

## **Bounded Feminist Agency and the Struggle for Inclusion in Academia**

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### **Abstract**

Equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives have gained considerable attention in academic organisations across Europe, driven by policy and legal mandates at both European and national levels. This is particularly relevant for organisations seeking funding from the European framework programme for research and innovation, Horizon Europe (2021-2027), which requires applicant research organisations to have an inclusive Gender Equality Plan (iGEP) to qualify for funding. In this context, EDI are increasingly recognised as an institutional responsibility, shifting from being the personal commitment of a few individuals to a collective organisational obligation. Despite these favourable conditions, progress remains slow, and the burden of driving change frequently still falls on women and marginalised groups, including early-career scholars, racialised people, and LGBTQ+ individuals. Moreover, the agency of these individuals is frequently bounded, with efforts to promote change facing resistance. In this chapter, we focus on the lived experiences of feminist change agents leading initiatives to incorporate EDI perspectives in teaching and research in a case study in an Italian university. To do so, we consider the notions of “power over”, “power to”, and “power with”, as articulated in 2022 by Tildesley, Lombardo and Verge, to identify the barriers to effecting change and the strategies employed by change agents to overcome challenges.

**Keywords:** Equality, diversity, and inclusion; inclusive gender equality plans; academic institutions; feminist agency; gendered power; institutional change

### **1. Introduction**

In recent years, the European Research and Innovation (R&I) landscape has increasingly prioritised Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives. This shift is driven by European and national policies which are progressively recognising the importance of inclusive and equitable institutional practices as a means to strengthen the European Research Area (ERA). Central to these developments is the Horizon Europe Programme (2021-2027), the EU’s flagship funding framework for R&I, which includes a mandatory requirement for public institutions applying for funding to develop and implement a Gender Equality Plan (GEP). This requirement is a crucial step in establishing gender equality as a non-negotiable obligation for all European research organisations, while promoting a broader vision of inclusion, as the

European Commission now requires GEPs to be inclusive (hereafter referred to as iGEPs). By encouraging an intersectional approach to institutional practices, Horizon Europe recognises that gender intersects with other dimensions — such as ethnicity, class, age and disability — and thus addresses the interlinked forms of discrimination that shape individual experiences in the academic environment. While it is not always clear how to translate the idea of intersectionality into concrete iGEP actions, the new criterion has spurred a shift from gender-focused measures to broader EDI initiatives.

The objective of mandatory iGEPs is to catalyse change processes into institutions, elevating it from a peripheral concern to a central criterion of excellence. However, despite the ambitious policy objectives, transformation remains uneven, often relying on voluntarism, with women and marginalised groups, including early-career scholars, racialised people, and LGBTQ+ individuals, shouldering disproportionate responsibility (Dahmen-Adkins & Peterson, 2021; Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019). Moreover, these efforts are frequently constrained by entrenched structural barriers, including resistance to change (Chaves & Benschop, 2023; Hodgins et al., 2022; Tildesley et al., 2022). This resistance can create an indifferent or even hostile environment for those advocating EDI, limiting their effectiveness and potentially discouraging further efforts. Consequently, the transformative potential of iGEPs risks devolving into a mere formality.

The aim of this chapter is to look at the experiences of change agents who are driving EDI in academic institutions. Using Tildesley et al.'s (2022) framework of “power over”, “power to”, and “power with”, we examine how change agents confront resistance, balance demands, and foster inclusion. This analytical framework has proven valuable in reflecting upon and contextualising within a broader theoretical model the challenging path we, the authors of this chapter, have been navigating over the past few years. As scholars engaged in advancing EDI measures in our own institutional settings, we identify ourselves as change agents who are not merely observing these dynamics from the outside but actively participating in the ongoing struggle for promoting a more equal, diverse, and inclusive R&I field. Thus, the reflections of this chapter are informed by continuous observation of, and engagement with, real-world endeavours. By aligning our experiences with those of other change agents, we contribute to a collective narrative that recognises both the struggles, and the incremental victories achieved through persistence, collaboration, and strategic advocacy.

