

The European Union and gender equality in research and higher education: A view from Greece

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About the authors

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Abstract

This policy paper provides an overview of the state of things in the European Union (EU) in the area of gender equality in science, research and higher education, and reviews the EU's efforts over the last twenty years to develop a comprehensive policy of gender mainstreaming in this area. Even though equality between women and men is a core value that is enshrined in the European Treaties and a large body of related legislation exists, there are persistent gender disparities in academia and scientific research. This paper examines how the EU's normative and policy guidelines are designed and have evolved over time to tackle such persisting disparities, particularly as these are manifested in the obstacles that prevent women from advancing in the high ranks of the scientific and academic profession. These disparities are noticeably evidenced in the case of Greece, where despite a permissive constitutional frame and existing legislation, the political will, initiative and resources to promote gender equality in research and academic have been thoroughly lacking. By reviewing the Greek legal framework regarding gender equality and relevant policy documents on research and higher education, this paper identifies the implementation gaps and suggests possible tools to address the gender imbalances in Greek research and university structures.

The European Union and gender equality in research and higher education: A view from Greece

Over the past half century, women have made remarkable inroads into the fields of science, research and higher education in Greece and in Europe. Whereas until the 1960s-1970s, their presence among university students was limited (one third or less than their male counterparts), by the 1990s and 2000s, they made up fifty percent (or more) of university students, including at the postgraduate level.¹ Women's advancement in careers in scientific research and higher education also remarkably grew, following along their increasing entry in the labor market, including in professional occupations. Such significant progress has both reflected and reinforced profound social changes in gender relations. Yet, continued inequalities between the sexes have stubbornly persisted. In the late 1990s, the European Commission's General Directorate of Research commissioned the European Technology Assessment Network (ETAN), composed of renowned scientists to prepare a report on women in science. It found that while women's presence in this area increased, few actually enjoyed an equal opportunity to pursue a scientific career, and even fewer to play, even a minor role, in decision-making about scientific policies and practices. Indicatively, women formed a meager 7% or less of full professors in six Member States. Despite country variations in systems and structures, the proportion of women in senior scientific positions remained consistently small. Their continued under-representation undermined the achievement of scientific excellence, and was found to be both wasteful and unjust.²

Today, twenty years later, the situation of women in senior academic and scientific positions, as well as in decision-making in scientific research, has improved but far from impressively. Women continue to face greater difficulties than men in advancing to the highest academic positions in all EU countries. The so-called 'glass ceiling' phenomenon refers to the diminishing representation of women as a standard academic career progresses. Even though women enter the tracks of an academic and research career in large numbers, their presence progressively declines as we move up to higher level scientific and research positions.³ This is especially pronounced in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) areas and in natural sciences. In part, this imbalance begins to be evidenced much earlier, as girls and young women tend to go into the fields of humanities and social sciences, and fewer of them into STEM, manufacturing and construction. Another manifestation of the 'glass ceiling' phenomenon is in management and decision-making in academic and research institutions. While women tend to make up the majority of administrative and research support staff, their presence in leadership and decision-making positions in universities and research centers sharply drops. In 2017, only 21.7% of heads of institutions in the higher education sector in the EU were women.⁴

The trajectory of women's advancement in research and academia is aptly visualized in a "scissors-shaped" trend, which we can see in Figure below, which has been extracted from the EU's Women in Science data base. Women make up the majority of the university students at the beginning, but they are subsequently overtaken by their male colleagues, until they become a minority in the highest ranks. Along the way, there is a significant loss of female potential that progressively takes place after the award of their doctoral degrees.⁵ As it is rightly stated, "the overall numbers of women and their ratios to those of men in senior academic and decision-making positions are much lower than what would be

¹ In Greece, in 2016, women made up 49.2% of all doctoral graduates, up from 39.9% in 2007, and above the EU average (47.9% in 2016). See SHE Figures (2018), pp. 19-20. The increase in the number of female doctoral graduates in 2007-2016 was faster than the increase among male doctoral graduates (p. 22).

² *Science Policies in the European Union - Promoting Excellence through Mainstreaming Gender Equality*, A Report from the ETAN Expert Working Group on Women and Science, Brussels: European Commission (2000), p. viii.

