

5 Communities of Practice and gender equality

Fostering structural change in research and academia in Central and Eastern Europe

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Introduction

In recent years, gender equality in higher education (HE) and research and innovation (R&I) has been high on the European policy agenda. The European Commission supports research performing organisations (RPOs) and higher education institutions (HEIs) in introducing gender equality measures, including comprehensive gender equality plans (GEPs). Despite some gains (Timmers et al. 2010; European Commission 2019), the implementation of structural change and reaching sustainable outcomes remain difficult (Cavaghan 2017). Common problems include resistance within institutions, lack of management support, an absence of sustained financial and human resources, unavailability of gender expertise, as well as the lack of authority of the staff responsible for developing and introducing GEPs (EIGE 2016). These problems are also witnessed in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), but additionally some regional specificities play a role. Although anti-discrimination and gender equality legal framework is present throughout the region and includes constitutional and labour code provisions and equal treatment legislation (Böök et al. 2021), specific laws on gender equality in HE and R&I and policy incentives for implementing gender equality measures have not been put in place (EIGE 2016). As a result, the extent of the adoption of GEPs in HEIs and RPOs – perceived as an effective tool for institutional change – is in CEE significantly lower than in other regions of Europe (European Commission 2019; Reidl et al., 2019). Moreover, the institutions in CEE are experiencing stiff political resistance to gender equality interventions and feminist agendas as a part and parcel of democratic backsliding in the region (Krizsán & Roggeband 2019). They are nevertheless developing some internally-driven

initiatives, including the creation of anti-discrimination and gender equality bodies, developing anti-harassment policy and introducing work-life balance measures. More comprehensive gender equality interventions – in the form of implementing GEPs – have been undertaken mainly within the framework and lifespan of EU-funded institutional change projects. While these projects offer a transfer of good practices from countries with higher level of uptake of structural change to those who are “lagging behind”, they often lack a sustainable support from intra- and inter-organisational stakeholders. Based mainly on West European experiences, they also risk not taking fully into account the local legal, political, and historical contexts of the CEE region. Moreover, these interventions remain scattered, and there is insufficient flow of information and exchange of experiences concerning them.

The reflection on CoPs stems from the assumption that they are the experimental environment, where alternative practices can be enacted, incorporated into the organisational environment and, thus, slowly accelerate change (Chapter 1, Müller & Palmén, this volume, p. 14). While there are several structural and processual factors that facilitate or hinder the effectiveness of institutional change for gender equality in HE and R&I, we will analyse which of them can be created or fostered by an inter-organisational CoP operating in conditions of lack of coordination of dispersed and isolated activities, insufficient legal and policy incentives, and high levels of resistance. We argue that an inter-organisational CoP operating within the region of CEE may play a role of intermediary support structures that connect various initiatives and strengthen those conditions necessary for structural change through enhancing the capacity and agency of organisational change actors. Such structures may as well allow for exchange of localised, context-specific knowledge and discuss tailored strategies that are possible in the region or national context.

To discuss the role of CoPs in the process of institutional change in HEIs, the chapter analyses, through the case study approach, the process of setting up and developing the CoP for Gender Equality in Central and Eastern Europe (GEinCEE CoP). The CoP was created within the H2020 ACT project and it aimed to respond to particular needs of gender equality practitioners and scholars in the CEE region voiced, among others, in the ACT Community Mapping survey. According to the survey, the most urgent needs include support from organisation management, gender know-how, regular monitoring of gender equality status quo, strategies to overcome resistance and financial resources (Warat et al. 2019).

The GEinCEE CoP's mission is to promote and support institutional change to advance gender equality in HEIs and RPOs, i.e., diagnosing the situation as well as promoting and assuring support in designing, introducing, and monitoring selected gender equality measures or GEPs. It also collects and systematises existing experiences and knowledge in the region. As of June 2021, GEinCEE CoP gathers researchers and gender equality officials

of 20 organisations from Poland, Lithuania, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Ukraine, and Cyprus.

In this chapter, we will first present the theoretical considerations in regards to the role of CoPs in supporting institutional change towards gender equality in HEIs and RPOs. After presenting the case-study approach, we will discuss the creation and development of GEinCEE CoP. Finally, we will analyse the possible impact of the CoP on factors supporting gender equality institutionalisation.

