Horizon Europe eligibility criterion should be noted:

- 12) The *Ljubljana Declaration on Gender Equality in Research and Innovation*, announced at the end of the Slovenian Presidency in the 2nd semester of 2021 (MIZS, 2021). This declaration was collaboratively drafted through a bottom-up process, with the support of the upcoming presidencies and representatives of the Standing Working Group on Gender in Research and Innovation.

A seminal piece of this European structural change doctrine is the report which stemmed from the Expert Group on Structural Change convened by the EC in 2011. This report was important as it, for the first time, unequivocally demonstrated the inadequacy of specific programs designed solely to assist women, with the aim of preventing the loss of talent and addressing the metaphorical “leaky pipeline” phenomenon. This term is used to depict a situation where female academics, in far greater numbers than their male counterparts, fail to progress consistently in their academic careers (Etzkowitz & Ranga, 2011; Pell, 1996). The report advocated for a necessary shift away from viewing the issue as a “women’s problem” and instead directed attention toward the institutional aspects, emphasizing “the structural transformation of institutions, utilizing a systemic, comprehensive, and sustainable approach” (European Commission, 2012b). The problem is not on the women. While policies and measures can continue to target and support women to be more active in science, this alone will not resolve the issue. Rather, the primary challenge lies within the institutions themselves, as they are systems that perpetuate, uphold, and strengthen inequalities. Furthermore, it lies within an androcentric scientific environment that has historically overlooked the contributions of women. As such, actions and measures should be directed not only at empowering women but at transforming the very “structure” of these institutions, an essential step toward advancing excellence in research and innovation (Schiebinger & Schraudner, 2011).

The report went far beyond the mandate for which the expert group was convened (as requested by the EU Competitiveness Council, specifically focusing on the “loss of women’s talent”) by identifying the following five key challenges, deeply rooted in a structural conception of the problem, for achieving gender equality at the institutional level: a) opacity of decision-making processes; b) institutional practices in which unconscious cognitive biases operate in assessing and evaluating research and academic merit and performance; c) unconscious gender biases in the assessment of excellence and the peer review process; d) gender biases in the content of science; and e) research institutions as gendered labour organizations, resulting in gender pay gaps, harassment and power imbalances, and which need to recognize the importance of work-life balance. This report produced significant ideas which were integrated into the 2012 EC Communication. Although the discourse has since evolved towards a more inclusive and social justice-oriented framework, moving away from the neoliberal competitiveness and talent loss-oriented framework prevalent at the time, the core ideas of the structural change

approach were firmly established. Since then, this report has been widely cited as a reference in proposals for structural change projects.

These projects, funded by the European Commission through specific calls addressing gender issues since the 7th Framework Programme,³ have produced numerous materials, reports, recommendations, and guidelines.⁴ This body of work has driven the evolution of the European structural change approach towards a more pragmatic orientation that emphasizes concrete actions through the formulation and implementation of GEPs. As mentioned above, another significant milestone is the GEAR online tool that has provided, since 2016, specific advice and practical tools to universities and research performing organisations to support the development and implementation of GEPs. An important feature of this tool is that it draws principally from practical experience while also incorporating feminist and gender-oriented organizational and educational theories. Initially designed by Yellow Window, a gender expert consultancy firm commissioned by the EIGE that had also designed the Gender in EU-funded Research Toolkit and Training (2009–2011), which was an important support to gender projects in 6FP and 7FP, GEAR engaged numerous gender experts and scholars who were actively involved in European structural change projects during its design phase. EIGE has since maintained the tool, with technical assistance provided by Joanneum Research. In 2022, it underwent a comprehensive review and update, with contributions from gender experts specializing in “structural change”. GEAR not only serves as a valuable resource for practical implementation but also offers a solid theoretical foundation for understanding the structural change approach.

Another source contributing to the development of this doctrine are the evaluations and progress reports conducted by the EC to assess the status of gender mainstreaming in research and innovation. Ferguson (2021) references two such reports: the 2017 Interim evaluation of Gender Equality as a Cross Cutting Issue in Horizon 2020 (de Cheveigné et al., 2017), and the 2018 ERA Progress Report (European Commission, 2019). The first one, produced as result of an interim evaluation in which I participated as a member of the expert group responsible, demonstrated the difficulties and limitations associated with implementing this structural approach and slow progress toward the three Horizon 2020 objectives for gender equality. It particularly emphasized the slow increase of gender researchers in leadership positions, and the low integration of the gender dimension in funded projects. The progress report further contributed to this assessment by identifying disparities in progress across the ERA.