We do so by reflecting on how this theoretical framework applies to the case of Italy, a context characterised by longstanding national mechanisms for promoting equality in public universities, where formal structures provide a rich framework for examining the interplay between institutional policies, cultural dynamics, and the efforts of feminist change agents working to advance EDI goals. We draw on the Italian context as a lens to reflect on our own experiences. Specifically, we focus on two key arenas: first, our efforts in implementing an iGEP within our university; and second, the challenges and strategies we have encountered as part of an international University Alliance composed of eight partner universities intersecting their initiatives. These dual contexts offer us both greater autonomy and an expanded capacity to negotiate institutional changes, providing unique insights into the dynamics of power and agency in advancing gender equality in academia.

The structure of this chapter is as follows: the next section presents the theoretical framework used to analyse gendered power struggles. The following two sections provide an overview of the general context in Italy and reflect on how the specific case study can be reconciled with the concepts of 'power over' on the one hand and 'power to' and 'power with' on the other. We conclude commenting the implications of our experiences for further research into the implementation of feminist policies at Italian universities.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### ***2.1 Change through bounded agency***

Institutional change is a complex and often incremental process shaped by enduring rules, norms, and power structures that resist rapid transformation. As Mahoney and Thelen (2010) suggest, institutions are relatively fixed and unproblematically enforced rules, which include both formal and informal rules that shape behaviour and are resistant to immediate change. Gendered norms within institutions exemplify these stable patterns, as they are embedded in cultural and organisational practices, often requiring significant effort to alter. Nevertheless, institutions are not immune to change; the norms that shape institutional behaviour evolve over time, responding to shifts in social, political, and economic contexts (Chappell, 2006).

Rather than occurring through sudden, transformative events, change is often catalysed by ongoing political contestation and negotiations between institutional actors (Linková & Mergaert, 2021). In academic institutions, the progression of gender reform often relies on “the individual agency and activism of a few passionate individuals in institutions, often with no collective force or voice to systematically challenge the status quo” (Thomson et al., 2022, p. 46). Henderson (2019, after Ferguson, 2015) characterises them as the ‘the gender people’:

In higher education institutions, ‘gender people’ can take two forms: diversity workers who are predominantly on professional services contracts, and academics who deliver curricula, supervise projects and conduct academic research relating to gender. These roles can overlap; diversity work is often given to academics whose work relates to diversity and who visibly occupy the marginalised positions which diversity work seeks to redress (p. 730)

Change efforts often take place in contexts where transformative agency can be both fostered and constrained by institutional structures, interacting in a mutually influencing relationship (Mackay et al., 2010). Structure refers to the established patterns and norms within an institution that provide both opportunities and constraints for action. These structural factors can include formal policies, cultural norms, and organisational practices, which collectively shape the "trading zones" where negotiations for change occur (Linková & Mergaert, 2021). In turn, agency is the capacity of individuals or groups to act within these structures, pushing for change while facing constraints imposed by the institution, on the one hand. On the other hand, agency can also manifest as resistant agency against change, where individuals or groups resist, reinterpret, or undermine reform efforts to preserve the status quo or maintain existing power dynamics (Thomson, 2018).

This interaction is described in the literature as “bounded agency” (Mackay, 2014), illustrating the dual pressures faced by EDI advocates in academic organisations: they are empowered to promote change but constrained by institutional structures and/or resistant agencies that act to hinder their transformative efforts. This bounded agency shapes change agents’ strategies, compelling them to find creative ways to leverage institutional resources, address opposition, and build alliances that can support transformative efforts in a meaningful way.

## **2.2 Resistance to EDI initiatives: “power over”**

Resistance to change endeavours have mainly been conceptualised in the context of initiatives aimed at *gendered* institutional transformation (Campanini & Pizarro, 2021; Hodgins et al., 2022; O’Connor, 2023; Peterson et al., 2021). Scholars have categorised resistance as individual/institutional and explicit/implicit. Individual resistance often stems from personal attitudes or behaviours that oppose EDI efforts. It may be explicit, such as through the denial of existing biases, or more implicit/subtler, such as hesitating to participate in gender training. Institutional resistance, in turn, is embedded within organisational structures and is reflected in processes like legitimisation, decision-making, and resource distribution. It is characterised by systemic obstacles such as inflexible policies, deeply ingrained practices, and prevailing cultural norms that either uphold the status quo or actively resist transformative change (Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013; Mergaert & Lombardo, 2014).

