

Title	Beyond a technical fix: reflecting on a feminist “Parallel” self-assessment approach to integrating gender into a large-scale scientific research project
Authors	Linehan, Carol;Laoire, Caitríona Ní;Gaffney, Christine
Publication date	2025-10-29
Original Citation	Linehan, C, Laoire, C N & Gaffney, C 2025, 'Beyond a technical fix: reflecting on a feminist “Parallel” self-assessment approach to integrating gender into a large-scale scientific research project', Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal, vol. 44, no. 9, pp. 357–375. https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-08-2024-0390
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	https://www.scopus.com/pages/publications/105028522606 - 10.1108/EDI-08-2024-0390
Rights	© Carol Linehan, Caitríona Ní Laoire and Christine Gaffney. Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this article (commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/
Download date	2026-10-31 11:46:30
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/19482



UCC

University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Beyond a technical fix: reflecting on a feminist “Parallel” self-assessment approach to integrating gender into a large-scale scientific research project

Carol Linehan

School of Applied Psychology, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland

Caitríona Ní Laoire

School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland, and

Christine Gaffney

Institute for Social Science in the 21st Century (ISS21), University College Cork, Cork, Ireland

Received 23 August 2024
Revised 11 July 2025
9 September 2025
Accepted 18 September 2025

Abstract

Purpose – Gender equality (GE) in research raises fundamental questions for existing research structures and norms. We ask how conventional science can meaningfully adopt a gender perspective that would “undo” much of what is considered sacred to the nature of science. This paper reflects on the challenges and opportunities of taking a feminist-inspired approach to integrating a gender perspective into a large-scale scientific research project. We present our reflexive “Parallel” approach (based on PArticipatory, RelAtional, and contExtual principles) to improving GE in a way that goes beyond “technical fixes” and reflect on the challenges of effecting meaningful change.

Design/methodology/approach – The research utilises a self-reflection methodology drawing on our experiences, as feminist researchers, of supporting partners in a large and diverse scientific project to integrate a gender perspective in their research. The paper takes a feminist lens to reflect on our experiences of implementing the reflexive “Parallel” approach, drawing on a guided reflection method and on documentation of our engagement with partners over the life of the project, along with analysis of results from self-assessment questionnaires completed by project partners.

Findings – Introducing a feminist reflexivity endeavour within a scientific project that is already shaped by logics of objectivism and gender-neutrality provokes fundamental epistemological tensions. Our Parallel approach was challenged by the structures of a conventional scientific project and faced resistance, including pressures to adopt more technical fixes and evasion of responsibility for change by “gendering the gender work”. Unlike more technical approaches, the Parallel methodology challenges gender-neutral scientific norms but, in doing so, provokes productive tensions that are essential for transformative change for GE.

Originality/value – Adds to understandings of the slow progress in improving GE in research; addresses the lacuna in how change might be stimulated in practice; argues that change for gender equality must be framed from a feminist epistemological perspective; proposes the feminist Parallel reflective self-assessment approach; and suggests that research funding organisations need to embed such an approach if they are to meaningfully meet their gender obligations.

Keywords Gender equality, Research, Reflective self-assessment, Implementing change, Feminist approach

Paper type Research article

© Carol Linehan, Caitríona Ní Laoire and Christine Gaffney. Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at [Link to the terms of the CC BY 4.0 licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Funding: This research was funded by the European Commission through the Horizon 2020 programme.



Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An
International Journal
Vol. 44 No. 9, 2025
pp. 357-375
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 2040-7157
p-ISSN: 2040-7149
DOI 10.1108/EDI-08-2024-0390

Introduction

It is increasingly recognised that making research more gender-equal improves science and contributes to research excellence (for an overview, see [EIGE, 2022](#)), leading to a growing imperative across all disciplines for research projects to engage with questions about embedding gender and diversity. As a result, many scientific research projects now incorporate actions focused on this goal. However, taking gender equality (GE) seriously raises fundamental challenges for existing research structures and norms around how research is done. It is well established that scientific and academic research are highly gendered fields in which success is largely defined according to masculinist norms ([O'Connor, 2023](#); [Scheibinger, 2014](#)). Therefore, to embed gender in research in a meaningful way is not simply about “adding gender” but about challenging masculinist and gendered norms that permeate research and being cognisant of the limitations of superficial or “technical fix” approaches to addressing gender in research. We argue that to take the task of embedding gender in research seriously means taking a feminist approach.

