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LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS – A CASE STUDY OF CHANGES IN GENDER EQUALITY IN DECISION-MAKING BODIES

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Abstract

Despite the general legal and social environments in Europe and in Portugal being positive to the institutionalisation of equal opportunities in Higher Education Institutions (HEI), gender inequality seems to persist in stereotyped perceptions embedded within organisational cultures. The European Union (EU) has been developing several programmes to fund the promotion of Gender Equality Plans (GEP) in HEIs in the European context.

It is encouraging to find that in some specific cases the implementation of these progresses has positive results. This is the case of the institution studied here, which committed to equality beyond rhetoric. The paper reports on a case study of best practices in promoting gender equality in decision-making bodies at the middle-management level in the University of Aveiro, in Portugal. Based on an international H2020 funded research project, the University of Aveiro has implemented GEPs resulting in an increase in the number of women in decision-making bodies. This paper explains the process of cultural change in general, as well as the rector's team attitudes in particular to promote progress in the pursuit of gender equality in decision-making bodies.

When the project started, women constituted only 5% of members in these middle management bodies (i.e. Deans of both university departments and polytechnic schools). One year after the implementation of the project, this percentage increased to 20%. The paper details the several steps taken to reach this result. First, the problem was identified based on a quantitative analysis of the gender composition of decision-making bodies at UA; then, the process through which members access these bodies was also analysed. In a second stage of the project, the rector was informed and instigated to more proactive in increasing women's representativeness in the following elections. Without changing the regulations, it was possible to develop informal strategies. These are related with the identification of women with competencies to perform the job and with personal empowerment for them to appoint themselves for the position.

Although progresses have been made, it is important to acknowledge that these initiatives are not enough to promote structural changes and more needs to be done to accelerate the pace of progress as well as to change institutional practices and individual mentalities.

Keywords: Decision-making bodies; gender equality; higher education institutions; Gender Equality Plan; Portugal.

1 INTRODUCTION

Gender equality is one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set in 2015 by the United Nations General Assembly and intended to be achieved by the year 2030, as part of UN Resolution 70/1, the 2030 Agenda. However, Gender equality meaning is socially, politically and geographically constructed [1]. When compared with other regions in the globe, Europe has been classified as the 'promised land' of gender equality, especially in the education sector [2].

This is especially true for the European Union (EU), since it has been producing common European policies on gender equity since the eighties, greatly due to the influence of women's groups [3]. Although initially EU-gender policy was mainly sustained in equal opportunities in the labour market, other types of political strategies emerged such as positive action measures and gender mainstreaming [4]. Nevertheless the research on convergence of the European gender norms, which compares different member states conclude for the existence of diverse policy outcomes [1] [5] [6].

Although Higher Education Institutions (HEI) are expected to be in the frontline to implement democratic and social values, being crucial in the intent of the EU to stimulate the maximum effective use of women in the labour force [7], they have been criticized by their medieval human resources practices [8].

In this context, with the creation of the European Research Area (ERA) (Doc 8194/05), the EU tried to push member states not only to reinforce human resources in science and technology but also to stipulate targets to increase women participation in industrial research and technology and to increase significantly the number of women in leading positions. In this sense, gender equality within ERA encompasses gender balance in research teams at all levels, gender balance in decision-making, and the integration of the gender dimension in the content of R&I proposals and procedures.

Since gender equality and gender mainstreaming in research has been identified as one of the key priorities for the ERA, specific funding was assigned to researchers to implement gender equality in HEI. As a result, many European HEI have been taking initiatives to develop and implement GEP. Although there are difficulties and risks in implementing these plans [9], there is also evidence of positive results of its implementation [10] [11].

The aim of this paper is to expose the positive experience of the implementation of a GEP in a Portuguese university in the specific case of women's participation in decision-making bodies.

The paper starts with a reflection on Gender Equality as a priority in the ERA, presenting then the methodology and the results. After exposing the results of the implementation of the GEP and its discussion, the paper ends with the main conclusions.

2 EUROPEAN POLICIES IN GENDER EQUALITY – THE FOCUS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Gender equality meaning is socially, politically and geographically constructed [1]. In the EU context, the importance of gender equality has been translated firstly in the EU intent to promote equal opportunities in the labour market and, more recently, in a gender mainstreaming perspective [4]. Particularly relevant in the promotion of more gender equal European societies is the situation of women in science, which has been the focus of specific policies in the EU.