While much of the literature has focused on gendered institutional change, recent studies on EDI initiatives reveal similar patterns of resistance. Institutions have often displayed a high level of discursive commitment to EDI yet simultaneously underperform or resist meaningful structural changes aimed at addressing issues such as racism and cultural diversity (MacKenzie et al., 2023). This paradox is particularly evident in higher education, where resistance manifests in strategies to protect institutional image, such as trivialising or denying critiques, distracting from systemic issues, or undermining those advocating for change (MacKenzie et al., 2023)

As with gender-related initiatives, resistance to EDI is more often implicit, subtle. Studies show that EDI is frequently perceived as external to core academic structures, as evidenced by efforts to sabotage the integration of EDI into curricula through apathy and unwillingness to engage (Marom, 2023). While overt resistance is not always prevalent, it becomes more pronounced in specific contexts, such as online spaces (Marom, 2023), or when initiatives challenge traditional power dynamics. As Saba et al. (2021) explain, resistance is often rooted in a fear of losing power and privilege, particularly among dominant group members who may feel threatened by the changes EDI seeks to implement.

Studies on resistance to EDI initiatives in academia and beyond highlight the extent to which institutions, while publicly supporting EDI, often resist efforts that would require substantive change to their everyday practices. These forms of resistance, whether individual or institutional, explicit or implicit, can be characterised as “power over” – actions or non-actions that serve to maintain an unequal status quo and prevent transformative change (Tildesley et al., 2022).

### ***2.3 Counteracting resistance through transformative agency: “power to” and “power with”***

While resistance to institutional change presents significant barriers, the potential for transformative agency within these structures must not be overlooked. Institutions are not solely sites of constraint but can also serve as strategic platforms for feminist activism (Mackay et al., 2010). Acknowledging the dynamism of institutions and the capacity of feminist insiders to reshape entrenched gendered norms requires a nuanced perspective. This dual role underscores the interplay of structure and agency in shaping the trajectory of change, inviting scholars and practitioners to critically analyse how gendered power dynamics operate within institutional contexts. As O'Connor (2019) asserts, “in a context where gendered power is ubiquitous, feminist agency may be reflected in tactics, which may or may not shift power, but which in any event create space and maintain hope” (p. 827).

Therefore, while it is crucial to understand how resistance operates, it is equally vital to examine the strategies feminist actors employ to confront and dismantle these barriers. This is where Tildesley et al.'s (2022) conceptualisations of “power to” and “power with” become essential. “Power to” encapsulates the individual agency of change actors, enabling them to take decisive actions, devise innovative solutions, and mobilise resources to pursue transformative objectives. Complementing this, “power with” reflects the collective strength derived from building alliances and fostering collaboration, which amplifies the influence of change agents and sustains advocacy efforts against institutional inertia.

Tildesley et al.'s (2022) analysis highlights how power is both a tool for and a barrier to change-oriented efforts, describing “domination and feminist empowerment as co-dependent and dynamic processes, with specific enabling factors in a given institutional context” (p. 906). By reframing resistance as a dynamic and relational process, it becomes possible to recognise how feminist actors face institutional constraints and leverage opportunities for transformation. This perspective situates resistance not simply as an obstacle but as part of an ongoing negotiation that defines the landscape of change.

Understanding resistance as a power dynamic illuminates not only the challenges faced by EDI initiatives but also the multifaceted strategies employed to counteract them. Change agents navigate these dynamics by harnessing both individual and collective agency and forging coalitions (Bleijenbergh, 2018; Bleijenbergh et al., 2021; Dahmen-Adkins & Peterson, 2021; Tildesley & Bustelo, 2024) and identifying windows of individual opportunity to strategically push for change within institutional structures (Mackay, 2021; O'Connor, 2019). These efforts highlight the importance of persistence, strategic advocacy, and the ability to balance competing power dynamics within highly resistant environments.

### **3. Context: EDI in the Italian academia and at UniGE**

The governance structures of Italian public universities reflect a commitment to EDI, influenced by national legislation and European frameworks. Italian higher education benefits from a strong tradition of gender equality in the public sector, rooted in compliance with EU directives and national laws. Key

mechanisms have evolved to promote equality, address discrimination, and foster well-being within academia.