Finally, within this doctrine predominantly built upon the hands-on experiences and reflections of consortia, scholars, commissioned experts, and expert groups, there is a set of academic articles written by gender scholars and experts actively engaged in the various funded EU projects (among others, Bencivenga & Drew, 2021; Campanini & Pizarro, 2021; Caprile et al., 2022; Clavero & Galligan, 2020; Espinosa-Fajardo et al., 2022; Kalpazidou & Cacace, 2019; Lipinsky & Wroblewski, 2021; Palmén & Kalpazidou, 2019; Thomson et al., 2022; Wroblewski & Palmén, 2022). However, these academic contributions are not as numerous as they could be, as the expertise, mutual learning and reflection within a “structural change community”, which is intensely occupied in implementing action-oriented research projects, leave very limited time for academic writing.

3. See European Commission, 2016.

4. Without trying to be exhaustive, and as three illustrative examples of different nature and in different date, we will mention here the ones produced by FESTA on resistances (FESTA, 2016), by GENOVATE on evaluating GEPs (Espinosa-Fajardo et al., 2016) and by TARGET (Caprile, 2022).

Structural change processes are always complex, and it is important to highlight that they aim at instigating genuine and profound alterations in the “structure” of universities and research organizations, entailing comprehensive changes in the culture, values, rules, and procedures of these institutions. This involves changes to how things are regularly conceived, done, or thought by all stakeholders involved, as well as how they relate to each other. It necessitates different strategic areas of action for addressing existing gender (and other) inequalities/imbances, aiming to fix the institutions and the knowledge they produce. Additionally, structural change endeavours should aspire to be irreversible (the change concerned cannot be reversed), comprehensive (going beyond changing the organization’s rules), inclusive (involving all relevant players and stakeholders of the organization concerned and considering the top-down and bottom-up levels of the organization), and context-specific (adapted to specific contexts without being applied in the same manner everywhere).

The notion of complexity mentioned above, and the profundity of the proposed structural change, gives rise to “a nonlinear relationship between inputs and outputs of policy measures, where impact depends on the interaction of a multitude of variables strongly related to context” (Kalpazidou Schmidt & Cacace, 2019, p. 321). Scholars underscore not only the importance of adopting GEPs but also the critical role played by their implementation. This process can prove more challenging in effecting institutional change, as it hinges on a variety of factors, including a sound understanding of gender issues rooted in gender theory and research evidence, commitment from senior management, sufficient levels of human and financial resources, leadership at all levels, and continuous stakeholder engagement (Clavero & Galignan, 2020, p. 655), as well as the need of gender competence of top managers (Lipinsky & Wroblewski, 2021). Palmén and Kalpazidou Schmidt (2019), using the evaluation framework developed in the EFFORTI project, identified several elements which contributed to the successful implementation of gender equality interventions: stable governance frameworks; top-management commitment; bottom-up participation; framing synergies with other initiatives; strategies for tackling resistance; resources; sustainability of actions; gender competence, experience, knowledge and transparency; targets, standards, and monitoring; and accessible data and information. As mentioned in the introduction, while acknowledging the multidimensional and intricate nature of structural change, this article will focus on two particular aspects of the structural change approach that can be carefully examined and nuanced within the context of the SUPERA case: the necessity and benefits of top-management institutional support (top-management commitment), and the need for a participatory bottom-up approach in diagnosing, formulating, implementing and evaluating GEPs.