The kick-start on the concerns of Europe for equality between women and men in science and technology can be traced back to the 1980's when a national report was produced in Germany, in 1989. Other European member states also joined this initiative to develop reports on gender equality and contribute to build European policies to improve women's situation in science. That is the case of The Rising Tide (1994), in the UK; Excellence in Research (1995), in Denmark, and Women in Academia (1998), in Finland.

However, the nodal point in the definition of European policies to promote women in science was in 1998, when the Commission invited over 300 specialists to attend "Women and Science" conference in Brussels. As a result of the general consensus on the need to implement gender mainstreaming policies, the Fifth Framework Program included a strategy to promote research for, to and in relation with women. With the particular intent to create better (in)equality indicators and sharing experiences, the European Commission created the Gender watch system [12].

All the subsequent Framework Programs had a gender mainstreaming proposal. In the last framework programs, the objective was defined as to support actions trying to achieve structural and cultural changes in the way that gender and diversity are managed in universities and research institutions. Systemic strategies to increase participation and to advance the careers of female researchers, were expected to be developed and implemented by universities and research centers. In the same way as they were expected to cooperate to develop common actions and exchange good practices in the implementation of structural change.

The gender mainstreaming perspective is clear in Horizon 2020 where two strategies were identified to promote gender dimension in the contents of research and innovation. Not only there was a recommendation of eliminate the lack of equality in participation in research in all stages of the scientific career and in different fields of research; but researchers were also pushed to integrate the gender dimension as a dimension in all research processes. Furthermore, the commitment of the research institutions ought to be included in the clauses of the agreement.

Other initiatives developed by the EU are also relevant in structuring the relevance of gender equality in Europe. Particularly relevant was the creation, in 2006, of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). This institute has been used as an instrument to make it real and strengthen the need to disseminate information, exchange good practices and develop new methodological instruments to promote gender mainstreaming. Six lines for action were defined by EIGE, in 2010, to promote gender equality in Europe, namely: 1. Equal economic independence; 2. Equal pay for equal work and for work of equal value, 3. Equality in decision making processes; 4. Dignity, integrity and eradication of gender violence; 5. Gender equality in external actions; and 6. Horizontal aspects.

Equally relevant were the reports created by the European Commission, particularly, in 2000, the European Technology Assessment Network (ETAN) report. Adding to this, the European Commission along with the Helsinki Group, started collecting data on the situation of women in science turned public with the She Figures. Turning these statistics and indicators on Gender Equality in Science public was a way to monitor the situation and the advances towards gender equality in the spheres of higher education and the labour market within all EU States. The more recent available data of the She Figures report reveal that, despite the considerable differences between countries, women are increasing their participation in higher education, but horizontal and vertical segregation tend to remain unchangeable. Adding to this, the She Figures" report also attest the existence of a glass ceiling for women who are less represented in decision making positions.

In fact, the under-representation of women in decision-making positions and as highest positions in higher education are identified as one of the causes why the lack of gender equality in science has become entrenched [9].

The position of the different countries revealed in the She Figures is also a result of their distinct capacity or willingness to implement gender mainstreaming policies. Portugal is an interesting case of study in this regard.

Since 1976 the Portuguese constitution has eliminated any kind of discrimination based on gender, with article 13 stipulating the right to equality between women and men. The constitution stipulated other important principles like the right to have work (article 58). The same article (58) defined the freedom to choose a job or a profession and the conditions to eliminate all kinds of obstacles in access to any job, occupation or professional rank based on gender. The right to have the same salary for the same work and protection during maternity were also considered. These legal changes were developed at a time when the international organisations like the OECD or ONU were particularly active in calling attention to women's rights. In the 1980s, inspired by Sweden's Equal Opportunities (EO) policies, a Commission for the Equality in Work and Employment (CITE) was created in the Ministry of Work as a way of promoting equality in law for women and men at work (Monteiro, 2010). When Portugal joined the EU –in 1986 –it was required to comply with its directives on EO. Other important legal changes have included: equality of opportunity and treatment at work in the public sector (1988), establishing a Commission for Equality and Women Rights (1991), and legislation addressing direct and indirect discrimination in the workplace (1997). The impact of the EU's EO directives has been clear in the past ten years in relation to part-time work (Laws 103/99); parental leave (Law 7/2000); applying the principle of equal remuneration for women and men in the workplace; and equal treatment of men and women to access employment, training, promotions, and working conditions.

Despite this general legal framework for EO, there are no traditions of hard Affirmative Actions (AA) plans in workplaces in Portugal. The only exception is the Law 3/2006 of 21st August (amended by Laws 1/2017 of 2nd of May and 1/2019 of 29th March), imposing quotas for female candidates in political parties. With respect to Higher Education, there is no national legislation requiring AA plans in the Portuguese higher education system [13]. Nevertheless, the number of women in academic staff equals the number of men in the beginning of the career, and the country is one of the OECD members with a higher number of women in STEM (OECD, 2018). Nevertheless, women are still underrepresented in top positions in the career and in leadership roles [14].