CoP approach to structural change towards gender equality

The academic reflection points to several factors that facilitate the effectiveness of institutional change for gender equality in HE and R&I. A single, most important structural element is the conducive governance framework with legally-binding measures and positive incentives for introducing comprehensive gender equality measures (Linková et al. 2007; Palmén & Kalpazidou Schmidt 2019). When this condition is lacking, the fate of gender equality interventions depends on other factors that have been identified across various studies. The key processual factor is the involvement of all organisational stakeholders, including governing bodies and other actors across the whole organisation early in the process (Lipinsky 2014; Vinkenburg 2017; Palmén & Kalpazidou Schmidt 2019). At the same time, resistance to gender equality interventions at different levels and from different actors has been identified as an important obstacle to successful implementation of gender equality interventions (Verge et al. 2018; Palmén & Kalpazidou Schmidt 2019). In this context, framing synergies with other initiatives within an organisation and linking gender equality issues to wider concepts such as research excellence or responsible R&Is is considered as a pro-active strategy to tackle resistance at different levels and, therefore, can be considered a factor enhancing the effectiveness of gender equality initiatives (Colizzi et al. 2019; Palmén & Kalpazidou Schmidt 2019). Similarly, sufficient resources, including funding and decisive power of gender equality bodies are important facilitators of effective gender equality interventions, as well as gender expertise, awareness and competence within organisations (EIGE 2016; Lipinsky 2014; Lansu et al. 2019; Palmén & Kalpazidou Schmidt 2019). They all enhance the capacity and agency of gender equality actors to initiate and sustain institutional change. Any transformations should also be rooted in the organisational aims and structures to proof them from personal changes and enable them to become sustainable (Colizzi et al. 2019). Formulating realistic targets tailored to the context of a given organisation, as well as comprehensive monitoring of the effects of gender equality interventions are deemed to enhance the obligation of the organisational leadership and other stakeholders to actively promote gender equality (Mühlenbruch & Jochimsen 2013; Palmén & Kalpazidou Schmidt 2019). Thus, difficulties in obtaining organisational

sex and gender disaggregated data hamper the processes of designing, implementing, and monitoring gender equality interventions (Palmén & Kalpazidou Schmidt 2019).

Previous knowledge, although limited, suggests that a CoP can help create some of the above-mentioned conditions for effective implementation of gender equality interventions. Firstly, by engaging different stakeholders, i.e., gender equality practitioners, researchers, human resources, and top management, CoPs bring together a range of perspectives on a problem and different types of competences, and therefore ensures that relevant and context-specific knowledge is accessible to those who need it (Hearn & White 2009). Secondly by engaging different functional roles in an organisation, CoPs enable the transcendence of organisational hierarchies and functional boundaries and may therefore assure that implementing change is a multi-stakeholder responsibility (Palmén et al. 2019). Thirdly, through emphasising community engagement and participation, CoPs may effectively tackle resistance (Palmén et al. 2019). Fourthly, while this has not been explicitly tested, CoPs may empower their members to pursue and sustain change at their organisations. As collective agency emerges through a learning process – occurring at group discussions, community meetings, participatory workshops or informal conversations (Pelenc et al. 2015) – CoPs seem to be suitable for improving the agency of gender actors. Additionally, by fostering the sharing of practice, mutual learning, and the promotion of the achievements of the gender equality projects that overcome national and institutional boundaries, inter-organisational CoPs contribute to the advancement of gender equality in R&I and HE at the European level (Palmén et al. 2019). With the case study of GEinCEE CoP, we investigate whether and to what extent fostering conditions for institutional change may be performed by an inter-organisational CoP.

Methods

The research draws on the strengths of the case study approach, particularly its heuristic potential, the triangulation of methods and data, and the ability to stress the case evolution in time through a series of interrelated events (Flyvbjerg 2011; Yin 2014). Case study research is an in-depth, detailed exploration of the individual, group or a phenomenon, also a project, a programme, or an institution, aiming at a comprehensive and rich description of an individual case and its analysis (Flyvbjerg 2011; Starman 2013). The case study approach enables a focus on the contextual factors that are relevant to the phenomena being studied (Yin 2014), or the “relation to environment” (Flyvbjerg 2011), which is important to highlight specific conditions for the community in the CEE region.