Feminist approaches acknowledge the need to disrupt conventional gender-blind approaches to scientific research ([Fassa, 2015](#); [Kalpazidou Schmidt and Cacace, 2019](#)). This goal is underpinned by the claim that knowledge production is a gendered process ([Harding, 1986](#); [Hesse-Biber, 2012](#)) and to recognise this means acknowledging the socially constructed nature of all knowledge. This claim challenges universalist and objectivist epistemologies and the accepted ideologies of much conventional science and research. Herein lies the dilemma. How can conventional science meaningfully adopt a gender perspective that would “undo” much of what is considered sacred to the nature of science itself? What happens when a feminist-informed reflexivity endeavour is introduced within a project already shaped by logics of objectivism and universalism? Here, we draw on our experiences of seeking to do just this, discussing the challenges that arise and the implications for future endeavours to embed a gender perspective in research. We draw on our experience of being tasked to develop “gender protocols and training” for a large, complex consortium-based scientific research project. First, we outline the policy and conceptual context in which our study is situated.

Framing gender equality interventions

Recognition of the need for greater GE in research is not lacking and many policy initiatives at EU (for an overview of recent strategic direction and policy initiatives see EU Commission Gender Equality Strategy, 2020–2025) and UN (e.g. UN SDGs) levels seek to promote better GE and diversity. Aligned to such policy is the increasing monitoring of gender representation via initiatives such as Athena SWAN and the She Figures ([European Commission, 2021](#)). The most recent “She Figures” report (2021) illustrates some positive trends, such as being close to achieving gender parity at the PhD level overall, but persistent segregation in fields such as Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) with just 22.4% of PhD graduates being women. An equally important strand to consider is how well gender is taken into account in the creation and evaluation of scientific knowledge. She Figures (2021) highlights how little account is taken of gender in research, with just under 2% of EU publications (2015–2019) including a sex/gender analysis and only 3% of Horizon 2020-funded projects incorporating a sex/gender analysis in their research.

Such trends present a troubling backdrop for achieving greater GE in research and suggest that “more of the same” in terms of policy or practice is unlikely to change this stalled progress. *That* change is needed is not controversial; *how* to meaningfully achieve change and at a quicker pace than heretofore is the question driving both policy and research. Part of achieving change is understanding the reasons for the slow pace. Our aim is not to re-produce the extensive research in this area. For a recent summary of the many issues impacting gender in research content and careers, see [EIGE \(2022, p. 5\)](#), which highlights:

Studies have revealed gender-discriminatory practices, such as biased recruitment, promotion and funding processes and criteria. There is also a strong influence of gender stereotypes in relation to R & I. Gender discrimination in science may take different forms, sometimes overt, but most often subtle

and hidden. It may operate even in highly formalised and seemingly gender-neutral peer-review processes or selection and promotion procedures. Furthermore, working cultures in R and I organisations are experienced as not inclusive and frequently even toxic.

Many studies, such as [O'Connor \(2023\)](#), draw attention to the structural, cultural and organisational factors that (re)produce gendered power and inequality regimes. Against the backdrop of gendered regimes, what then of attempts to achieve change?

Part of the challenge in achieving change arises due to how change is *framed*. For example, is change envisaged in terms of limited technical fixes or box ticking ([Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019](#)) and “happy talk” ([Ahmed, 2012](#)) or as a more transformative process? [Tzanakou and Pearce \(2019, p. 1194\)](#) are critical of changes stemming from individualistic, neoliberal approaches that “lack engagement with the structural issues in which gender inequality is rooted”. It is well established in feminist research that gendered practices and gender subtexts (or logics) are (re)produced through complex structural and cultural dynamics ([Acker, 2012](#)), although this knowledge is not always embedded in GE change interventions. [Kalpazidou Schmidt and Cacace \(2019\)](#) map the evolution of how change for GE is framed, from individualist interventions (labelled as “fixing the women”) to later cultural (factors such as organisational culture, history and norms) and structural (factors such as organisational hierarchies, rules and procedures) perspectives. They argue for an approach to change that recognises complexity “where impact depends on the interaction of a multitude of variables strongly related to context” (p. 321), in effect a framework for change that recognises contextualised local dynamics involving both positive mobilisations for, and also resistances to, change. This echoes [O'Grada et al.'s \(2015\)](#) call for interventions that acknowledge the mutually constitutive nature of structure and agency in the reproduction of gender inequalities. Thus, it can be argued that academic debate has moved beyond framing change as a dichotomous choice between “fix the women” and “structural” approaches, to debates about how to achieve the depth and complexity of structural change required at multiple, and interacting, levels ([O'Grada et al., 2015](#); [de Vries and Van den Brink, 2016](#)). However, while more complex structural transformative approaches have greater potential to achieve change, organisations are slow to adopt such approaches ([Van den Brink, 2015](#)) as they challenge the way work is done, how it is valued and the organisation's very culture and there are “few practical guidelines on how to achieve transformation” ([Benschop et al., 2015, p. 554](#)).