Top-management support provides legitimacy to gender equality work and facilitates the integration of changes into internal procedures and systems. It also significantly reduces the chances that gender equality initiatives are rejected and enhances individuals’ motivation and engagement (GEAR tool, EIGE, 2016 & 2022). However, top-down support alone is insufficient to drive meaningful change (Palmén & Kalpazidou Schmidt, 2019; Caprile, 2022). Bottom-up approaches and processes, “built on the principles of participation, ownership and reflexivity” (Ferguson 2021, p. 35) are also necessary. Involving stakeholders not only aids in the effective implementation of GEPs but also fosters a sense of ownership that helps address resistance. Additionally, it ensures that the diverse needs and demands of various sectors within the organization are adequately addressed (GEAR tool, EIGE, 2016 & 2022). Beyond participatory methods, the establishment of internal networks is considered valuable for the successful implementation of GEPs, these networks enable stakeholder involvement in a decentralized manner, which is especially relevant in large universities with multiple

faculties. They serve as a bridge between top-down and bottom-up approaches to facilitate structural change (Bleijenbergh, 2021; EIGE, 2016; FESTA, 2016; Kalpazidou Schmidt & Cacace, 2019). Participatory and decentralised approaches for the design and implementation of GEPs are recognised to be time-consuming, but worth it in the long run as they promote genuine structural change in higher education organisations where gender equality work is often not prioritized and encounters considerable resistance.

3 Gender-Structural Change Projects in Europe and the Role of Top-Management Support and Institutional Commitment: The Case of SUPERA

Structural change projects, as with any other projects funded by the EC through research framework programmes,⁵ require expertise and expert teams to remain competitive in calls for proposals, which often feature low success rates (10.7% for Science with and for Society-SwafS proposals in Horizon 2020; Tornasi & Delaney, 2020). Furthermore, collaborative efforts within consortia during proposal development, aimed at achieving coherence and shared visions among the project team, are pivotal for securing funding. The evaluation and funding of gender-structural change projects depend a good part on the competence, profiles and experience of the teams presenting the proposal, guaranteeing quality proposals, effective collaboration, and mutual learning among European partners. It is important to note that, beyond technical expertise, personal commitment has been identified as a crucial factor in the successful implementation of gender-related projects and initiatives (Tildesley et al., 2021; Ranea-Triviño et al., 2022). However, the reliance on individual expertise rather than institutional support means that the emphasis during project proposal preparations is often placed on specific individuals rather than institutions. While institutional support for structural change is undeniably significant and has been highlighted in various studies (e.g., Caprile, 2022; EIGE, 2016; Ferguson, 2021; Clavero & Galligan, 2020; Palmén & Kalpazidou Schmidt, 2019), it may not always receive adequate attention at the proposal stage. This situation arises because evaluations primarily consider the qualifications and expertise of the project teams, as reflected in their individual CVs, when determining funding eligibility.

The location of the individuals responsible for overseeing the teams within the consortia tasked with executing European structural change projects, as well as their relationships with decision-makers within their respective institutions, is crucial. The level of involvement in the proposal process and the strength of institutional support significantly influence the ultimate outcome, and these aspects are, in part, contingent upon the individuals within each institution. Partners can be from a particular department or faculty or may represent a broad perspec-

5. In the 7th framework programme, since the 2010–2011 call for proposals FP7-SCIENCE-IN-SOCIETY, there have been 12 gender-related “structural change” projects funded (INTEGER, GENIS LAB, STAGES, FESTA, GENDERTIME, GENPORT, GENOVATE, EGERA, TRIGGER, GARCIA, and GenderNET). There were 8 other gender-related projects from 2008. In Horizon 2020, Ferguson (2021) listed 17 GERI-funded GEP projects, and 9 other gender-related non-GEP projects, including GENDER-NET Plus ERANET Cofund (a consortium of 16 organisations from 13 countries for strengthening transnational collaborations between research programme owners and managers, which ran until 2022, and GENDERACTION, a network of national representatives and resource centres on gender in research and innovation, which ran until 2021 and was re-funded under Horizon Europe as GENDERACTIONplus. For a complete list of gender projects under the H2020-EU-5b “Promote Gender Equality in Particular by Supporting Structural Change in The Organisation of Research Institutions and in the Content and Design of Research Activities” programme, see European Commission, 2014.

tive from a rectoral position. However, involving the institutions from the outset is necessary for the teams, as it not only saves time but also ensures a solid institutional commitment.