The empirical evidence for this study is of a secondary character and based on the documentation of setting up and developing the GEinCEE CoP from December 2018 until June 2021. The analysed data come from the ACT

project evaluation process, which included the aim of identifying challenges and strategies for developing CoPs for institutional change, assess the usefulness of the learning outcomes for the CoPs, as well as the effect of the CoPs on the development of gender equality in their member institutions. Progress reports were written by the CoP facilitators that document the development of the CoPs based on the routine filling in of the monitoring files. They contain detailed information on the CoPs' objectives, composition, activities and progress, as well as meeting protocols, social media content such as blog-posts or tweets. Additionally, within the evaluation process 3 semi-structured interviews with CoP members were conducted online in 2020 by the ACT project partner JOANNEUM RESEARCH. The interviewees were selected following criteria that aimed at getting a diverse picture (e.g., in terms of their organisation size, country, or number of CoP meetings attended). The interview questions targeted participation in CoP activities, cooperation and communication with other members and perspectives on the benefits and impact of CoP involvement. Furthermore, they concerned the perceived limitations of the CoP approach and further needs to achieve structural change in member organisations and in the European Research Area.

Beyond the ACT project evaluation data, the chapter also draws from analysis of written summaries and any other documentation from 12 general CoP meetings, two CoP member-only workshops, and three open events. The summaries from all events between 02.2019 and 05.2021 report meeting topics and the discussed issues. Also, the content of the blog run by the members of the CoP was analysed. As of June 2021, it includes 27 posts prepared by both GEinCEE CoP's members and CoP co-facilitators.¹

Additionally, to provide a context for the emergence of the GEinCEE CoP, selected results from the ACT Community Mapping survey were used. The survey – carried out in 2018 – mainly reached people involved in the processes of implementing gender equality measures in HEIs and research institutes. Its aim was also to identify potential community members and their needs (Reidl et al. 2019).

Finally, the individual experience of the chapter authors concerning participation in the GEinCEE CoP is used as data. Two authors, Paulina Sekuła and Ewelina Ciaputa, serve as CoP facilitators and coordinators of CoP working groups. Ewa Krzaklewska is a local coordinator of the ACT project and a researcher. Marta Warat is a researcher in the ACT project and the coordinator of one of the working groups of the CoP.

Built from scratch: On developing and consolidating a Community of Practice for Gender Equality in Central and Eastern Europe

Creation of GEinCEE Community of Practice

The creation of GEinCEE CoP started in December 2018. Initially, Jagiellonian University in Kraków (JU), which was responsible for CoP creation

and facilitation, considered focusing primarily on Polish institutions and used pre-existing (in)formal networks of collaboration in the field of gender equality to start its development. After several meetings among Polish prospective members, it was decided that the CoP's reach should be expanded. Individual researchers from the CEE region who took part in H2020 gender equality projects and respondents who declared their interest in joining a CoP in the ACT Community Mapping Survey were invited to several meetings for advice in relation to CoP creation, its potential aims and regional focus. Building on the result of those meetings as well as recently forged bonds between experts, the CoP was created in May 2019 and its name, mission, vision and agenda were determined.

While different types of competences were brought together by the engagement of diverse stakeholders (Hearn & White 2009) including representatives of universities and research institutes, the discussions with the members-to-be and the results of the Community Mapping reinforced the belief that the regional focus is important as countries within CEE share similar aims, concerns, needs, and institutional context. Indeed, the regional focus of the CoP is seen as its main strength, as underlined by the members. Focusing on the CEE region is beneficial in terms of knowledge sharing and providing a sense of belonging:

I think it is important that this community of practice is focused mainly on this region. And it means, at least for me, that I am part of some network. I can always write to [listing names] asking about information, help, advice, some materials ...

(Member 3, interview)

The geographical aspects appear critical in CoP development analysis. Aside from being helpful for developing a cross-national network of gender experts, the CoP also proved critical in terms of strengthening national networks of two of the biggest groups of Polish and Lithuanian experts. The regional focus paradoxically triggered the twinning of organisations from the same country and intensified national-level communication between those organisations and fostered the sharing of practices. Although the CoP has been gaining new members and supporters, it is far from representing most countries of the region and its membership is skewed towards Polish HEIs. Despite the high efforts to engage national policy makers and research funders, these aims to date have not been reached. These problems are perceived by members as weakening the possibility to impact wider national and regional contexts.

***Building mutual engagement, joint enterprise,
and shared repertoire of action***

The creation of the CoP institutionalised collaboration between different types of organisations and individuals operating in the CEE region. The

Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) – an agreement signed by the GEinCEE CoP members – provided a formal framework for cooperation and confirmed members' engagement in the activities of the CoP aiming at advancing gender equality. The CoP won acceptance from central management of most organisations represented in the CoP as only in five cases the MoU was signed by individuals, not the legal representatives.