Italian formal structures and legal frameworks underwent significant shifts with the establishment of Committees for Equal Opportunities (CPOs) and the creation of Unified Guarantee Committees (CUGs). The CPOs, introduced under Law 125/1991, were initially tasked with promoting gender equality, addressing gender-based discrimination, and reducing the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles. In 2010, Law 183/2010 established the CUGs, expanding their scope to include multiple forms of discrimination—such as age, disability, ethnicity, and sexual orientation—while integrating the functions of CPOs and anti-mobbing committees. Unlike CPOs, which remain active in some universities (e.g., UniGE) and focus more strongly on gender, CUGs adopt a broader approach, positioning them as potential drivers for promoting EDI, as can be inferred from the full definition of CUG: Unified Guarantee Committee for equal opportunities, the improvement of well-being at work and anti-discrimination.

Through CUGs, public universities develop three-year Positive Action Plans (PAPs) aimed at removing obstacles to equality in the workplace. These plans target gender imbalances in management and operational roles, particularly where the gender gap exceeds two-thirds. Positive action measures are specific, temporary measures which, as an exception to the principle of formal equality, aim to achieve full and effective parity by removing potential barriers related to gender, gender identity, age, origin, religion and disability. PAPs encompass temporary measures designed to counteract systemic inequalities, with initiatives ranging from leadership development to work-life balance measures and policies addressing gender-based violence.

At the European level, Horizon Europe's requirement for iGEPs as an eligibility criterion for research funding has spurred Italian universities to formally adopt these plans, embedding them into institutional policies. However, as noted by Bencivenga et al. (2021), the adoption of iGEPs risks being reduced to a "box-ticking" exercise if not accompanied by deeper cultural and structural changes within institutions. Moreover, there is a risk of duplication with actions already promoted, for instance, by PAPs.

Additionally, entrenched cultural norms, institutional inertia, and uneven accountability hinder effective implementation of EDI initiatives. A study by Chamocho et al. (2024) highlights that while most universities have drafted GEPs, these plans vary widely in clarity, thoroughness, and alignment with guidelines from the CRUI (Conference of Italian University Rectors). Many plans outline objectives and actions but lack clear prioritisation, adequate resources, and robust accountability mechanisms.

Although collaborative dynamics remain limited, structures such as CUGs foster cooperation not only within academia but also across public hospitals, municipalities, and regional administrations, among other institutions. This interconnected approach creates opportunities for coordinated action at both geographical and sectoral levels. As Bencivenga (2019) observes, such networks enhance the collective impact of equality measures by facilitating the exchange of best practices and resources. However, the translation of formal commitments into meaningful cultural change remains inconsistent, highlighting the ongoing need to dismantle systemic barriers and strengthen mechanisms for accountability.

For the sake of brevity, we do not provide an exhaustive analysis of all the activities mentioned above. Instead, we focus on two specific and interrelated contexts where the authors of this chapter have significant decision-making power and operational autonomy. We view this choice as a first step in a broader study that could later be expanded to encompass the entire university through interviews and the analysis of documents and initiatives.

The first context observed in this chapter is the University of Genoa (UniGe), a public Italian university founded in 1481 in Genoa, northern Italy, with additional campuses in other cities across the region, for which it serves as the capital. The university is structured into five schools, which function as coordinating bodies for its 22 departments, organised based on disciplinary affinity and organisational needs. Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of students and staff by gender.

**Table 1. UniGE Academic Year 2022-2023 Enrolment and Staff Breakdown by Gender**

| Category                                | Total  | Male           | Female         |
|-----------------------------------------|--------|----------------|----------------|
| Students                                | 32.792 | 14.359 (43.8%) | 18.433 (56.2%) |
| Academic Staff<br>(Teaching & Research) | 1.441  | 875 (60.7%)    | 566 (39.3%)    |
| Administrative Staff                    | 1.289  | 821 (63.7%)    | 468 (35.3%)    |

At UniGE, numerous initiatives are linked to EDI-related topics, in accordance with the Italian regulations mentioned above and the measures adopted independently by the University (Table 2).