3 METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

This section aims to present the work carried out in this research. It starts by briefly characterizing the project under which the data was collected, then it presents into more detail its implementation at the University of Aveiro, following which the main results are highlighted.

3.1 CHANGE project

3.1.1 Characterization

Under the Horizon 2020 funding programme, the project “CHANGE” aims to create and implement tailor-made gender equality plans (GEPs) in research performing organisations (RPOs). By doing so, it intends to stimulate institutional cultural change towards gender equal work environments and foster the importance of gender dimension inclusive research and innovation programmes in research funding organisations (RFOs). An important aspect for CHANGE is the inclusion of the results and experiences of previous European projects with similar objectives for achieving structural change in research institutions towards gender equal work environments.

The idea of the project stemmed from the widely acknowledged research-to-practice gap and knowledge-to-action gap. This gap intends to be closed by integrating relevant actors and stakeholders from the beginning and co-producing gender equality knowledge together, in order to come up with practical knowledge. The involvement of key actors, called Transfer Agents (TAs), within each organisation will, together with the core consortium partners, transmit co-produced gender equality knowledge inside the partner institutions [15]. This approach aims to ensure the promotion and sustainable institutionalization of the gender equality plans beyond the project duration, which is four years. The CHANGE consortium is composed by seven institutions from six countries (Austria, Germany, Portugal, Slovenia, Slovakia and Israel), of which five are implementing partners and two are leaders.

The general methodological approach of CHANGE is built upon a condensed version of Kotter’s model on how to achieve structural change in organisations, which in this case are RPOs and RFOs towards more gender-inclusive science and research. The CHANGE model includes five stages: 1. Institutional gender benchmarking and awareness raising; 2. Feedback and planning; 3. Quick action; 4. Strategic action and 5. Sustainability and knowledge transfer.

During the first phase, the implementing partners undertook an institutional gender equality benchmarking, including gender-segregated data, also raising awareness for the needs and benefits of gender equality. The second phase is devoted to exchanging the collected data, for identifying and understanding institutional mechanisms and structures, which can support or hinder the success of the GEPs. During this phase, the GEPs will be individually designed taking into account the institutional and national circumstances. The third phase relates to the implementation of short-term actions so as to increase the visibility of the project within the institution and the awareness of gender equality issues. Phase four is devoted to the implementation of middle and long-term actions, which are designed for changing the organisational culture of RPOs. Middle-term actions start and finish during the project life cycle, while long-time actions start during CHANGE and are maintained beyond the project duration. The fifth, and last stage deals with the sustainability of the GEPs or specific actions to be discussed and fostered. Another emphasis during this phase lies on the regional, national and international knowledge transfer of the co-produced gender equality knowledge within the project. Workshops are set-up as means for dissemination, communication and exploitation.

The project is very much based on the co-production of knowledge and on building communities of practice among RPOs in each implementing country, ensuring a spill-over effect of CHANGE results. One of its results are policy papers based on this strategic stakeholder involvement, aiming at closing the theory-to-practice gap. Thus, the project aims to contribute to stimulating institutional cultural change towards gender equal work environments in RPOs and fostering the importance of gender dimension inclusive research and innovation programmes in RFOs.

3.2 Implementation of CHANGE project in the University of Aveiro

3.2.1 Phase one

In the first stage of the project, the problem was identified based on a quantitative analysis of the gender composition of decision-making bodies at the University of Aveiro (UA). Gender segregated data was important to highlight the situation of women (or men) concerning gender equal decision

making, but also to raise awareness for (potential) existing inequalities. Thus, information was collected on the following nature of governance structures:

- Governance bodies – Bodies responsible for overseeing the activities, determining the future direction and monitoring progress against strategic ambitions;
- Management bodies – Bodies related with the operational running of the university;
- Scientific and pedagogic bodies – Bodies responsible for the scientific and pedagogical decisions strategic and operational decisions;
- Advisory bodies – Bodies that provide advices to any of the previous bodies but without authority to take decisions.

Afterwards, the process through which members access these bodies was also analysed.

The involvement of the TA team, which is composed by the rector and the vice-rector, right from the beginning of the project was essential since it is key to support the institutional acceptance of the CHANGE aims, as well as allowed an early identification of other potential supporters and allies in order to increase the sustainable embedding of gender equality in the organisation. In this way, the message on the project was conveyed to other members of the academic community, as well as it was included in the electoral programme.