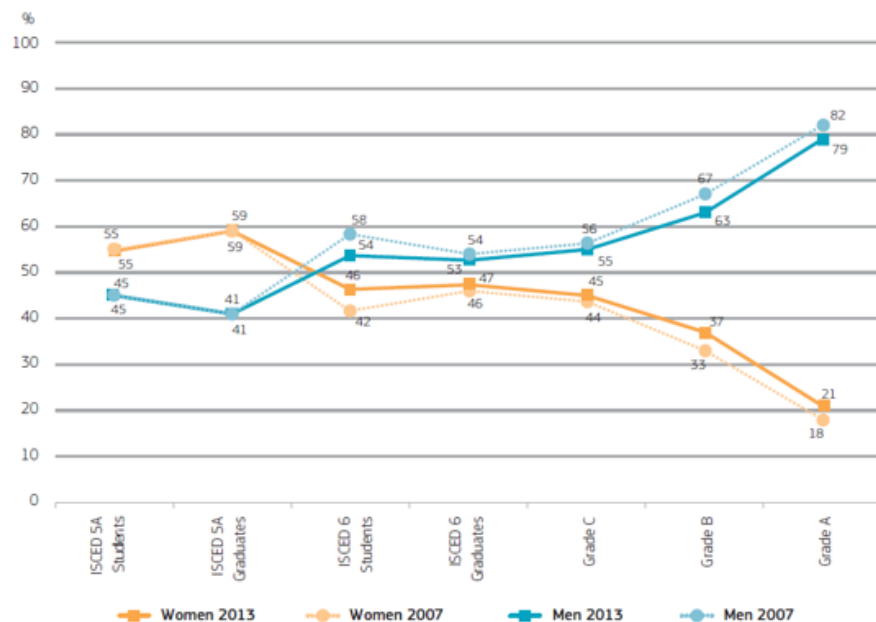
³ In the EU-28 in 2016, women constituted 54 % of students and 58 % of graduates at the B.Sc. and M.Sc. levels (or their equivalent - ISCED 6 and 7). However, women made up 48 % of students and graduates at doctoral level (ISCED 8), 46 % of grade C academic staff, 40 % of grade B and 24 % of grade A academic staff. SHE Figures (2018), p. 115.

⁴ SHE Figures - *Gender in Research and Innovation* (2018), p. 115.

⁵ Nazareth Gallego-Moron, "Breaking the Glass Ceiling - The Doctoral Thesis Defence as a Key Turning Point", *Metode Science Studies Journal* 7 (2017), pp. 113-119.

expected given the growing numbers of women among higher education graduates in recent decades” (EIGE, 2017b; OECD, 2018).⁶

Figure 6.1. Proportion of women and men in a typical academic career, students and academic staff, EU-28, 2007–2013



Notes: Reference years Eurostat data: 2007–2012; Reference years for Women in Science (WIS) data: 2007–2013; Exceptions to the reference years (WIS): AT: 2007–2011; BE (FR), LV, RO: 2010–2013; CY, PT: 2007–2012; DK, LU (Grade A and B, C not available): 2009–2013; ES, IE: 2008–2012; BE (FL), NL, FI: 2011–2013; PL, SK: 2012–2013; FR: 2012; HR: 2014; MT: 2015; EE: 2004 (She Figures 2012); LT: 2007 (She Figures 2012); UK: 2006 (She Figures 2012); Data unavailable for: (Eurostat) ISCED 5A Students: LU (2007); ISCED 5A Graduates: FR (2012), LU (2007); ISCED 6 Students: DE (2007), LU (2007); ISCED 6 Graduates: FR (2012), LU (2007).
Source: Women in Science database, DG Research and Innovation and Eurostat – Education Statistics (online data code: educ_grad5)

The situation of women in research and academia in Greece follows along the abovementioned trends and on most aspects, it is within the EU average or below. Data generated in an important study by Nancy Papalexandris⁷ shows that in 2016, women were 31% of all faculty members in Greek universities, up from 27% in 2003, and their presence is significantly higher in the humanities and in the arts (40-45%), moderate in social and economic sciences (28%), and small in computers and engineering (18%). The “glass ceiling” is well entrenched here too. While women make up 43% of lecturers (this rank was abolished in 2013?) and 37% of assistant professors, their presence sharply diminishes as they advance in the rank of full professors, only 21% of whom are women. Limited is the presence of women in decision-making positions in Greek universities, where they make up only 15% of university rectors, and 23% of heads of departments (with large variation across disciplines, 34% in Department Heads in Humanities, but only 7% of Department Heads in Engineering and Computer Science).⁸

At the European and EU level, policy and research debates on how to redress persistent gender disparities in academia and scientific research significantly evolved over the past few decades. In the 1980s, policy concerns in European and other Western countries were mainly placed on women's recruitment. Research focused on gendered socialization, namely, how from an early age individuals internalize ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ roles that shape their educational and professional choices. Deeply rooted ideas about science being a ‘masculine’ field arguably discouraged young women from pursuing a career in science. Women were said to be less professionally ambitious than men and prone to prioritize

⁶ *SHE Figures - Gender in Research and Innovation* (2018), p. 115.