The evaluation and funding of specific teams and individuals participating in the proposal process make changes among team leaders and responsible personnel during the project duration unlikely. However, in the event of a change, it should be adequately justified, even if occurring within the institution itself. In the case of SUPERA, the sole change in leadership occurred within the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, as the former team leader departed from the institution. However, this transition was effectively managed due to the expertise and experience of the new personnel responsible for structural change projects, along with the consistent presence of another team member throughout the project's entirety. Although these types of changes always consume time and may cause delays, posing a risk to the stringent deliverables schedule typical of European projects, the partner was able to meet all the scheduled objectives, and the State Research Agency (AEI) approved its Gender Equality Plan in 2021, the third year of the project.

In the other partner organizations, the teams responsible for SUPERA remained intact despite experiencing institutional and political changes affecting their leadership during the project's duration. However, in the case of UCM, the SUPERA project was significantly impacted by institutional changes and resulting loss of top-level support. When the project began, I was not only the European coordinator and the leader of the UCM team, I also held the position of Rector's Delegate for Equality, making me the highest ranking individual responsible for gender equality policies at the institution. At this time, I had full support from institutional leadership with the project. However, a new Rector was elected following UCM Rector elections in April 2019, assuming office in June 2019, who did not view the SUPERA project as an institutionally action-oriented initiative. The new rectoral team regarded SUPERA as a typical European research project associated with a specific team that no longer held institutional responsibilities.

As a result, SUPERA could not and did not continue in the institution as initially intended and funded, not even continuing in a reduced capacity. It was clear from outset, that the new rectoral team did not want to identify themselves with the SUPERA approach, making explicit in the turnover meeting with the new Rector's Delegate for Equality in July 2019 that they proposed to follow their own approach in the elaboration of a new GEP, disregarding the GEP's draft worked by the project in its first year. However, in 2021, there was some recognition that the SUPERA approach aligned with the broader European approach to gender policies in academia. Consequently, the Rector's Delegation for Equality sought limited guidance from the SUPERA technical team regarding the structure of the new GEP. This resulted in the incorporation of certain EC general gender equality objectives and some of the actions proposed in the 2019 draft developed by SUPERA in its initial year.

Nonetheless, for various reasons outlined in the following section, the UCM GEP that was ultimately approved in April 2022, just a month before the conclusion of SUPERA, bore little resemblance to the original plan and work carried out within the European project. In this instance, the fact that SUPERA was originally associated with the head of gender policy at UCM at the time of the proposal and grant agreement, something initially considered a strength during the proposal drafting and funding phase, proved counterproductive given the change in the Rector's team. This stands in contrast with the experience of the University of Cagliari where, like in UCM, SUPERA was initiated where there was robust support from the Rector's team and the leader of the SUPERA team also serving as the Rector's Delegate for European projects. In this case, however, when there was a change in Rector toward the

project's conclusion, gender policies within the institution continued, and a member of the SUPERA team was appointed as the new Rector's Delegate for Gender Equality.

Another interesting aspect worth mentioning is the distinct institutional links within two of the partners, the University of Coimbra (CES-UC) and the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (MICINN). In both instances, the individuals leading the SUPERA teams within their institutions were situated outside the organizational framework for which the equality plans were intended to be formulated and implemented. In the Portuguese case, the responsible team operated within the CES, a centre for social studies linked to the university but with its own structure. In the case of the Spanish Ministry, the responsible team was in the Women and Science's Unit at MICINN, but the equality plan was drawn up for the State Research Agency (AEI). Shouldering this responsibility within third structures requires many hours of negotiation and work with the institutional teams to achieve effective change. In the case of CES, the change in the Rector's team at the beginning of the project caused a delay in what had previously been planned. However, both the University of Coimbra and the AEI successfully approved their GEPs in 2021.

After studying the different situations in the SUPERA Consortium, I conclude that under certain specific conditions, having the highest top-level support for the project as a starting point can be counterproductive if there are changes in the top-level positions in the institution. Conversely, initiating with a more indirect or lower-profile engagement in terms of top-level endorsement can ultimately yield highly productive outcomes. Regardless of the approach, having expertise and experience within the consortia appears to be critical for the successful implementation of funded projects. As the next section shows, even in the most challenging scenario, such as that of the UCM, where institutional support at the rectoral level is lost, gender-structural change can still be catalysed.