**Table 2. UniGE activities and Statutory Bodies related to gender equality, inclusion, and respect for diversity**

| Year | Activity / Initiative                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2000 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CPO (Commission for Equal Opportunities) established to protect gender equality and contrast discrimination. Gender Budget published annually.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                     |
| 2001 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Services for the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities and SLD (Specific Learning Disabilities).</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| 2008 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Work-life balance initiatives: subsidised agreements with elementary schools, kindergartens, and summer centres.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                   |
| 2012 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CUG (Committee for the Guarantee of Equal Opportunities, the Well-being of Employees, and Non-discrimination) established. Positive Action Plan published every three years.</li> </ul>                                                                                                       |
| 2015 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Agreements with institutions to support staff members caring for non-self-sufficient individuals.</li> <li>Double university student ID for gender-transitioning students, allowing them to obtain a temporary bureaucratic profile and a student ID bearing their preferred name.</li> </ul> |
| 2017 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Remote working regulations introduced for administrative staff.</li> <li>Trusted Advisor (Consigliere/a di fiducia) role introduced with a 3-year mandate, providing professional support to those seeking assistance regarding harassment or mobbing.</li> </ul>                             |
| 2018 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continued implementation of the Code of Conduct and other equality and non-discrimination measures.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                |
| 2021 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rector's Delegate for Equal Opportunities and Inclusion appointed.</li> <li>Whistle-blower protection procedure introduced.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                        |
| 2022 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parents' Fund set up for specific categories of non-tenured teaching staff, including research scholarship holders, PhD students, and ESRs.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                        |
| 2024 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Code of Conduct established to prevent any form of discrimination, harassment, or mobbing in the workplace.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                        |

In this chapter, we consider the concepts of “power over”, “power to”, and “power with” in relation to Area 4 of UniGe's GEP, which spans the period 2022-2025 and is updated annually. Area 4 is centered on integrating gender perspectives into research and teaching programmes, serving as a key pillar for advancing gender equality in academia. We have chosen to focus on Area 4 because, in contrast to other areas such as recruitment, which is constrained by Italy's top-down university recruitment system, where decisions are established at the ministerial level, actions within Area 4 can serve as a pathway for broader institutional change. Teaching and research are areas of autonomy, allowing for the adoption of EDI initiatives without external constraints.

It is important to emphasise the inclusive dimension of the GEP, which, while formally adhering to the terminology proposed by the EU, also includes measures that place it fully within an EDI framework in synergy with other strategic university documents — such as the PAP and the Gender Budget. Table 3 provides an overview of the specific actions planned and implemented as part of Area 4 UniGE's GEP.