Members of the CoP took part in several face-to-face meetings, participated in international conferences and debates, which allowed them to meet in person also on an informal basis. It is important to point out that it was face-to-face meetings at the start of the CoP development that constituted a firm base for the community's further operation, as these were considered more valuable when it came to creating relationships and having discussions compared to online meetings. Nevertheless, after the emergence of the pandemic caused by COVID-19, the CoP members took part in over a dozen online meetings (of both the whole CoP and working groups), as well as in tailored workshops and trainings. The CoP had also been present in social media and in scientific discourse through the active dissemination of news, activities and blog posts on the GEinCEE webpage and Twitter, but also online campaigns and discussions organised within the ACT project.²

CoP meetings, workshops, and trainings allowed for collaborative learning and knowledge sharing through exchange of good practices. At each CoP meeting, selected members presented developments and challenges to gender equality at their institution. As showed below, the exchange of knowledge supports institutional change, but also hearing other experts' stories creates a sense of belonging and raises motivation for action:

Therefore, participation in the CoP activities helps us keep a critical attitude towards existing organisational practices and procedures, approaching them from gender equality perspective. More importantly, this participation facilitates our search for the most efficient future steps developing strategies for initiating institutional changes in the most optimal way. In addition, the sense of community and belonging, and the empathic understanding of the complexity of endeavours to strengthen gender equality give strength and motivation to continue striving for better work and life conditions for everyone at Vilnius University.

(Blog entry 1)

Participation in meetings, discussions, and cooperation on common problems also allowed the CoP members to overcome isolation, which would otherwise be hindered:

For me, it was important to experience and get to know more deeply that we are not alone. There are also other institutions ... that face the

same or even worse problems... we can talk and brainstorm about it. We can try to find solutions together. Not to mention the kind of knowledge about what is happening in my region in terms of gender equality. ...

(Member 2, interview)

To engage in academic discussion around gender equality interventions, the CoP co-organised an international conference and a panel debate that raised a discussion among the most important GE actors in the region, including many from Horizon 2020 structural change projects. These initiatives made their voices heard in relation to the problem of the sustainability of measures and policies beyond the duration of these projects.

Evolution of the GEinCEE CoP – Enhancing visibility and supporting sustainability

After about one year of functioning, the GEinCEE CoP started to evolve from being mainly a forum to exchange knowledge, good practices, and emotional support to an agent with a sustainability and impact strategy. Initially, CoP facilitators focused mainly on group building and providing members with specific tools (discussed in the next chapter) dedicated to reinforcing change in organisations. After about 1.5 years, their focus switched to raising visibility of the CoP and gender equality issues in a wider social context, as well as community sustainability beyond the ACT Project. The Consolidation Event in April 2020 was an important step in this process. During it, members reflected on the status quo of the CoP, indicating its strengths and weaknesses, and picturing its future development. Gaining visibility of the CoP was seen as a decisive factor that triggers interest from other entities potentially joining the CoP, but it also raises the CoP profile, in turn legitimising the activities at member institutions. Therefore, to increase the CoP's visibility and impact, CoP members decided to create three working groups focusing on the preparation of a policy brief (based on the results from the GEAM survey), an edited book on gender equality in the CEE region and the CoP's sustainability after the ACT project lifespan. Moreover, in order to advance gender equality within member institutions, the CoP Support Programme was set up. The idea was to facilitate change by providing institutions with services indicated by them as needed: support in analysis of the GEAM survey results, organisation and provision of trainings as well as the proofreading of scientific articles on gender equality.

From June 2021, CoP members have been working intensively on the CoP's sustainability plan. They search for the best solutions to maintain the CoP's activities, members involvement and organisational leaders' support. They are concentrating on preparing a proposal for the Horizon Europe call focused on gender equality plan development and support.

How the GEinCEE CoP fosters (or not) structural change

After looking at the process of CoP creation and development, we will analyse to what extent the GEinCEE CoP has impacted on factors facilitating and hindering effective gender equality interventions in its member organisations and the region. We will reconstruct the aspects of this impact according to the order of significance attributed by CoP members.

Agency of gender actors and engagement of organisational stakeholders

The activities developed within the GEinCEE CoP were recognised by their members as effective methods of strengthening the capacities of gender equality supporters to advocate for change in their organisations, as well as supporting the process of institutionalisation of gender equality in member organisations.