4 Changing Dynamics of Top-Management Support and Bottom-Up Strategies: The Case of UCM

The SUPERA project started on 1 June 2018, with maximum institutional support at the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM). The team responsible for project implementation initiated their work within the Gender Equality Unit. They began by conducting a participatory diagnosis and crafting the groups and commissions known as Gender Equality Hubs, which would play a pivotal role in shaping the plan. Given that I was appointed Delegate for Equality in July 2015, the start of SUPERA was practically at the start of the final year of a four-year rectorate. Despite initial expectations that the Rector would secure a renewal for another four-year term, this did not materialize. Nevertheless, the delayed start of SUPERA had a silver lining: it allowed us to find an already well-structured Equality Unit, ready to engage in participatory efforts. Moreover, this unit had already built relationships with various actors from across the University. This facilitated an exceptionally productive first year for SUPERA. This year proved crucial for the project's continuity, particularly in light of an adverse overall situation, marked by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the absence of institutional support from June 2019 onwards.

At UCM, from the beginning, the SUPERA proposal⁶ received the highest top-level sup-

6. The first SUPERA proposal, with a slightly different Consortium, was unsuccessfully presented in 2016 to the European Commission's Science with and for Society programme (SwafS-03-2016-2017), under the topic, "Support to Research Organisations to Implement Gender Equality Plans." The proposal presented in

port. From the beginning, as the Delegate for Equality, with the Rector's support, I actively pursued the idea of spearheading a European consortium to submit a proposal to Horizon 2020. Our overarching goal was to catalyse gender-structural change within the institution, securing not only financial resources but also tapping into European expertise. Additionally, we aimed to internationalize gender policies at UCM.

The Rector's electoral platform in 2015 had placed significant emphasis on gender equality policies. Among the outlined measures, a commitment was made to develop a new participatory Gender Equality Plan (GEP) involving the entire university community. This commitment was a concrete response to the abstract and top-down GEP designed and developed previously, which was approved by the previous Rectorate shortly before the 2015 elections despite being unknown by most gender scholars and other stakeholders at the university.

This top-level support from the Rector to gender-structural change policies at UCM was also reinforced by the fact that the Rector's Delegate for Equality was considered a member of the Governing Board during the 2015–2019 period. This was exceptional, as rectoral teams in Spanish universities typically include vice-rectors but not delegates. This position granted access to weekly meetings with the vice-rectors and the Rector, allowing me to actively participate in their deliberations and decisions. This insight into the workings of the vice-rectors, their priorities, challenges, and difficulties, was essential for gaining a comprehensive understanding of the institution. Such institutional knowledge, recognized as a crucial factor for effective gender mainstreaming (Council of Europe, 2004), enabled me to propose realistic and pertinent cross-cutting gender policies, which needed to be incorporated into an institutional GEP.

The composition of governing bodies within universities can vary, but typically, these bodies are comprised of vice-rectors rather than delegates of the Rector. These vice-rectors are responsible for implementing specific measures or policies and liaising directly with the Rector, but they are not usually involved in the Rector's broader decision-making processes. Consequently, having a dedicated vice-rectorate with direct responsibility for gender equality policies is often regarded as one of the most effective ways to provide robust support for these policies in universities. However, this arrangement may come with certain drawbacks. Frequently, vice-rectorates for Equality are combined with other responsibilities such as culture, social responsibility, corporate responsibility, diversity, and inclusion, which are sometimes considered secondary or non-essential. Consequently, especially when the vice-rector does not prioritize equality issues or has an excessive number of other responsibilities, the individual responsible for gender equality policy may find it more challenging to directly access the Rector compared to if these responsibilities were structured as a Delegation.

The SUPERA project was built upon four fundamental principles. Firstly, the principle of *accumulation* aimed to leverage existing ideas and materials that had been accumulated and tested by previous structural change projects, thereby avoiding redundant efforts. Secondly, the principle of *inclusion* underscored a clear intention to engage various stakeholders comprising the university community in the GEP right from the start. The third principle, *innovation*, involved the utilization of pioneering methodological tools, such as design thinking and co-creation methodologies. Lastly, the principle of *sustainability* guided our approach, with the understanding that the project would conclude in four years, necessitating a lasting impact. As a result, the methodology of SUPERA centred on the establishment of "Gender Equality Hubs" (GEHs) to facilitate the involvement of individuals typically engaged in the daily

2017, which was successful and achieved funding, was on the same topic but included two research funding organisations: the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation & Universities (MICIU) and the Autonomous Region of Sardinia (RAS).

operations of the university. This approach aligned with the overarching principle of gender mainstreaming (Council of Europe, 1998) and aimed to cultivate a sense of ownership and commitment to the GEP, thereby facilitating not only the plan's design but also its implementation. In other words, recognizing the systemic, structural, and cultural barriers perpetuating gender inequalities in organizations underscored the imperative of involving "regular organizational actors in the transformation process" (Benschop & Verloo 2011, p. 283).