⁷ Emeritus Professor, Athens University of Economics and Business; President of the Greek Association of University Women (ELEGYP).

⁸ These research findings were presented at the TARGET project workshop on “Gender & Diversity Leadership in Research and Academia”, Athens, ELIAMEP, 15 March 2019.

family over career. Overall, the explanations for the underrepresentation of women in research were sought outside of scientific professions and research institutions.⁹

In the 1990s, increasing criticisms of the above socialization-based approach led to a shift in the prevailing policy paradigm. Policy concerns gradually moved from entry and qualification issues to retention and career advancement, following a corresponding shift in research from socialization to organizational approaches.¹⁰ Attention shifted to research organizations, their implicit norms and standards, institutional practices and power relations. This approach was further reinforced in the late 1990s, when evidence was provided that the peer-review system in Sweden was tainted by phenomena of sexism and nepotism.¹¹ At that time, a report by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology also publicly admitted that they had given lower pay and fewer resources to female scientists than to male scientists of equal seniority.¹²

In the light of the above, from the 2000s onwards, policy debates have emphasized the need to combine organizational measures with efforts to overcome gender bias in knowledge production by mainstreaming sex and gender analysis in basic and applied research. Gender mainstreaming was to be a goal not only of research organizational change, but also in the design of research content. The latter required increasing awareness and consideration of whether a sex and/or gender dimension is relevant for scientific inquiry and analysis, as well as necessary for improving the quality of the research process and methods.

The organizational and epistemic lens to tackling persistent inequalities described in the previous paragraph, was also incorporated in the European Commission's developing policy in this area. It was understood that discrimination against women, occurring at times inadvertently, did not take the form of equality of access and opportunity. Instead, it was manifested in persistent gendered biases and assumptions permeating the policies and practices of scientific institutions, it systematically disadvantaged women and undermined excellence. The acknowledgment that structural barriers prevent women from taking advantage of the equal rights and opportunities guaranteed in law, was a critical step and turning point. With this as a starting point, the EU gender equality policy drew from and incorporated different approaches: equal treatment (ensuring men and women are treated the same); positive action (special actions to redress structural disadvantage); and mainstreaming-integrating gender equality into structures, institutions, policies and programs.¹³

It is well-known that equality between women and men is a core value that is enshrined in the European Treaties.¹⁴ A large body of legislation actively promotes gender equality in areas such as equal pay, work-life balance, health and safety at work, social security, access to goods and services, and protection from human trafficking, gender-based violence and other forms of gender-based crime. For nearly 20 years, the European Commission has shown continuous efforts to strengthen gender equality and to include a gender dimension into research content in the European Research Area (ERA). In 2012, the European Commission reaffirmed the pursuit of gender equality as a key goal of the ERA - a paramount issue of rights and social justice. Equally importantly, gender equality has also been seen as essential for ending the severe waste of talent that the under-representation of women in research, science and innovation reflects, as well as necessary for opening up to a diversification of ideas and approaches that foster excellence.¹⁵

⁹ V. Stolte-Heiskanen, "Women's Participation in positions of responsibility in careers of science and technology: Obstacles and opportunities", *Tampereen yliopiston sosiologian ja sosiaalipsykologian laitoksen työraportteja*, B26 (1988).

¹⁰ C. Cronin and A. Roger, "Theorizing Progress: Women in Science, Engineering and Technology in Higher Education", *Journal of research in science teaching* 36 (1999) 637-661; J. Glover, (2001). "Targeting Women: Policy Issues Relating to Women's Representation In Professional Scientific Employment", *Policy Studies* 22 (2001) 69-82.

¹¹ C. Wennerås and A Wold, "Sexism and nepotism in peer review", *Nature* (1997), 321-343.

¹² Massachusetts Institute of Technology, *A Study on the Status of Women Faculty in Science at MIT* (Boston: MIT 1999)

¹³ *Science Policies in the European Union*, p. 2.

¹⁴ Articles 2 and 3 of the Treaty of the European Union (TEU); and Articles 8, 10, 19 and 157 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). Gender equality is further implemented through Directive 2006/54/EC on the implementation of the principle of equal opportunities and equal treatment of men and women in matters of employment and occupation (recast).