While acknowledging that change needs to be framed as complex, iterative and involving interactions at multiple levels within organisations, challenges remain in how to achieve change in practice. For example, the “top-down”, neoliberal and managerialist underpinnings of recent policy agendas to address gender inequalities mean that technocratic approaches to change tend to dominate, such as those that assume linear pathways from policy to outcome, prioritise metrics and “quick fixes”, reward “institutional peacocking” ([Yarrow and Johnston, 2023](#)) and promote moderate rather than radical change ([Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019](#); [Ahmed, 2012](#)). Highly technocratic approaches to GE intervention run the risk of being too superficial to meaningfully disrupt gendering processes. [Powell et al. \(2018\)](#) highlight the resistances to institutional change projects; [Bleijenbergh \(2018\)](#) uncovers the challenges when a project questions an organisation's core narrative rather than offering more limited technical solutions. [Benschop et al. \(2012\)](#) point to the sticky historicity of old gender orders even while change occurs, and [Ní Laoire et al. \(2021, p. 575\)](#) highlight the “contingent ways in which uneven gender relations articulate and manifest in different contexts, shaping possibilities for, and obstacles to, gender equality intervention”. Such work sensitises us to the need for interventions that get up close to the sticky and messy processes and practices that (re)produce gender inequalities and to the resistances that interventions may face. In sum, while the need for a more radical approach to change has been copiously outlined in previous research, past experience has also demonstrated the many challenges to interventions that seek to go beyond technocratic approaches.

From technical “fixes” to more transformative changes

We position our work within the feminist transformative critique of change interventions, outlined above (Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019; Ahmed, 2012), moving away from universalist technical “fix” solutions which may seem attractive and “tick a box” but ultimately do not effect sustainable real changes. We reflect here on how to bring about transformative change in practice, framed by a feminist approach to change and also on what happens when we try to do this.

Moving from superficial to meaningful change requires that we attend not just to numerical gender representation in science and research careers but also consider how gendered notions of “excellence” are baked into research metrics, structures and institutions and thus add layers of complexity to achieving better integration of GE in research. Existing studies highlight how normative understandings of research or scientific excellence are those that tend to value men’s scientific work more than women’s (Fassa, 2015; Van den Brink and Benschop, 2012). Feminists argue that science and knowledge are always value-laden, shaped by the worldviews of the most powerful in society, and hence that pure objective knowledge is never possible. A substantial body of feminist literature associates the emphasis on objectivity and detachment in the natural sciences and in positivist social research with the hegemony of masculinism in scientific thought (Harding, 1986; Lennon, 1995). Harding (1986) refers to this as androcentrism in science. She points to the inherent difficulties of attempting to undo sexism and masculinism in science, given the dominance of objectivist and androcentric epistemological framings, arguing that such framings can be more or less dominant in different scientific disciplines and that research programs that are more empiricist and positivist have been more resistant to gender *as a theory*. At best, they have been willing to adopt gender as a *variable* to be analysed in their subject matter, as a property of individuals and their behaviours rather than of structures. She is pointing here to the limitations of viewing gender solely in terms of a descriptive and empirical social category rather than a theory through which the premises of androcentrism in science can be undone (Harding, 1986). This distinction has implications for the agenda of addressing gender inequalities in research. It means rethinking some of the fundamental principles of doing science. It means going beyond “feminist empiricism”, an approach that adds gender as a variable without unpacking the underlying structures of knowledge production. It means adopting the feminist principle of researcher reflexivity to critically question the underlying assumptions that permeate scientific knowledge production (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Finally, for us as gender scholars, it means partnering with those who have a stake in the scientific structures we wish to change, through a collaborative and participatory approach which makes gender practices and inequalities more visible (Acker, 2006) and builds capacity for change from within (Coleman and Rippin, 2000).