**Table 3. Actions in Area 4: Integration of Gender Dimension in Research and Teaching Programmes 2022-2025**

| Objective                                                                                                                     | Action / Sub-Actions                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Promote awareness of equal opportunities and combat stereotypes and biases                                                    | <b>4.1.a</b> – Organise public cultural initiatives (e.g., conferences, seminars, scientific dissemination events).<br><b>4.1.b</b> – Conduct training on equality and gender dimension in research activities.                                                                               |
| Ensure gender balance in academic events                                                                                      | <b>4.2.a</b> – Develop and publish guidelines to promote gender balance in events.<br><b>4.2.b</b> – Monitor the application of these guidelines.<br><b>4.2.c</b> – Monitor the impact of the guidelines.                                                                                     |
| Monitor and evaluate gender dimensions in scientific production                                                               | <b>4.3.a</b> – Propose adding a field in the IRIS database for gender or diversity inclusion in scientific publications.<br><b>4.3.b</b> – Map competitive research projects addressing gender or inclusion themes.                                                                           |
| Promote gender-focused research                                                                                               | <b>4.4.a</b> – Establish at least two annual scholarships for theses or doctoral research on the cultural, social, economic, and innovative value of gender and diversity variables.                                                                                                          |
| Encourage the integration of gender dimensions in research processes                                                          | <b>4.5.a</b> – Produce and distribute informational materials on integrating gender and intersectionality.<br><b>4.5.b</b> – Organise at least one annual training event for faculty on gender integration in research.<br><b>4.5.c</b> – Highlight gender balance in research dissemination. |
| Prevent and address gender gaps in STEM disciplines                                                                           | <b>4.6.a</b> – Design and implement outreach activities to promote STEM among high school students.<br><b>4.6.b</b> – Conduct campaigns to highlight career opportunities in the digital revolution for high school students.                                                                 |
| Enhance training on the proper use of gender in administrative language                                                       | <b>4.7.a</b> – Organise synchronous and asynchronous training (e.g., "information pills").                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Promote the use of inclusive and non-discriminatory language                                                                  | <b>4.8.a</b> – Develop and deliver webinars on non-discriminatory language use.                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Foster participation of underrepresented genders in academic governance                                                       | <b>4.9.a</b> – Conduct feasibility studies for gender parity initiatives in research and teaching projects (aligned with the Athena SWAN model).                                                                                                                                              |
| Prevent and address gender gaps in STEM disciplines                                                                           | <b>4.10.a</b> – Design and implement outreach activities promoting STEM among high school students.<br><b>4.10.b</b> – Conduct campaigns showcasing career opportunities in the digital revolution for high school students.                                                                  |
| <b>New objectives and actions introduced for year 2023-2024</b>                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Facilitate researchers not directly involved in other GEP actions to understand, apply, and collaborate on GEP implementation | <b>4.11.a</b> – Create an EDI plan at Department level (following the Athena SWAN model).                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Make new students aware of the GEP and other UniGE initiatives promoting EDI                                                  | <b>4.12.a</b> – Prepare materials for dissemination.<br><b>4.12.b</b> – Distribute materials to new students.<br><b>4.12.c</b> – Update materials for dissemination.                                                                                                                          |
| Promote the integration of the gender+ dimension in doctoral pathways through the "EDI Young Researchers" group               | <b>4.13.a</b> – Organise at least five periodic meetings annually.                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |

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The second context of observation concerns the second phase of the work of the European University Alliance Ulysseus, of which UniGE is a member. In this phase, UniGe has designed and coordinated a work package dedicated to the promotion of EDI theories and practices within the partnership, which includes seven other partner institutions. This work builds on the results of the first three-year phase of the Alliance, which laid the foundations for a collaborative and structured approach.

The aim of the work package is to coordinate and harmonise the partners' strategies and initiatives, based on their respective GEPs and ongoing EDI-related activities, to create a common, inclusive environment. These efforts are important to facilitate study and work experiences that will take place at

multiple partner universities and to position the Alliance as a model of an international university that shares inclusive values and goals. In this way, the Alliance aims to foster an academic environment that embodies the principles of EDI and addresses the current challenges of the global higher education landscape.

#### **4. Bounded agency: challenges and opportunities in the University of Genoa and Ulysseus University alliance**

##### **4.1 Power Over**

When observing our experiences related to the implementation of actions in Area 4 of the GEP and the similar work carried out with the European Alliance partners, examples of explicit “power over” — i.e., dominance dynamics exercised at individual or institutional level that perpetuate the status quo — are marginal. This is likely because what is set out in Area 4 of the GEP, an official document approved by the academic governing bodies, is enforceable without further authorisations. Furthermore, the androcentric organisational culture has little scope to manifest itself through mechanisms that reward masculinity or devalue the work of women in this specific field, especially because the actors in these contexts are almost exclusively female researchers, professors and administrators who are aware of such dynamics.

Thus, the resistance that we, as change agents, identify in our context manifests in subtler forms, such as general disinterest, low engagement of the broader institutional community in GEP activities, or delayed reaction times. These behaviors, while not amounting to overt sabotage or formal opposition, nonetheless hinder timely and effective implementation. This passive resistance reflects a broader indifference to EDI initiatives rather than active opposition, making it necessary to adopt strategies that proceed “under the radar.” Actions undertaken in this context are designed to remain within formally and broadly authorised boundaries, enabling progress while avoiding scrutiny or obstruction. This approach ensures that initiatives align with institutional principles on paper while advancing concrete outcomes in practice.