¹⁵ See European Commission COM(2012)392, "A Reinforced ERA Partnership for Excellence and Growth", Brussels, 17 July 2012, p. 4 and pp. 12-13.

As laid out in the European Commission's communication for a reinforced ERA (2012), the EU Member States are encouraged to mainstream gender equality in research and higher education by creating a legal and policy environment and providing incentives for removing legal and other barriers to the recruitment, retention and career progression of female researchers while fully complying with EU law on gender equality (i.e. Directive 2006/54/EC); addressing gender imbalances in decision-making processes; strengthening the gender dimension in research programs; engaging in partnerships with funding agencies, research organizations and universities to foster cultural and institutional change on gender – charters, performance agreements and awards; and ensuring that at least 40% of those from the under-represented sex participate in committees involved in recruitment/ career progression of staff, and in the evaluation and implementation of research programs.¹⁶

Research and higher education institutions and research-funding organizations (RFOs) are also required to promote systemic institutional changes. An important tool to initiate such processes of change is the adoption of Gender Equality Plans (GEPs): they introduce and implement the necessary structural measures to redress gender disparities, and they are adjusted to the specific situation and challenges of each organization.¹⁷ Other key policy tools developed by the EU in order to monitor the progress in gender equality in research organizations are the *She Figures* Reports, which were published for the first time in 2003, the European Research Area (ERA) monitoring tool, and the integrated gender evaluation in the Research and innovation actions (RIA) and Innovation actions (IA) of Horizon 2020.

While gender imbalances in research and higher education in Greece are roughly comparable to the EU average, Greece lags behind in policy initiatives and government efforts to redress such persistent imbalances. Promoting gender equality in research and higher education has not been on the agenda of Greek governments, and it has been given a low priority in the country's gender equality agenda overall. Awareness of gender inequalities in the research sector is very limited in public research institutes in Greece. Factors such as caring and family responsibilities, and the prevalence of networks of male scientists especially in decision-making and institutional structures, constrain women researchers from reaching high-rank positions.¹⁸ Despite persistent disparities, research institutes and universities have not adopted policies or strategies to promote the integration of gender in their work, and to raise awareness around and tackle such disparities. Even though national organizations, like the National Documentation Center, are thoroughly familiar with and seek to promote EU policy developments in this area, the EU's gender equality policy in scientific research and academia has so far made limited inroads in Greece.

To be sure, over the past few years, Greek policy documents related to scientific research and higher education, as well as to gender equality more broadly have increasingly espoused and incorporated the relevant EU tools and principles - mostly, however, as good intentions. The latest *Greek Strategy for the European Research Area (ERA) - National Roadmap, 2016-2020* defines gender mainstreaming as one of its priorities. Law 4386/2016 on "Regulations on research and other provisions" recognizes the need to achieve greater gender balance in the composition of evaluation and selection committees, and of various advisory bodies in the field of research, technology and innovation. It also establishes a quota, according to which at least one third of the members of these advisory bodies and of the scientific councils of research institutes must be from one sex, "as long as the candidates have the necessary qualifications as required by each position" (Law 4386/2016, Art. 25). It is unclear whether these quota provisions have ever been put to practice and there is no information confirming that this has taken place. Recognizing their potential to bring about change within research and academic organizations, the Greek Strategy for the ERA 2016-2020 also urges public research bodies "to establish Gender Equality Plans and to include relevant provisions in their internal regulations and strategic plans".¹⁹

¹⁶ European Commission COM(2012)392, "A Reinforced ERA Partnership for Excellence and Growth", pp. 12-13.

¹⁷ European Institute for Gender Equality, *Integrating gender equality into academic and research organisations* (2016), pp. 8-9.

¹⁸ Pavlos Hatzopoulos, Nelli Kambouri and Kathy Kikis-Papadakis, "Integrating Gender in Research Institutions in Greece", *ERCIM News*, No. 104, January 2016, pp. 13-14.

¹⁹ Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs, *Elliniki Stratighiki gia ton Evropaiko Choro Erevnas (ERA) - Ethnikos Odikos Chartis 2015-2020* [Greek Strategy for the European Research Area (ERA) - National Roadmap, 2015-2020] (Athens April 2016).