At the UCM, three types of Gender Equality Hubs (GEHs) were created in the first year of SUPERA's operation. The first was the Network of Gender Equality Nodes. Initially, the concept was to have these "Nodes" serve as catalysts for change within the faculties, allowing for the decentralization of both diagnosis, community participation, GEP implementation, and future Faculty Operational Equality Plans. We acknowledged early on that university life primarily unfolds within its faculties, rather than at the rectorate level, and that many inequalities must be identified and rectified there. Initially referred to as Focal Points, the Advisory Council recommended changing their designation to "Gender Equality Nodes." The selection of Gender Equality Nodes in each of the 26 UCM Faculty was conducted in an organic manner, involving faculty members from diverse fields who had participated in the training activities conducted by the Equality Unit. The selection was made through collaboration between me as the delegate and the faculty deans. Through a series of meetings and workshops with these nodes, their roles and responsibilities were defined. This included organizing diagnostic activities and establishing various "action groups" within the faculties. These action groups were encouraged to recruit not only fellow faculty members but also students and administrative staff. Additionally, the creation of the network aimed to foster networking, mutual learning, and the exchange of experiences.

From the Equality Unit at the rectorate level, coordination of equality policies was also necessary among the central services of the university. Consequently, a second Gender Equality Hub was established, known as the GEP Follow-up Committee. This committee encompassed individuals from various categories, including staff, teaching and research faculty, administrative and service personnel, and students. In addition to the Gender Equality Nodes, representatives from Central Services and each Vice-Rectorate were invited to participate. The Committee convened twice in the first year, adopting a workshop format. The first meeting focused on conducting an enriched diagnosis by reviewing the data and evidence compiled by the SUPERA team regarding inequalities at UCM. The second meeting aimed to formulate several measures to be incorporated into the plan.

Lastly, the third Gender Equality Hub was comprised of an "Advisory Council" comprised of gender experts at UCM from diverse academic fields, including the Director of the Institute for Feminist Research. This third entity ensured a connection with gender studies and provided the GEP with the support and insights of gender experts.

During the first year, extensive diagnostic work had been completed, and initial meetings with GEHs had taken place. A preliminary draft of the GEP had been initiated, incorporating the various needs and actions identified through the diagnosis and discussions. Plans were in place to approve a UCM Gender Equality Framework Plan in June 2019, but this approval was never realized due to the unexpected change in leadership in June 2019. An exhaustive report was produced in June 2019 by the Equality Unit, on the structural change process that took place during the 2018–2019 academic year, as a way to facilitate the transition to the incoming rectoral team. However as mentioned in the previous section, the new Equality Delegate, who assumed office in July 2019, made it evident that the incoming Delegation would not carry forward the initiatives initiated by SUPERA. Consequently, it was decided, in agreement with the

new Delegate, to adopt a more low-profile approach from SUPERA, focusing on the continuation of diagnostic and training activities exclusively within the Network of Equality Nodes. The other two GEHs, namely the Commission and the Advisory Council, were discontinued. As detailed in the subsequent sections, limited opportunities for exchange and feedback from the SUPERA team in the plan formulation process emerged starting from 2021.