In general, participation in the CoP's activities encourages us to look critically at and react towards all institutional procedures and measures where (potentially) inequality could be practiced. Thus, joining international CoP inspires us to act for institutional change – to clarify and specify institutional gender equality policy, elaborate reasonable and, believable, innovative GEP and, while implementing it, to strive for the elimination of gender bias and all possible inequality supporting practices from institutional procedures by making them transparent and gender sensitive.

(Blog entry 2)

Being part of a network of committed individuals and experts, and participation in exchange of knowledge, experience, and practices, was perceived as not only providing a sense of belonging (Pelenc et al. 2015), but also giving expertise and courage to effectively lobby organisational officials for structural change:

... I succeeded in raising interest in some people also from the managerial board and from the director's circle. And they are ready to implement some plans with me. So, I think it's a big success at that level.

(Member 1, interview)

Some CoP members were also able to engage their co-workers in the discussions about possibilities to implement gender equality measures and to involve them in action groups with concrete tasks to fulfil:

... It was the day when a meeting of the GEinCEE CoP has been organised at the LSRC. This event was a stepping-stone for us: after the workshop, an initiative gender equality group of expert researchers and those

interested in gender equality issues came together and started planning and implementing such activities as the application of the GEAR tool for the assessment of gender equality status quo in LSRC, the participation in preparing an application for H2020 Swafs' program, the organisation of an international conference focused on discussing the implementation of GEPs in RPOs and RFOs in CEE countries, etc. The GEinCEE CoP not only triggered those activities at LRSC, but also took and still is taking active part in most of them.

(Blog entry 2)

In this context, it was pointed out that participation of an organisation in an international network brings the topic of gender equality into the discussion. Organisational leaders become aware that gender equality is undergoing important developments in other institutions in the region that are part of the community. In order not to lag behind, they commit to advance gender equality by supporting or engaging in similar developments at their organisation. However, CoP members were not able in every organisation to get sustainable leadership support and engage more people to join the CoP and to share work related to gender equality. The reasons reported by members were manifold and included lack of time and financial resources, discontinuity due to changes of university governments as well as resistance towards gender equality interventions (which will be discussed in more detail below).

Gender know-how

Previous research highlights gender expertise, as well as practical competences and experience as facilitating factors in implementing gender equality interventions (Palmén & Kalpazidou Schmidt 2019). This has also been widely recognised by the CoP members as a key condition for structural change. Since the beginning of its operation, the GEinCEE CoP has been strongly focused on the exchange of knowledge and practices between CoP members and on knowledge acquirement from external gender experts. CoP members recognise the specificity of the CEE region and appreciate that they can share context-dependent and experience-based knowledge, which can serve as an inspiration to develop more effective tools and measures. Additionally, the CoP makes CoP members' voices heard in the discussions on gender equality which, as expressed during meetings and workshops, to a great extent are dominated by the Western perspective. This is often underpinned by the assumption that CEE institutions need knowledge transfer and solutions from more developed North-West countries, or the imposition of specific goals of gender equality policies and aspects which they should cover.

The CoP facilitators successfully develop and uphold a stimulating and supportive space for communication and the exchange of ideas, knowledge and experience.... This space is especially valuable because of its unique focus on the CEE region, which rather often has been neglected

in wider European discussion on gender equality in research and innovations. Thus, participation in the CoP's activities enriches us with knowledge about gender equality achievements in other RPOs in the region, expands our understanding of undergoing process, and reinforces our general sensitivity to the topic.

(Blog entry 2)

In the interviews and during the meetings, members reported receiving new knowledge, and perspectives on approaches, solutions and strategies on how to develop a GEP. In this context, the usefulness of workshops on undertaking concrete actions towards implementing GEPs and building argumentation for structural change was raised.

... we got some information about how to learn, how to analyse, how to design and implement a gender equality plan. So, I started to do that. For example checking my institutes' regulations and checking national regulation, and I started to do that with a handbook about practices (...), I think that I did concrete steps thanks to information, which I get during CoP meetings.

(Member 1, interview)

The CoP members also appreciated being updated on gender equality resources and events and having access to different perspectives, as the CoP members represent various scientific disciplines and hold different positions in their organisations. Access to gender knowledge and expertise was seen as equally advantageous for the members themselves and for their organisations (also see [Chapter 10](#)):

Yes and of course, this cooperation of a community. It gave me a lot as a person that I could meet these people and get some expertise. I have the feeling that when I need some help, or when I need some external expertise, I know where to go. This is very important for me, but also for [name of research centre].