Nevertheless, it was crucial to rely on people who were already involved in EDI issues, who were willing to initiate action and involve colleagues and students. In addition, highlighting the work done by the Ulysseus partnership through the sharing of initiatives launched by individual partner universities has exerted a kind of external pressure to encourage UniGe stakeholders to integrate a gender perspective into their teaching and research. This strategy is particularly effective as the university alliances fund extensive staff and student exchanges, so harmonisation of EDI practises and policies is essential to facilitate mobility and collaboration. At the same time, we are aware that these are relatively small measures that do not in themselves entail any structural changes. Their limited scope allows us to implement them even under conditions of subtle resistance. However, we are aware that at some point we may encounter major obstacles that could significantly hinder progress. In this respect, engagement with the wider scientific debate will be crucial in addressing such challenges, as it provides insights from other contexts where similar forms of resistance have been successfully overcome.

## 4.2 Power To

As for the ability of individuals to act despite resistance by using innovative strategies and adapting to institutional contexts (power to), the measures exemplified by Tildesley et al. (2022) are fully applicable in our context:

- **Integrating gender equality into prevailing discourses**, e.g. in relation to academic quality: this is facilitated by the widespread nature of both GEP and Ulysseus, so that inclusive perspectives can be addressed in numerous academic initiatives and working groups.
- **Building legitimacy through global campaigns** (e.g. #MeToo, LGBTI Safe Space): The #finisce qui campaign enabled UniGE to raise awareness of discrimination issues through a targeted communication campaign that was disseminated across all departments.
- **Engagement of high-level stakeholders**, such as rectors, to enforce compliance with equality standards: In Ulysseus, the Rectors' Committee meets regularly and communication with individual rectors ensures that attention to EDI issues is maintained, as they are not considered equally relevant at all partner universities.

Other elements associated with “power to” in our context:

|                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. <b>Micro-dissemination actions:</b>                                                                                                                   | <b>Dissemination actions during study programmes or national/international events.</b> | This includes participation in roundtables, conferences, working groups and summer schools, individual presentations of EDI-related topics and promotion of the adoption of our strategies. Researchers who are sensitised to EDI issues can act as multipliers. This includes the activation of co-operation agreements (e.g. research grants or participation in tenders such as MSC Actions) with promising researchers to develop and share innovative ideas.                                                                                                                                                                               |
|                                                                                                                                                          | <b>Participation in EU-funded projects</b>                                             | EU projects that deal with EDI topics and serve as a lever for change. The intensive project work enabled by the networks available to us has led to participation in up to four concurrent projects <sup>[1]</sup> that focus on gender equality and EDI and serve as catalysts for ideas and appropriately funded exchange.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Relevance:</b> These examples show how individual actors can use innovative and targeted strategies to drive the implementation of EDI measures.      |                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| 2. <b>Focus on young STEM researchers:</b>                                                                                                               | <b>Raise awareness</b>                                                                 | Continuously raise awareness among young researchers in all STEM disciplines. In line with area 4 of the GEP, many actions target STEM disciplines as these areas face greater challenges in promoting inclusive policies. The age of stakeholders is also crucial, as interest in EDI is generally stronger among younger people. A practical example is the adoption of inclusive perspectives in a basic research project on nanotechnology, which gradually introduced a different approach to scientific research by linking medium- and long-term results and potential impacts of basic research with society and specific stakeholders. |
| <b>Relevance:</b> This is an investment in future capacity to advocate for cultural and institutional change, a clear example of individual empowerment. |                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |

Notes: [1] GenderEX\_Gender for Excellence in Research, H2020, GA No 952432; MILIEU\_Women, Disability and Inclusion\_H2020, GA No 95329; STEP\_STEM Research Equality Diversity and Inclusion, Horizon Europe, GA No. 101078933; EDIRE\_Equality diversity and inclusion for research enhancement in Bosnia Herzegovina, Horizon Europe; GA No 101060145.

#### 4.3 Power With

Examples of collective action to achieve common goals through alliances and co-operation (power with), as described by Tildesley et al (2022):

- The **creation of networks** between equality bodies and progressive academic actors: for example, participation in conferences and study days organised by the University of Turin, Italy, which foster exchanges between European alliances that include Italian and French partners. Ulysseus presented its experience with EDI topics involving a considerable number of alliances. In addition, the University Diversity and Inclusion Working Group, coordinated by the University of Rotterdam, which meets every two months, compares the initiatives and strategies of various alliances.
- **Engagement of students and administrators as allies:** At Ulysseus, various activities involve students (e.g. the UlySA association, which represents the students of the eight universities) and administrators (given the European Universities' focus on creating joint, formally recognised degree programmes). The involvement of these stakeholders enables proposals and strategies related to EDI to be made and ensures that new services and initiatives are accessible from the outset, avoiding subsequent changes and adaptations.
- **Utilising informal spaces** to build support and legitimacy for equality-related work: The University engages in activities that involve the wider public, both individually and through stakeholders (businesses, NGOs, committees, etc.). Ulysseus' ongoing actions promote the idea of global accessibility and respect for diversity at a territorial level.