Our contribution in this paper is threefold: (1) We present our approach for embedding GE in a large scientific research project, which we term the “Parallel” approach, based on the feminist-inspired principles of reflection, participation, relationality and context-sensitivity; (2) We draw on our own experiences in this project to reflect on what happens when you do adopt this kind of approach to embedding gender in a research project that is already grounded in conventional (masculinist) scientific assumptions, both in terms of a) showing positive opportunities for achieving change and b) highlighting the struggles and tensions that ensue when feminist principles challenge masculinist scientific assumptions; and (3) We seek to give voice to the shared struggle as gender scholars when we attempt the difficult process of effecting change towards GE, to show you are not alone.

Project context and the PARALLEL approach

Project context

We reflect here on our efforts to facilitate meaningful and ultimately disruptive gendered change in a large scientific research project. In line with feminist principles of reflexivity outlined above, we describe our positionality or who “we” are in this context. We are three

female scholars from social science backgrounds. We have a track record of engaging in research on gender and careers (including academic, medical and corporate domains) and are influenced by feminist scholarship (as outlined above). Drawing on our expertise, we have been primary investigators and/or partners/collaborators on a number of funded projects aimed at improving GE in academic and research careers. On the basis of that experience, we (the three co-authors) were invited to join (as a minor partner) a large scientific research consortium that was commencing a new project. The core scientific focus of the consortium is not the key concern, but rather that, in common with many EU-funded research projects, it included a small sub-task on embedding gender in project activities. Our role was to bring our gender expertise to this one subtask within the much larger project that was not itself primarily about gender, the subtask being to advise on gender training and the implementation of gender planning across project activities. This subtask was our only role within the project; we were not involved in any way in any of the core scientific research activities.

The project involved a large EU-funded global research consortium with many different stakeholders and 21 research teams across 17 different countries (within and outside the EU) broadly situated within the sciences. The consortium was formed to address a set of research themes in the domain of science-society. GE was not its primary objective, and our work within the project was to promote GE in project operations across the life of the consortium. In the case of this particular project, priority focus in the overall project structure was on “core” scientific goals rather than on embedding gender into project teams and activities. However, the project did have as one of its sub-aims to promote inclusivity in research and innovation, thus offering a fertile opportunity to reflect on how GE in project teams and research content could be enhanced. Engaging in inclusive approaches to embedding gender was part of the rhetoric of the project, though very much not its main scientific objective or aim. In practice, just three months were allocated for work on “Gender Protocols and Training” (hereafter, the gender subtask) within the three-year project. In an attempt to make more meaningful changes, we, the gender subtask team, elected to spread the three-month allocation from a single block in Year 1 to across the life of the project to enable us to promote and track gender activities across the whole duration. Our team had experience on previous gender-focused projects, which highlighted for us the importance of iterative adaptations when implementing GE actions.

In common with many large international research consortia, this particular consortium comprised many different organisations, sectors and indeed national contexts. The wide variety in national contexts (17 different countries worldwide) posed challenges in recognising and reflecting on gender issues. For example, some consortium partners (hereafter, partners) national contexts had equality legislation, but not all. Partners had joined the consortium based on scientific expertise in the core project areas; therefore, partners were very diverse in terms of GE starting points, ranging from those with substantial expertise in engaging with GE to those that were very new to considering GE in research. In fact, a few individuals in the consortium had significant levels of feminist gender expertise (for example, one researcher had held a position as a vice-dean for diversity and inclusion in their institution; another had extensive expertise in gender policy in developing countries). However, they did not hold prominent roles in the project, for example, as workpackage leaders. The majority of partners had limited knowledge and familiarity with ideas about “gender and diversity” and, we found through our interactions throughout the project, tended to represent gender mostly as a variable (that is, in terms of a numerical representation of numbers of male and female research participants and/or project team members). This wide diversity in context and expertise added to the complexity of embedding gender into an international consortium with very different degrees of awareness, acceptance and willingness to engage. Such diversity added challenges to our aim of enhanced GE as not all project partners were starting with the “same” levels of awareness, knowledge or expertise and came from very different national and socio-cultural contexts. This variety and complexity complicates ideas of “best practice” as stakeholders need to consider how best to address and improve gender in their particular contexts (Ní Laoire

et al., 2021). The issue is not just one of diversity across contexts but the seduction of universalist prescriptions for “fixing” gender, stemming from positivist scientific approaches that seek generalisable principles. In contrast, our Parallel approach sought to empower local stakeholders to adapt gender understandings to their local contexts.