(Member 2, interview)

However, some limitations to acquiring gender knowledge has been observed as well. While transferring solutions and approaches within one type of organisation (i.e., from one university to another) was perceived easy and effective, knowledge transfer to non-university research institutions was seen as requiring adaptations and, therefore, more difficult.

Practical tools for collecting data, enhancing gender knowledge, and monitoring interventions

The analysis indicates that ready-made tools are beneficial for members of the CoP that often have limited resources for acting. A gender equality audit and

monitoring (GEAM) tool for carrying out survey-based gender equality audits in academia and RPOs developed by the ACT consortium (for more details, see [Chapter 3](#)) proved most needed. It fitted well with the well-articulated need to conduct regular assessments of gender equality and organisational culture status quo. Therefore, most of the CoP members engaged in the preparation phase for the launching of the GEAM survey – they participated in the pilot survey and gave their feedback on its content and functionalities, they joined forces to translate the questionnaire and relevant documentation into local languages and adapt the questions to the specificity of their organisations and to the context created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our motivation to join the project was to develop the discussion about gender equality, promote the idea of equality among university employees and encourage them to complete the survey ‘The Gender Equality Audit and Monitoring Tool’. Our intention is to collect data on issues such as: stereotypes, prejudices, bias, organisational culture and climate, behaviour, interpersonal experiences etc. and share them with international academic environment. We also plan to deepen the analysis with a qualitative study on employees’ personal experiences related to gender equality.

(Blog entry 4)

While there were some concerns as to whether there would be the organisational will to use the tool and some delays due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as of June 2021, the survey has been already conducted in 12 of the member organisations. The GEAM was widely recognised as a tool for providing information on the situation in institutions and the basis for future evidence-based interventions, monitoring change, and improving working conditions in participating organisations. Running the survey and presenting its results were also reported to trigger a discussion on gender equality issues among employees and to help create allies and synergies within organisations. The comparability of results, both nationally, regionally, and internationally, was as well seen as the CoP’s strength through which a CoP can potentially attract the attention of policymakers and foster a discussion about gender equality issues in research and academia in the CEE region.

However, not all members managed to obtain consent from their organisational leadership to conduct the GEAM survey. In some organisations, other surveys on gender equality and/or working conditions had been recently carried out or already scheduled. In others, the discussion on conducting the GEAM survey and implementing GE measures was put on hold due to the election of the university authorities, the COVID-19 pandemic, and institutional resistance towards gender auditing.

Apart from the possibility of using tools developed in the ACT project, members of the GEinCEE CoP co-created an online map of GE bodies and measures in their own institutions and gave accounts of the developments in

relation to gender equality in the blog. The map presenting gender equality bodies and measures present in HE and R&I in the CEE region (<https://geincee.act-on-gender.eu/gender-equality-mapping>) was an effect of coordinated action of assessing gender equality status quo at member organisations carried out in the first months of the CoP's operation. The map and the blog accounts were recognised as important and needed output from the collaborative activity within the CoP: it increased the visibility of gender equality issues in CEE and the CoP itself by providing data on the status quo of gender equality and addressing the gaps in the research concerning CEE countries. Additionally, the online map and the accounts are thought to be useful in advocating for progress in members' own organisations (by demonstrating developments in other places).

Dealing with resistance

The Community Mapping results and testimonies given by the GEinCEE CoP members proved that having effective tools to overcome resistance towards gender equality interventions is needed. While argumentation strategies for gender equality were more systematically tackled in the CoP's trainings, the community itself has been recognised as a safe space to discuss sensitive and difficult issues, including resistance to change. The CoP's meetings provided opportunities to both share good practices in dealing with resistance, already tested by some partners, and receiving emotional support by those who face reluctance or hostility towards gender equality interventions.

However, as the manifestation of resistance can take various forms, a CoP is not viewed as providing a solution to all problems. The context of anti-gender discourse and initiatives prominent in some of the CEE countries was perceived by the CoP members as having a negative impact on their work and the possibility to implement gender equality interventions. This inhospitable (or even hostile) climate in one of the member countries impeded the activities of a newly created intra-university gender equality committee. The team encountered hate which diminished their motivation for engagement and caused censorship in regard to language used to name their activities, in particular the reflection was made around the concept of "gender", raising heated discussions. In many institutions, the name of the survey was renamed using the concepts such as "equality between women and men", "equal treatment", or "work conditions".