The SUPERA team contemplated altering the intervention strategy by crafting a training plan and participatory activities within the faculties to fortify the Gender Equality Nodes and their action groups. Participatory diagnostic activities were proposed to enable interventions in the faculties. Case studies were carried out in some faculties, examining timetable allocations, alongside workshops on the prevention of bullying in the faculties. Priority was also given to networking, promoting opportunities for exchange and mutual support among Nodes. To this end, training courses and workshops were continued, including one on leadership and another on conflict resolution. All the opportunities offered by SUPERA at European level for meetings, training and capacity building were also used. We adapted a planned study originally intended prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the utilization of academic time during and after the pandemic. A survey was conducted, yielding intriguing results,⁷ with substantial engagement from most of the Gender Equality Nodes. Even in the face of the rectorate team and its Delegation's refusal to employ institutional email for survey distribution, this resistance was leveraged to further empower the Nodes within Faculties. The success of the recruitment, with over 25% of research staff providing responses, serves as a testament to this empowerment effort.

Subsequently, in light of the adverse situation of the pandemic context and absence of institutional support, a strong emphasis was placed on fostering affective ties, mutual support, mutual assistance, interdisciplinary collaboration, and inter-faculty teamwork. Throughout the duration of SUPERA, the individuals comprising the network of Gender Equality Nodes experienced empowerment, and the network itself was fortified through a series of activities and collaborative efforts. For instance, the network collaborated with the technical support of the SUPERA team to organize a conference on integrating the gender perspective in teaching in January 2022.

However, this robust network-building stood in stark contrast to the lack of institutional recognition afforded to the Gender Equality Nodes and the network within the forthcoming GEP. The process of formulating the plan at UCM progressed at an exceedingly slow pace. While the SUPERA team was able to submit some initial action proposals early in the process, the Delegation provided us with a first draft of the plan, to which we offered feedback aimed at aligning the plan with the European objectives of Horizon 2020. However, new decrees issued by the Ministry of the Presidency, regulating equality plans in companies in 2020,⁸ disrupted the process of drafting and approving the plan. This decree accorded trade unions a leading and nearly exclusive role in negotiating the plan. In May 2021, the Delegation established commissions to formulate the plan, and SUPERA was initially invited to participate in

7. For the report, see Bustelo et al., 2021a (Spanish-language version) and Bustelo et al., 2021b (English-language version).

8. In October 2020, two Royal Decrees were passed. The first, "Royal Decree 901/2020 of 13 October regulating equality plans and their registration," determines the scope of equality plans and regulates the issues related to the companies obliged to negotiate, draw up and implement an equality plan. It also regulates the negotiating mechanism and procedure in the drafting of the equality plan, the diagnosis that should be included, and the development of monitoring and evaluation systems. The second, "Royal Decree 902/2020 of 13 October on equal pay for women and men," regulates the obligation of calculating the gender equality gap as part of an initial diagnosis and the periodic monitoring and evaluation of the Gender Equality Plans.

the commission alongside faculty staff. However, this involvement was abruptly suspended before the third meeting in September because the Delegate believed that negotiations should exclusively involve the unions. Consequently, the plan that was eventually approved in April 2022 bore little resemblance to the original versions on which the SUPERA team had provided feedback,⁹ and the Network of Gender Equality Nodes was completely disregarded.¹⁰

The introduction of Royal Decree 901/2020¹¹ faced strong criticism from universities. The requirement that GEPs be negotiated primarily with workers' representatives, namely trade unions, excluded any other participatory processes involving the university community. This issue was raised by the Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities (CRUE) and, after different consultations, it was concluded that the Decree applies to private companies, and thus private universities, but not to public ones. This was then brought before the Ministry of Universities' Gender Table (*Mesa de Género*), and consequently, through discussions, the new Organic Law 2/2023, dated 22 March, on the University System, incorporated two types of compulsory plans: one for human resources and another for the overall university strategy. The latter is the plan mandated from the perspective of structural change.

Returning to the Network of Equality Nodes, significant indicators of its impact allow us to conclude that SUPERA has managed to achieve a certain sustainable impact at UCM. Three notable examples include: 1) In the elections for the University Senate and Faculty Boards, the network encouraged its members to stand as candidates to represent equality issues on both their Faculty Boards and the University Senate. Approximately 6–8 individuals applied, and the majority were successfully elected. 2) As a result of SUPERA's work, including a conference on integrating a gender perspective in teaching, most of the Nodes in the network collaborated on two pedagogical innovation projects, in addition to one focused on student participation in the classroom from a gender perspective. This involvement was remarkable as there is no other project at UCM that engages faculty staff from such a diverse range of areas and faculties. 3) The network's active engagement and collective lobbying during the 2023 Rector's election were highly significant. The network successfully met with all candidates to discuss gender-related issues. Unfortunately, the current Rector, who secured re-election, was the sole candidate who declined the invitation to meet with them. Despite the less-than-optimal outcomes concerning UCM's institutional equality agenda, this active involvement increased the network's visibility within the UCM community. As a result, they have decided to continue collaborating within their faculties and as a network within the university.