Parallel approach

As the gender subtask team, we operationalised our conceptual framing of change (as reflective, participatory, relational and contextual) through a self-reflection approach to collaborative work and awareness-raising with our consortium partners to challenge gendered assumptions in this large research project. Our aim was to build awareness across the large research consortium of the value and means of assessing and improving GE in both research careers and research content. Our goal was to support partners to reflect critically on their existing practice, to engage them in knowledge construction and a learning process and thus to build capacity.

We realised from the outset that our approach would have to be in some ways disruptive to undo gendering in this project, which was not itself centrally focused on gender, although GE was amongst stated project principles. We were influenced by Coleman and Rippin’s (2000, p. 586) advice that

... for this process to work, we as researchers needed to be able to “disrupt” the normal workings of the [project/organisation] and create spaces within it in which reflective discussion could take place.

Other gender projects, such as GENOVATE, highlight the value of participatory guided self-reflection as a key element of sustainable GE planning (Archibong *et al.*, 2016). Inherent to this approach is self-assessment, whereby groups learn how to critically assess their own activities through a gender lens, thus taking ownership of the process of reflection and change. The self-assessment approach to gender change is also at the heart of well-established initiatives such as the Athena SWAN Charter, which, while not without its flaws, nonetheless offers opportunities for change (O’Mullane, 2021; Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019). Therefore, we built on established good practice and sought to develop an approach to gender training and planning that was grounded in a reflective self-assessment approach.

Drawing on our learning from previous projects (O’Grada *et al.*, 2015; Ní Laoire *et al.*, 2021) and on feminist approaches to transformative change, we developed our approach to this task, based on three core principles:

- (1) Participatory and reflective: Drawing on feminist principles of participation and reflexivity (Lykes and Hershberg, 2012; Hesse-Biber, 2012), we were conscious of the need to work with partners in a participatory manner, to encourage their self-reflection on project activities and structures, to unearth their assumptions about gender neutrality and to challenge them to meaningfully embed gender considerations in both their project teams and research content. Similarly, Coleman and Rippin (2000) highlight the need for collaborative action research and reflection to achieve change, while Bleijenbergh and Van Engen (2015) show the value of taking a participatory approach to enhance GE by supporting stakeholders to arrive at shared definitions of GE problems and to identify and implement appropriate policies.
- (2) Relational: Mindful of O’Grada *et al.*’s (2015) relational account of GE change, which argues for a view of individuals and structures as mutually constitutive to achieve change, we argue for taking a relational approach to change, which positions individuals and systems as reciprocally involved in effecting change. Thus, structural change requires interventions that disrupt the taken-for-granted gender subtexts that are reproduced in everyday life by gendered actors. Drawing on Acker (2012, p. 217), here “gender subtexts” refer to “texts, explicit or implicit, written or just common practice, that shape the gendered processes and structures”.

- (3) Contextual: [Ní Laoire et al. \(2021\)](#) demonstrate that for a change approach to work, it has to speak to participants' contextual starting place and not adopt, in an unproblematised way, a universalist approach to change or assume a contextual transferable best practices. This contextualised approach to change draws on feminist scholarship, which pays attention to how gendered structures and cultures are (re) produced in different ways, shaped by the specific contexts in which they are embedded ([Acker, 2012](#)).

This reflective self-assessment approach we term “Parallel” (PARTicipatory, RELational and conTEXTual). The Parallel approach speaks to the need for complex processes to occur simultaneously during transformative change processes – that is, for new practices to be introduced while existing practices continue; for implementation and reflection to occur in parallel; and for supporting stakeholders in parallel with challenging them. In other words, the approach recognises that change processes do not necessarily involve once-off transformative events; instead, such change is complex and occurs in relatively small cumulative steps over time.

In practical terms, we developed a plan to support consortium partners to embed gender and diversity in a meaningful way in the research project. Influenced by the Parallel principles, we worked with the partners to raise gender and diversity awareness and to undo some of the gendered structures and scripts already embedded in the project. Our work involved a number of core activities.