It must be noted that Greece has a highly favorable constitutional frame for advancing gender equality. The Greek Constitution guarantees the principle of equality between the sexes (Article 2, para. 4) and the right to equal pay for work of equal value regardless of gender or other differences (Article 22, para. 1). At the same time, unlike other EU countries, Greece has in place permissive constitutional provisions that recognize substantive (and not only formal) equality between the sexes. In the constitutional revision process in 2001, provisions that had allowed for derogations from sex equality, were abolished and replaced with a provision stating that “positive measures for promoting equality between men and women do not constitute discrimination on grounds of sex”. It also added that “the state shall take measures to eliminate inequalities to the detriment of women that exist in practice” (Art. 116(2)). This constitutional amendment was the outcome of a concerted and highly effective campaign by women’s organizations in the late 1990s, which succeeded in convincing the constitutional revision assembly to amend gender equality norms. It was extremely significant because it abolished in Greece the constitutional barriers, present in other EU countries, and paved the way for positive measures in different domains, such as for example, the adoption of gender quotas for local, national and European Parliament elections, and the abovementioned gender quota provision for advisory bodies and scientific councils.²⁰

Over the past few years, a number of new laws and provisions are aimed at promoting gender equality, including gender mainstreaming in research, academia and in the private sector. Law 4604/2019 on “Promoting substantive equality between the sexes and combatting gender-based violence” encourages universities and research organizations to integrate gender in their study programs and research content (Article 17 of the L. 4604/2019).²¹ Private and commercial enterprises are also encouraged to adopt equal opportunity policies, including specifically through the adoption of Gender Equality Plans (GEPs). For those companies that will adopt such policies, a reward of an official distinction of the “Equality Badge” (*Sima Isotitas*) is foreseen mounting (Article 21 of the L.4604/2019). GEPs are ‘soft’ policy tools championed by the European Union and they are aimed at mainstreaming and implementing gender equality measures in different organizational settings, including in research and academic institutions. The Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), a non-governmental and non-profit foundation, is the first Greek Research Organization to adopt a comprehensive Gender Equality Plan on the basis of an audit, and to implement it by monitoring progress with the planned actions.²²

At the same time, another law of 2019 which aims at the restructuring of some universities, includes an article that for the first time provides for the establishment of Committees for Gender Equality (CGE) in all Greek universities (4589/19, Article 33). It foresees such committees as consultative bodies to assist the university administration in its efforts to promote gender equality. One of the main responsibilities of the CGEs is to develop Action Plans to promote substantive equality in the educational, research and administrative structures of higher education institutions. The implementation of CGEs in practice will no doubt be a serious challenge but also a key opportunity. The adoption of the recent legislation briefly described here, has raised the importance of the GEP as an appropriate and flexible, albeit entirely voluntary, tool that public and private organizations in Greece, including universities and research foundations, are recommended to apply. The recent expansion and elaboration of the Greek legal frame for gender equality, including in research and higher education institutions, is undoubtedly a positive development. However, its implementation in practice is unlikely to advance in the absence of sustained government will and the allocation of administrative and financial resources that the application of available tools, such as the GEP, requires.

²⁰ For a detailed analysis, see Dia Anagnostou, “Gender Constitutional Reform, Positive Measures and Transnational Dynamics in Greece and the EU: From formal to substantive equality?” *Canadian Journal of Law and Society* Vol. 28, No. 1 (August 2013), 133-150.

²¹ Law 4604/2019 on “Promoting substantive equality between the sexes and combatting gender-based violence”, *Government Gazette*, No. 50/1, March 2019.

²² ELIAMEP has formulated and adopted a GEP in the frame of the TARGET project “Taking a reflexive approach to gender equality and institutional transformation”, a Coordination and Support Action funded by the European Commission Program H2020 (2018-2021). For an overview of the project, see <https://www.gendertarget.eu/>

In sum, over the past twenty years, the EU has developed a comprehensive policy of gender mainstreaming in the area of science, research and higher education, and has invited Member States to utilize the available tools in formulating national policy interventions. Greece has recently made significant steps in harmonizing its legal and policy frame with the EU normative and policy guidelines in this area. What is strongly needed though is to make available the necessary resources and to mobilize administrative officials, academics and researchers, as well as other key stakeholders to develop and apply existing tools, as well as the advocacy and pressure, to bring real change. It is high time to pay serious attention to gender imbalances in Greek research and university structures, and to explicitly incorporate and address it as an indispensable component in the policy reform of higher education that is currently under way in Greece. This is not only imperative as an issue of social justice. It is also a key step to making use of, rather than discarding and wasting, the abundant talent and human capital that can be released if gender specific barriers to the scientific, research and academic professions are eliminated.