

# The Intersecting Dynamics between the Implementation of GEPs in HEIs and The COVID-19 Pandemic

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## *The "Gendered" Pandemic*

The impact of COVID-19 on gender equality has been discussed in numerous articles and reports, which show us how this pandemic is affecting women disproportionately when compared to men and thus deepening the gender inequalities. Accordingly, this pandemic has also created new challenges for the career progression of women in academia: "Earlier research confirms that women academics carry large teaching burdens, with relatively little time for research and publication compared to their male colleagues, many of whom do not carry equivalent domestic responsibilities" (Moodley & Gowus, 2020). The additional burden of childcare, domestic responsibilities and homeschooling caused by the pandemic have been **falling** on women which has already resulted with the fact that "Women in academic science and medicine are publishing far less since the pandemic hit" (Isselbacher, 2020). Furthermore, it should also be highlighted that it has been a particularly difficult period "for single-parent households, the majority of which are female-headed" (Gabster et al, 2020).

## *Integrating GEPs to the new Future of Higher Education and Research*

Recently, European Commission (EC) has announced that to have a Gender Equality plan (GEP) in-place will be an eligibility criterion for all legal entities to get funding from the EU's 2021-27 R&D programme, Horizon Europe. "Some of the requirements of the equality plans considered by the European Commission include the formal publication of the approved equality plan on the institution's website, the existence of experts in equality policies to carry it out and the commitment of Human Resources, disaggregated data and the development of training in equality" (ICMAB, 2020). This would be one of

the milestones for enhancing equalities in European academia since the Treaty of Rome. Nevertheless, this requirement may need to be re-designed according to the new dynamics triggered by the pandemic in higher education and research. Pandemic has not only devastatingly impacted gender equality but also started a huge and rapid change process on all the aspects of academia. Digital/Blended Learning has been one of the major challenges that needs to be quickly adapted at the very beginning of the pandemic. One of the Rectors, acting at a European University, who have responded to the EWORA Survey titled “Putting a Gender Perspective to Covid19 and Higher Education” described this unexpected and enormous transformation as follows; “we had to change to distance learning and to home office from one day to the next. This sudden change was at first a shock for both the staff and the students” (Saglamer et al, 2021).

Within this regard, the intersecting dynamics of higher education and pandemic should be adapted into the new criterion of “having GEPs implemented to be eligible to join Horizon Europe”. It is well reported that the future of higher education will never be the same as before and thus the implementation of GEPs should have been organized accordingly. “In 2025, higher education will be a hybrid of in-person and online learning, according to a new Ipsos survey for the World Economic Forum” (Whiting, 2020). Consequently, Implementing GEPs without considering the new future of higher education and the new “gendered” challenges that pandemic brought will fall short from the aim of creating a diverse, inclusive and equal academic environment. It is extremely beneficial for RPOs and RFOs to join to the Horizon Europe to be able to carry out research and networking activities with a sufficient funding. However, they may not be able implement efficient GEPs in a short period of time within the existing circumstances and uncertainties that pandemic has caused. However, the existing difficulties that HEIs are struggling to solve out should not set “gender” issues back. Gender inequalities being deepened by the pandemic should be reconciled with the new future of higher education. Nevertheless, this process of reconciliation needs a careful and time devoting planning in order to be able to implement GEPs which will cover the new burdens that all female and male academics are encountering and potential other burdens that may come up in times of crises.

### *Settlement of GEPs in HEIs in times of Crises*

Please find a list of recommendations for achieving a successful **process for Implementing GEPs during and after pandemic;**

- **Raising Awareness:** The Impact of the Pandemic on Gender Equality should be widely discussed within European Academia so that gender issues would not be put back while dealing with other emergent and unexpected challenges. It is rather important to promote how “gender” is intersecting with the change process that all academia is getting through since the beginning of pandemic.
- **Understanding Resistance:** University leaders have been extremely busy especially while shifting on-campus education to the online education and might intend to resist implementing gender policies within such an extraordinary period. Therefore, the types of resistances and the strategies to deal with them should be carefully mapped. The Handbook on Resistance to Gender Equality in Academia by the FESTA project funded by FP7 puts forward that “finalizing the process of change depends on the bottom-top combination of

policies” (Saglamer et al, 2016). Having a GEP implemented merely because as it is a requirement may bring other types of resistances to gender equality and therefore a sufficient time period for minimizing resistances and integrating all parties is needed while adopting a GEP.

- **The financial challenges;** caused by the pandemic should have been analysed since there may be lack of resources for the implementation of GEPs. It has been widely discussed that pandemic has caused severe financial problems in universities. One of the EUA report titled “The impact of the Covid-19 crisis on university funding in Europe” argues that “all sources of university income will be affected in some way in the short to medium term” (Estermann et al, 2020).
- **GEPs to be implemented should have a special attention/section on the gendered impacts of global crises.** How pandemic or other crises (such as climate change etc.) deepening the existing gender inequalities in academia or what other challenges are being emerged in this period and also what would be the potential challenges to be emerged during post-corona times should be analysed to be included by GEPs.
- **Blended Learning:** The new Future of Higher Education Area can also bring new opportunities to support work-life balance instead of diminishing it. As the blended learning will be dominating the future of higher education, new patterns of work-life balance should be estimated to be placed in GEPs. How the flexibility of the “working environment” can help academics’ career progression would be a key question to be included in GEPs.
- **Pandemic and Mobility Programmes:** The impact of pandemic on the international academic mobility programs is another facet of the new future of higher education. As “blended learning” is emerging from this ongoing change process, “virtual mobility” is also coming up in a similar manner. GEPs should have strategies to reduce the gender inequalities in academic mobility existing before the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, GEPs should also include new strategies to be developed for offering gender-neutral opportunities while academics are mobilizing and networking virtually. Bos, et al (2017) suggests that “improving the family-friendly features of conferences could be one way to patch the “leaky pipeline” of young female scholars leaving the academy”. Therefore, the new future of higher education needs to ensure that mobility/networking opportunities (whether blended or online) will be equally achieved by employing strategies such family friendly conferences.

### *Gender- As a Cross Cutting Issue*

Consequently, revealing out the intersecting dynamics of gender equality policies and the impact of pandemic in higher education and research is a key to enhance an equal, diverse and inclusive European Research Area. Implementing a GEP should not be isolated from other change processes and designing a GEP needs to have a wholly integrated approach to be able to response unexpected challenges such as COVID-19 pandemic. Gender inequalities are being exacerbated day by day and there is no time to loose, however, adapting a GEP in a short period of time may lack several other issues which gender is cross-cutting with and this can also bring new resistances to gender equality.

Therefore, a reconciliation period for raising awareness, getting involved all parties, minimizing resistances and offering solutions to the “gendered academic careers” according to the new life patterns triggered by the pandemic are needed for universities to be able to manage a successful change process of implementing a GEP and make it lively and sustainable in the new future which we are all trying to adapt.

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