When the antidiscrimination team was launched last year, the information appeared on social media and local newspapers. The amount of hate the team faced was overwhelming and nobody expected that. It was not only criticism, or unnecessary statements. It was pure hate. It showed me that we can try to make this structural change and we can look for tools, but there are people simply not wanting to have this

change at all. They use methods, words and tools where we have no tools to fight with. How can you fight the hate? If you try to explain yourself, it brings even more haters into discussion. What happened with my colleagues in this team? They participated in launching the survey within the project, but whenever they have to place their names somewhere officially, they have to reconsider, if they really want to do it. We had a huge discussion about if we should use the word gender in the title of the survey. It will bring hateful emotions again. I think the limits of the CoP are in the reality and political atmosphere, which is created by the government.

(Member 2, interview)

First accounts of the CoP members, collected after the European Commission announced introducing a GEP as eligibility criterion in the application for the Horizon Europe programme³, suggest that this decision should trigger changes, also in those partner organisations where organisational resistance had previously prevented any initiatives. However, the doubts are raised whether the requirement to have a GEP would help to improve organisational cultures of academia and research institutes, or its effects would rather be limited to signing a paper and ticking boxes on a checklist.

Framing gender equality within wider concepts and initiatives

Within the CoP, different strategies were discussed and applied relating to how to prioritise gender equality and manage resistance at member organisations. The CoP created a space to discuss the framing of gender equality in connection to other institutional strategies or plans (Palmén et al. 2019). The HR Excellence in Research Award was widely recognised among the CoP members as affecting the commitment towards advancing gender equality⁴. Some CoP members admitted that being a member of a CoP is another step to show the commitment to gender equality captured in the strategy on HR Excellence in Research, either by reinforcing the promised actions or initiating the discussion on gender equality on the institutional agenda. In this context, promoting the GEAM survey – as well as any gender equality interventions – as relating to the HR Excellence in Research action plan was seen as facilitating the involvement of organisational management to those activities. Additionally, as some members indicated, efforts related to assuring good work conditions and initiatives in relation to diversity and social responsibility, together with actions towards assuring gender equality, all exemplify a long-lasting commitment to capacity building and the incorporation of the voices of underrepresented groups, especially women.

As one of the first universities in Poland, we have implemented the Diversity Charter and the Declaration of Social Responsibility. We were also recognised with the HR Excellence in Research Award and

have experts who deal with the social responsibility issues at the university. The UL [University of Łódź] participation in the GEInCEE CoP is a result of previous steps taken to manage our social responsibility and gender equality.

(Blog entry 6)

However, even with many positive voices towards linking gender equality to other strategies, there was no consensus on such strategies. There have been doubts voiced by CoP members about embracing gender equality arguments and interventions within other concepts, such as diversity or anti-discrimination. One objection referred to the risk of blurring or melting the idea and priorities of gender equality. The other doubt referred to national and European legal and policy frameworks, where anti-discrimination and gender equality are treated as separate concepts, with the second one requiring adopting an intersectional perspective.

Human and financial resources

Structural change in research institutions demands human and financial resources. In some of the national contexts, EU-funded structural change projects have initiated effective institutional change and have provided one of the main or the sole encouragements to setting up a GEP in research and HEIs (EIGE 2016). This is also reflected in the experiences of GEInCEE CoP members – those of them who have already participated in the FP7 or H2020 projects gained financial, time, and human resources to advance gender equality frameworks. A share of our members were in fact engaged in such projects and the GEInCEE CoP has become a space to discuss their experiences, such as in the case of University of Gdańsk (STARBIOS 2) where gender measures were implemented under the framework of Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI), or projects which focused on implementing specific gender equality measures (e.g., WLB policy implemented under LIBRA project at the Central European Institute of Technology – Masaryk University) or a GEP (e.g., at the Vilnius University under SPEAR project).