First, we produced a tailored and accessible project Gender Protocol document (with links to web resources) as a resource for partners, early in the project; this resource was developed by us (the authors), drawing on feminist literature (such as [Harding, 1986](#)) and on existing available resources such the EIGE[1] platform; it defined gender as a social construction, outlined how GE principles were relevant to the objectives of the wider project and gave examples of how GE could be practically considered in all day-to-day research and project activities. To take just one example, in relation to GE in research dissemination practices, the protocol suggested;

Gender equality in dissemination practices covers a broad range of activities. It involves both visibility and inclusion of all members of the research team and consortium – making women and their research visible, allocating them speaker roles in public engagements, including them in the media presence such as web profiles and on-line blogs, and ensuring equal and fair representation in authorship of publications. It also includes making women and their experiences more visible in research by, for example, collecting and disseminating gender-segregated data. Consideration could also be given to the use of language, for example avoiding pejorative or sexist language when referring to both women and men, as well as avoiding gender stereotypes in both word and image. Ideally, the language and images used in dissemination activities are gender inclusive, for example, in the use of pronouns, and including images of both women and men in the research environment (see, for example, [ENTRUST guidelines](#)) (Project Gender Protocol).

Second, we delivered workshops on gender sensitivity at consortium events and encouraged the inclusion in consortium event timetables of partner-led sessions reporting on progress towards GE within the project. Third, we sought to ensure that other consortium members who had gender expertise had the opportunity to contribute to specific research tasks.

Finally, we developed a Gender and Diversity Self-Assessment Tool (SAT) to support partners in conducting gender and diversity self-assessments. The SAT took the form of a guided “questionnaire” for each project team to complete, with questions about gender balance in their teams and decision-making processes and about how they were embedding GE and gender-sensitivity in the research content and methods. Sample questions are outlined in [Table 1](#). The SAT referred explicitly to the Gender Protocol as a support document to assist partners in considering how they might address any gender issues arising from the self-assessment. The purpose of the SAT was to encourage partners to identify and reflect on gender issues both in the structure and composition of the project team and in the nature and conduct

Table 1. Sample headings and questions from SAT1

Self-assessment tool 1 (SAT1)	
Section A research careers	Section B research content
What is the gender balance in your team and how might it be enhanced?	How will you ensure gender balance in research participants and stakeholders?
How is gender accounted for in team decision-making processes?	How has gender been embedded in the research design and research questions?
GE in Working environments, e.g. what times are team meetings held at?	Have you reviewed literature relating to gender differences in the research field?
Who from your research team was visibly represented in the following dissemination or networking activities?	Does each task explicitly explain how gender issues will be handled?
Source(s): Authors' own work	

of their research activities, hence encouraging team-led reflection and action. It was not primarily a data collection tool, but a tool, in conjunction with the Gender Protocol and GE workshops, for raising awareness, and it served both to draw partners' attention to gaps they needed to address and to provide a structure for doing this. In this sense, the SAT had an educational purpose linked to an implicit normative message which communicated the expectation to partners that if they were reporting a lack of engagement with GE, they would need to justify this. We supported teams in doing these self-assessments through ongoing conversations with team members.

SAT1 was disseminated early in the consortium timeline to initiate awareness and reflection amongst partners on gender equality in the composition and roles of their project teams, their research participants and case-study sites and also importantly in terms of their research activities, such as embedding gender sensitivity in conducting literature reviews and designing research methodologies for their research activities.

About 12 months after the first round of self-assessment (SAT1), we wanted to check in with project teams and see how their approaches to GE were progressing (or not). We developed SAT2, which had far fewer questions than SAT1 and asked teams to reflect and report on *challenges faced* and *strategies adopted* in key areas such as:

- (1) Achieving gender balance in teams/research
- (2) Embedding gender into research content
- (3) How gender was integrated into their tasks
- (4) How gender was considered in their dissemination and networking activities

Taken as a whole, the Parallel tools and resources we designed were intended to support partners to take ownership of the work of embedding gender sensitivity in their research, to take responsibility for their research decisions and to build their understanding of the role of gender in research through an experiential learning process. According to [Ferguson \(2019\)](#), feminist-inspired learning processes encourage participants to take responsibility for GE in their institutions. We deliberately chose not to take a didactic approach, for a number of reasons: we did not have the resources/responsibility to make research decisions; we were aware that the contexts in which partners were doing the research varied considerably and they were best positioned to know their own research contexts and what would be feasible; and crucially we felt strongly that it is important for researchers to take responsibility for the difficult task of making their own research gender sensitive. The Parallel approach was about embedding meaningful situated practices in the everyday operation of the project – rather than more abstract rhetoric (“happy talk” [Ahmed, 2012](#)) that does not fundamentally challenge day-to-day practices, attitudes and behaviours. This was reinforced by encouraging ongoing

reflection on gender issues throughout the project, such as repeating the SAT exercise and introducing the practice of regular reports at consortium meetings by project leaders on progress toward GE.