Had we proceeded as initially planned in 2019, it is conceivable that the SUPERA UCM team might not have had extensive time to dedicate to a bottom-up strategy involving the network of equality nodes. Furthermore, the institutionalization of strategies and the network itself may not have allowed for the cultivation of the nurturing relationships and mutual support that have proven to be immensely impactful. This situation prompts contemplation about the potential of fostering not only empowerment and leadership but also emotional bonds within

9. An indicator of this change is the disappearance of the block on the integration of the gender dimension in the content of research and teaching, which has been replaced by the objective of including the gender perspective in the prevention of occupational risks at the UCM. See UCM, 2022.

10. Objective 8 reads: "Creation of Equality Liaisons with proven gender training for the implementation of the actions of the 2nd UCM Equality Plan in the Faculties and Centres," with only one measure for creating separate "Liaisons" (*Enlaces*), a term which is used in Spanish trade unions, for faculty staff, administrative staff, and students.

11. The other Royal Decree 902/2020, on gender equality gap, has had a very positive impact on the Universities, as for the first time are obliged to calculate the gender equality gap in their institutions as part of the GEP's compulsory diagnosis, and thus there is an official recognition that this gap exists.

networking. In any case, the UCM case serves as an illustration of how bottom-up approaches can stimulate gender change processes even in the absence of top management and institutional support.

5 Concluding Remarks

Among the lessons learned is undoubtedly the need for flexibility and ongoing assessment of the institutional situation and the local context, encompassing both political and social aspects. We tend to assume that the diagnostic phase, a crucial element underscored by the theory of gender-structural change, primarily occurs at the outset. However, the SUPERA experience reminds us that, as a requirement now incorporated into the European Commission's Gender Equality Plan (GEP) standards, this diagnosis must remain constant and continuous to facilitate real-time adjustments and revisions of previously established plans. This demands a high level of technical expertise coupled with strategic foresight, an indispensable component for effecting genuine gender-related structural change within our institutions.

The SUPERA case also allows us to conclude that the funding model through the Research Framework Programmes is most appropriate. It is crucial that consortia and teams have adequate technical knowledge, can collaborate effectively and have the financial solvency necessary for the successful and efficient implementation of the proposed, evaluated, and funded initiatives. However, the complex dynamics not only of gender-structural change, but also of the institutions themselves and the globalised world in which they operate, need to be understood and incorporated into planning from the outset. Changes in local and institutional contexts that can and do occur during the life of projects should be expected and taken into account. If this is recognised and supported at the highest levels of the institution, it should be considered in order to provide some form of protection and to engage potential future teams.

Both top-level management and unions must comprehend that for an inclusive and effective strategic GEP and for the minimal implementation of the GEP, negotiations around it should consistently involve a participatory process encompassing the entire university community. This should not only be the case in the design and adoption phase of the plans, but also in the implementation phase. In countries such as Spain, where legislation has mandated universities to establish GEPs since 2007, there is often a greater emphasis on formulating and negotiating their adoption but less focus on the implementation phase, particularly concerning bottom-up approaches.

The SUPERA project was undoubtedly a success story overall, despite the difficulties and changes experienced by each of the implementing partners in the Consortium. At the UCM, it can be concluded that despite the profound deviation from the original plan and the absence of institutional support for the project from the second year onward, the project has achieved other significant outcomes beyond the approved GEP. These include the establishment of a highly active and well trained network of change agents who continue to work toward gender-structural change within the faculties and across different institutional spaces. These achievements at the UCM, although they can be considered partial in relation to the initial objective, were achieved partly because the first year of implementation benefited from optimal conditions of high-level institutional support. However, they were also achieved because of collaborative efforts, support, technical assistance from the project, mutual learning within the Consortium, and a flexibility to adapt interventions to evolving circumstances and challenges within the context.

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