At the same time, the impact of the EU funding is problematic due to sustainability-related impact. In the GEInCEE CoP, it was the H2020 ACT project which provided financial and human resources for its operation through covering the costs of group facilitation, meetings, trainings, and materials. However, it did not include securing financial and human resources necessary to undertake gender equality initiatives at member organisations. In this context, a few members – especially those who were not formally engaged in other European structural change projects, reported the lack of dedicated funding as great limitation to their gender equality activities. While the CoP support programme enabled the provision of some service for willing organisations, a need for applying for external funding was articulated on various occasions, including the discussions on the sustainability

of the CoP and financial resources for personnel involved in the development and implementation of gender equality measures.⁵

The embeddedness of CoP in the ACT project was seen as producing ambivalent results. The CoP members –beside the CoP facilitators – have not been formally engaged in the Horizon project which impacted on their identification and engagement with the project, as they “*aren’t regular project members, actually, [they] are like guests*” (Member 1, interview). On one hand, it leaves more room for spontaneity and enables the CoP to be inclusive for new members. On the other hand, it gives the impression that there are no binding rules, which might mean that some members are more inclined to skip meetings and avoid mutual engagement due to voluntary commitment.

Conclusions

The GEinCEE CoP aims at addressing the conditions for structural change in HE and R&I in CEE that resonate with the needs formulated by the CoP members. As we have shown, the CoP to some extent fulfils the role of an intermediary support structure, combining isolated efforts to implement change in the region. However, it cannot be seen as a remedy for all challenges encountered by gender practitioners and scholars. The analysis shows that the CoP provides possibilities for an exchange of knowledge and building up gender expertise, which has been evaluated as an effective way of supporting gender equality initiatives in member organisations that lack employees with such expertise. In the context of scattered activities, it allowed for effective experience and practice exchange, capacity building, and it took steps to gather the experience and knowledge from the region. That not only was important from the knowledge-management perspective but also to give voice to practitioners and experts from the region that may share different experiences to their Western counterparts. In the context of resistances and the minimal strategic placing of gender equality, it provided local experts with some extra-institutional embedding of their activities, as well as strengthened their personal and collective agency. But even if the CoP is recognised as a safe space for sharing difficult situations, its effectiveness in managing individual cases of resistance proved limited.

Similarly, the need for financial resources necessary for implementing gender equality interventions has been addressed to limited extent. The CoP financed face-to-face meetings and its support programme sustained selected activities, but it did not provide resources for e.g., hiring personnel for implementing gender equality interventions, which in many organisations is missing. However, the CoP became a platform for – previously lacking – regional and country-based cooperation allowing for forming project teams that can apply for external funding.

The challenge of lacking resources was to some extent addressed through an access to ready-made tools. The GEAM survey tool proved to be an important instrument facilitating gender equality initiatives by equipping

their advocates with evidence-based legitimisation for the need of these interventions and by enabling regular monitoring of their effects. In some of the member organisations, the CoP helped to initiate concrete activities, or strategic reflections, but by itself it did not trigger substantial changes, rather supported ongoing initiatives. At this point we can see it more as a support mechanism to wider initiatives, that are triggered by other external forces, such as EU structural change projects or potentially in the future by the requirement to have a GEP to be eligible for participation in the Horizon Europe programme.

As seen by its members, through organised conferences, planned publications, and the dissemination of its results, the GEinCEE CoP has the growing potential to enhance the visibility of gender equality issues in CEE and reinforce a discussion on the specificity of the region in the European context. It has also become a platform for developing an agenda and methods that would include local settings and transcend a simple transfer of solutions developed in the Western European context. Trying to bridge scattered activities and connect regional actors however is not enough. Effective strategies to enhance its visibility to lobby national and regional policy makers for implementing legal and policy incentives for introducing gender equality measures are still needed.

Notes

1. Analysed blog entries are published at: <https://geincee.act-on-gender.eu/activities>.
2. For example, in the [#COMMIT2GENDER](#) campaign for [#8M2020](#) that was coordinated by the ACT project and co-organised by members of 12 H2020 structural change projects to share their goals and commitment on gender equality.
3. The Participants of the Horizon Europe programme that are public bodies, RPOs, or HEIs established in an EU Member State or Associated Country must have a gender equality plan in place (applicable from 2022 onwards).
4. The HR Excellence in Research Logo is awarded to HEIs and ROs which have implemented the “HR Strategy for Researchers” based on adherence to the principles of The European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers adopted by the European Commission. This strategy includes implementing equal opportunity policies at recruitment and promotion levels to obtain a representative gender balance at all levels of staff, including at supervisory and managerial level (European Commission 2005). As of June 2021, eight CoP member organisations had received the HR Excellence in Research award and two organisations were officially planning to apply for it.
5. See [Chapter 10](#) of this volume by Reidl et al., who show that this is also an issue for the other ACT CoPs.

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