Other “power with” elements in our case are:

|                                                         |                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|---------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. <b>Creation of a critical mass:</b>                  | <b>Identifying and consolidating a critical mass of people capable of driving change and counteracting institutional inertia</b>            | At UniGE, the GEP Implementation Committee consists of 18 members, while entire departments are involved in monitoring and implementing Area 4 actions, such as the Department of Civil, Chemical and Environmental Engineering (DICCA), which has developed an EDI plan modelled on the GEP, but focused on department-level actions and inspired by the Athena SWAN initiative.                                           |
|                                                         | <b>Relevance:</b> This activity requires organised collaboration and collective, sustained commitment to overcome institutional resistance. |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| 2. <b>Work within the Ulysseus University Alliance:</b> | <b>Dedicated work package</b>                                                                                                               | Creating a work package to address EDI issues under the leadership of UniGE and developing policies and strategies that align the goals of the Alliance with the specific needs of participating universities.                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|                                                         | <b>Harmonise EDI measures</b>                                                                                                               | Establish EDI-related measures that foster cooperation and harmonisation between the participating universities, which will be initiated during the first three-year project phase and consolidated during the second four-year phase.                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|                                                         | <b>Relevance:</b> This large-scale collaboration is a clear example of Power With using the Alliance to promote joint institutional change. |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| 3. <b>Use of non-formal activities</b>                  | <b>Creating networks between EDI units and progressive academic or administrative actors.</b>                                               | Creating networks between EDI units and progressive academic or administrative actors.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|                                                         | <b>Involving students and young researchers as allies.</b>                                                                                  | A practical example is the creation of the UniGE EDI Young Researchers Group, which is composed of PhD students who take or intend to take a gender, EDI or intersectional perspective in their research. Regular meetings and interactions with EU projects on gender issues, organising summer schools, expanding networks, building alliances between universities and facilitating pedagogical and scientific exchange. |
|                                                         | <b>Relevance:</b> These actions reflect the value of collaboration and building informal links to support EDI-related policy work.          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |

## 5. Conclusions

In this chapter, our primary aim was to propose specific measures, informed by strategies of feminist agency that often operate "under the radar." Our reflections reveal that, in areas such as the inclusion of EDI perspectives into teaching and research — where academics have the freedom to make decisions independently and are less reliant on top-down institutional directives — overt resistance has generally been minimal. However, our experience as change agents suggests that progress is frequently hindered by more subtle forms of resistance, such as passive disengagement, delayed actions, and indifference.

We have observed that institutional structures in Italian universities present both opportunities and limitations for advancing EDI goals. National mechanisms for equality, alongside the formal requirements of European frameworks such as Horizon Europe, create an environment that supports the integration of gender equality into organisational practices. Yet, cultural inertia and uneven engagement across

institutions often dilute the transformative potential of these frameworks, reducing them to mere procedural compliance.

Strategies rooted in the concepts of "power to" and "power with" emerge as crucial for overcoming these challenges. Individual agency and innovative tactics, combined with collective efforts and alliances, amplify the capacity of change agents to drive meaningful institutional reform. Our case studies, including the implementation of iGEPs at UniGE and the EDI-focused initiatives within the Ulysseus European University Alliance, illustrate how feminist actors can navigate resistance, build networks, and integrate EDI principles into institutional practices.

In conclusion, advancing EDI requires a sustained commitment to cultural and structural change within academia. Redistributing responsibility for EDI efforts, recognising the contributions of feminist change agents, and fostering collaboration across institutional and international contexts are essential for ensuring lasting progress. By situating our reflections within a specific context, we hope to contribute to a broader understanding of the strategies and challenges involved in implementing feminist policies in academic settings, offering insights for future research and action.

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