Expert interviews with organisational key players at the beginning of the project also supported the identification of factors that might hinder the expected impact of the GEP. Based on these outcomes, solutions for overcoming possible obstacles were discussed and pursued.

3.2.2 Phase two

In a second stage of the project, the rector was informed and instigated to be more proactive in increasing women representativeness in the following elections. Without changing the regulations, it was possible to develop informal strategies. These are related with the identification of women with competencies to perform the job and with personal empowerment for them to appoint themselves for the position.

The implementation of short-term actions enhanced the commitment of the involved researchers and transfer agents. These actions also allowed the involvement of more staff, who took part in interviews or were contacted on an informal basis. These were instrumental to identify key stakeholders, whose initial informal network evolved into a sounding board for the project. Inviting experts and setting up brown bag sessions to make gender equality more visible were also important at this stage of the project. Some of these initiatives were planned and implemented with the support of the rectoral team, especially in the communication to the academic community.

3.3 Results and discussion

CHANGE is an international project that aims to stimulate structural changes in Research Performing Organisations (RPO). This paper seeks to analyse, from an institutionalist feminist perspective [16] [17], the composition of the middle management bodies of one HEI (the RPO under study). The HEI is composed by 20 Organic Units (16 departments and 4 polytechnic schools) and each of them is managed by a Dean. The Dean is the Director or President of the organisational unit, designated by a selection committee composed by the Rector and four other elements [18].

The diagnosis of the gender equality situation of the HEI, which took place at the beginning of the CHANGE project in 2018, made it possible to verify that among the 20 Deans of the institution, only 1 was a female. Therefore, women represented only 5% of the people in this position [18]. At the end of 2019 – about one year after the start of implementation of CHANGE – the data was already showing marked improvements, with an increase of the percentage of women in these position around 300%. Women now account for 20% of all Deans and, although they remain in the minority, the progress is notable, especially if one considers that these improvements have occurred without changing the regulations.

In order to identify the reasons that have contributed to trigger these advances and improve our knowledge in this area, the interviews conducted with the Deans of HEI's Organic Units under the CHANGE project between July and November 2019 were analysed. The number of Deans interviewed represents 65% of the people in this position at the HEI under study.

In general terms, it was found that gender inequality is not perceived as a problem in the institution and, roughly speaking, all the interviewed Deans consider that there is no inequality in the Organic Unit to which they belong [19]. However, it is recognised that there are gender imbalances in the management bodies of these Organic Units. The interviews provide important information in this area as it revealed a number of factors that can help explain the recent increase of women in these positions (Deans).

The growing awareness about gender equality is referenced in several interviews. It seems to derive not only from discourses outside the organisation (notably at the EU level) but also from contacts and informal conversations that seem to have been intensified within the HEI in recent years. It is in these contexts, marked by informality, that new dynamics seem to be building up in favour of the promotion of gender equality:

I believe that people think that, the path to follow is to have more women in management positions and, therefore, this comes up in informal conversations. I would say yes, people are encouraging it. Women have to apply, and informal conversations are reinforcing and empowering this (Male 4).

The idea of encouraging women to apply for decision-making positions (Deans) takes shape and develops from these “informal conversations” – possibly as a result of the dominant idea that the non-existence of women in top positions stems from the simple fact that they do not apply, ignoring structural and cultural barriers [20] – and it is quickly assimilated as the best ‘strategy’ to follow in order to correct perceived imbalances. In this regard, one of the interviewees mentioned:

Some work has been done to convince a woman to apply for the department head position (...) [A: How was that work done?] Informally, informal conversations (...) (Male 6).

Another factor that can help explain the improvements in women’s situation is the sensitivity to diversity and gender equality of some people in middle management positions. Individual commitment to the issue seems to lead to the adoption of some care and/or practices related to gender equality, which include – in addition to the attempt to encourage women to apply for Dean – the search for gender balanced working teams and the deliberate promotion of women’s visibility in areas traditionally more associated with men. Such practices/care are, however, markedly informal and adopted on an individual initiative.

In the constitution, for example, of my work team (...), I end up having a gender parity committee in executive management (...) to pass on the message that the management itself has moved from a 100% male composition to a parity situation (...) by a conviction that we are here to set an example (Male 9).