Study methodology

While the preceding section outlines our Parallel approach to supporting partners to embed GE in their research, here we turn to describe our methodology for reflecting on our experiences of developing and implementing this approach. We took a “reflexive composite” methodological approach, following [Van den Brink \(2015\)](#), where she produced an interpretative and reflective analysis of her own experiences of raising GE issues in academic settings. Data for our self-reflection method included our post hoc reflections on the wide range of project activities in which we participated, or which we led, along with analysis of data and materials gathered throughout the project. Through a guided reflection method (see [Archibong et al., 2016](#)), based on our (all three co-authors) experiences of doing the work of the gender subtask, we retrospectively documented our thoughts in writing and in notes taken during discussions with each other, in response to some guiding questions we asked ourselves, such as “how successful, or not, was the approach we took? Why?”. In this, we drew on our reflections on, and notes taken during, the full range of our interactions with partners during the life of the project, which included attendance at regular consortium meetings, presentations of the Gender Protocol, SAT tool and SAT outcomes to partners, involvement in email discussions, delivering workshops on gender in research and supporting partners in conducting self-assessments. Our analysis of these notes and reflections involved an iterative process of discussion and writing (among the three co-authors) in which we drew on feminist theory to collaboratively make sense of our experiences.

The partners’ self-assessments provided a rich body of data which supplemented our reflections. We asked partners to submit their completed SATs to us, and we also engaged interactively and individually with them in response to any questions they had about the SAT process. Sixteen partners completed SAT1 while 11 completed SAT2. When completing SAT2 partners were asked to consent to the use of their data for purposes such as this; all provided their consent. Therefore, while we draw on broad trends evident from the SAT1 questionnaires, we present excerpts and specific information only from SAT2. We conducted a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data from across both SATs, which involved summarising and tabulating numerical data and conducting a thematic analysis of responses to open-ended questions.

It should be noted that while we draw on this SAT data analysis in this paper, the SAT was not primarily intended as a data-collection tool. The primary purpose of conducting an analysis of SAT data was to present the consortium with baseline data on gender representation in project teams and tasks, as part of raising awareness, and to share examples of good practice from across the consortium. To this end, we shared the results at consortium meetings and through two written reports. In addition, the results from SAT1 were useful to us, the gender subtask team, in gauging what kinds of further support could be offered to the consortium in the area of GE and to make iterative improvements to the SAT for the second round. Therefore, taken as a whole, our reflexive composite methodology was highly iterative, involving ongoing and parallel rounds of engagement with partners, reflection, interpretation and theorisation.

Reflections on implementing the parallel approach

Responses to self-assessment and consciousness-raising

It became apparent to us during SAT1 that there was a certain ambivalence and some resistance among partners to considering gender and diversity questions in depth. SAT1 revealed that many partners had not thought about gender until that point, with some questioning the need for it. By SAT2, halfway through the project, we found a change in that many partners were

reporting on how they had tried to incorporate gender into project methods and activities. There was less questioning of the need to take gender into account, and more emphasis on the challenges encountered in trying to do so. This comparison between SAT1 and SAT2 suggests that, possibly as a result of the numerous gender activities/supports we had introduced, along with the influence of the other gender experts in the project, gender and diversity considerations had shifted from being at best marginal to a more prominent position in the project work. Given that the original project plan did not have specific objectives for adopting gender-sensitive research methods, it can be surmised that partners may have been encouraged to do so as a result of engaging in reflective Parallel activities, which raised awareness of gender issues and simultaneously communicated their importance.

Note, however, that 16 of the 21 project partners completed SAT1 and 11 completed SAT2. There are a range of ways of interpreting non-engagement, for example, from viewing it as a signal of resistance to GE and/or perceptions of its irrelevance to the main scientific tasks, to those who may have engaged in reflection and interventions to support GE at their sites, but without reporting on such strategies via SATs. We reflect further on non-engagement below, but here we focus on those who did engage.