The perception of the commitment of the institution/Rectoral team to gender equality also seems to be an important factor. The introduction of gender equality in the electoral programme, the participation of the Rector and one Vice Rector in the CHANGE project (as transfer agents) and/or the use of gender-sensitive language in some of the communications sent from the Rector’s office seem not to have gone unnoticed in the academic community. All of these items are mentioned by the interviewees. The implementation of the CHANGE project in the HEI also appears as a factor that may be contributing to (accelerate) some of the changes. Besides being seen as an important mean for conveying information to people, the project itself sends out the message that there is a concern with gender equality in the institution:

(...) the project itself sends out the informal, subtle message that there are concerns about this [gender equality] (...). (Male 9).

As far as it was possible to ascertain, the gender balance improvements regarding Dean positions (middle management positions) at the HEI seem to have resulted mainly from informal ‘strategies’ or mechanisms, driven by increased awareness on gender equality, by the perception of the engagement of the Rectoral team, by the sensitivity and individual commitment with the issue and also by the implementation of the CHANGE project in the institution. In general, this study draws attention to the centrality and importance of informal mechanisms, and shows that it has the power to strengthen, weaken or even guide institutional re/configurations that aim to promote women’s access to decision-making positions – thus reinforcing the findings of previous studies related to these themes [16].

4 CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps more than ever, and somehow, as paradoxical as it may seem, gender equality has become increasingly more *popular* within the EU and European Commission funding schemes and programmes. Possible reasons explaining such attention, and focusing particularly on HEI and RPO, and within the European context, are the fact that despite the general *positive* legal and social environment to the institutionalisation of equal opportunities, gender inequality still remains, especially in stereotyped perceptions embedded within organisational cultures. Faced with this scenario, the EU has been developing several programmes to finance the promotion of Gender Equality Plans (GEP) in HEIs in the European context.

The study and analysis presented here is based on an international H2020 funded research project (CHANGE), in which the university here presented, the University of Aveiro, has been implementing a GEPs, which has already demonstrated an increase in the number of women in decision-making bodies. This paper explains the process of cultural change within the academia in general, and in the rector's team attitudes in particular, in order to promote progress in the pursuit of gender equality in decision-making bodies.

The diagnosis of the gender equality situation of the HEI, which took place at the beginning of the CHANGE project in 2018, evidenced that among the 20 Deans of the institution, only 1 was a female. Therefore, women represented only 5% of the people in this position. At the end of 2019 – about one year after the CHANGE project has been implemented – the data already showed impressive results, with an increase of the percentage of women in these positions around 300%. Women now account for 20% of all Deans and, although they remain the minority in these positions, the progress is notable, especially if one considers that these improvements have occurred without changing the regulations. In fact, what seems to explain this success lays in the development of informal strategies. These relate with the identification of women with competencies and willingness to perform the job and with personal empowerment in order for them themselves appoint for such positions and roles.

Short-term actions (e.g. identify key stakeholders, whose initial informal network evolved into a sounding board for the project; inviting experts; setting up brown bag sessions and workshops to make gender equality more visible in the academia) were also implemented in order to enhance the commitment of the involved researchers and transfer agents in the pursuit of a more inclusive and gender quality institution. These actions also allowed the involvement of more staff, who took part in interviews or were contacted on an informal basis. While the interviews were also important to identify the reasons that have contributed to trigger such advances and improve our knowledge in this area, these short-term actions were instrumental to involve and gain the support of the rectoral team, who were especially helpful in communicating the project and its initiatives to the academic community.

In general terms, during the interviews, it was found that gender inequality is not perceived as a problem in the institution and, roughly speaking, all the interviewed Deans consider that there is no inequality in the Department hey work. However, it was acknowledged that there are gender imbalances in the management bodies of these units. In fact, although the implementation of the GEP in the University of Aveiro can be labelled as a *successful instrument* for the increase of women in management and decision-making roles and positions in the academia, the authors fear that this change may be merely circumstantial or only due and during the project length in the institution. Therefore, monitoring and continuity of gender awareness measures are needed after the project is “concluded”.

As far as it was possible to develop this analysis, the gender balance improvements regarding Dean positions in middle management positions at this institution are mostly an outcome of informal mechanisms driven by an increased awareness on gender equality, by the perception of the academic community regarding the engagement of the Rectoral team, by the sensitivity and individual commitment with this topic, and also by the implementation of the CHANGE project in the institution. In general, this study draws attention to the importance of informal mechanisms, showing their power to strengthen, weaken or even guide institutional re/configurations that aim to promote women's access to decision-making positions – thus reinforcing the findings of previous studies related to these themes. Further studies/projects can be applied to other HEI – national and international – also to look at this “informality variable”, for example, to understand whether this is a cultural trait of the Portuguese culture, or just of this institution.

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