In SAT2, we asked partners to report on any strategies they had adopted since the time of SAT1 to embed gender-sensitivity in their research activities. The SAT “questionnaires” included prompts and examples, and references to the Gender Protocol, to support partners in developing such strategies. The information reported by partners through SAT2 suggested to us that they had adopted a range of types of strategies, which we categorise here as indicating either “low” or “high” engagement with GE. As an illustration of the journey from resistance to low engagement – in SAT1, one partner responded with “Not relevant” or “Not applicable” to many questions about how they might integrate GE concerns in their context. Later on in the project, this partner had begun to talk a little about GE in relation to their project activities but mostly by treating gender as a numerical variable (which we interpret as low engagement) and they moved to ensure that gender disaggregated data was collected on the team and research participants.

Higher levels of engagement with GE, as reported by other partners in SAT2, involved strategies such as reviewing research instruments for gender sensitivity, making gender explicitly a focus of a case study, building a gender lens into a literature review and guiding interviewers on ways of asking probing questions to surface gendered assumptions when collecting data with research participants. For example, here we see Partner A proactively trying to ensure some female voice/representation from male-dominated sectors in their stakeholder consultation.

We took special care when choosing the participants from domains that are traditionally seen as male-dominant, such as industry stakeholder groups. Whenever possible, we first contacted female stakeholder representatives in order to involve them in the research process or to get an advice on the choice of participant for interview or for the survey. (Partner A, SAT2)

Similarly, Partner G reported on their efforts to embed GE in their research:

Several strategies have been carried out to embed gender equality and diversity into the research content.[...] Bias has been addressed indirectly by having a diverse team in the tasks and work package, which has helped to identify possible biases in the research and also identified relevant research topics related to gender and diversity. Moreover, the research instruments have undergone revision by the gender experts within the work package. We have also taken gender and diversity as one of the main topics to be investigated in the case studies in Task X.X. [...] In addition, we have taken care of having an inclusive language in the reporting in the deliverable. (Partner G, SAT2)

SAT2 reports showed that many teams strongly engaged with embedding gender throughout all aspects of the research process. Most of the partner responses contained a comprehensive level of detail regarding, for example, the different strategies undertaken by the teams to ensure gender balance among their research participants. They also, variably, discussed their efforts to

embed gender into the research content. Gender sensitivity was more evident in SAT2 than in SAT1, thus pointing to the Parallel approach having had an impact on people's thinking. Over time, some very creative and contextualised solutions/actions emerged from among partners, which indicated emerging gender competence within partner teams, and suggests that the Parallel approach was, to a degree, effective. We were conscious that encouraging partners to develop their own solutions was a much more effective approach than one which would have involved the so-called gender experts trying to impose solutions without fully knowing the context.

Reflecting on the challenges for feminist GE work in conventional scientific projects

We turn now to reflect on some challenges we encountered when trying to support partners to move beyond superficial to meaningful engagement with gender issues in this project, and reflect on the implications for feminist GE work in conventional scientific projects.

The challenge of dominant scientific research structures. The initial project workplan that we were presented with featured gender as one small three-month sub-task ("Gender protocols and training"), with limited resources (in comparison to the overall project budget), as just one of 42 sub-tasks in total, described as follows in the workplan:

This includes selection of best training program, Plan for integration of Gender equality and diversity throughout all Implementation throughout project, and Planning appropriate training.

In hindsight, this marginal positioning of gender work in the project may be indicative perhaps of an imperative to instrumentally address gender as a criterion for attaining research funding but without considering it as integral to, and visible within, the scientific content of the project, and therefore not meaningfully resourced or evidenced across deliverables. The language of the gender subtask also reflects a view of GE work as being primarily about diagnosing problems and delivering bounded, discrete and implementable solutions, such as a short training event. This is a view which denies the ways in which gender relations are reproduced relationally through ongoing entanglement of individual agency, biographies and practices with gendered structures. An instrumental approach serves to demonstrate that GE has been considered but does not fundamentally change project aims, structures, ways of working, research methods or deliverables. Furthermore, it reveals limited understandings of how gendered structures are reproduced.

Relegating gender work to a discrete sub-task is related to the typical way in which large scientific consortium projects are prepared, which produces a related structural challenge to embedding GE. The project plan, with associated workplans and division of resources, is often created under time pressure as funding application deadlines loom. Subsequently, project teams have limited degrees of freedom if funding is granted. The pre-determined, linear nature of most large scientific project designs, with a set path to pre-defined deliverables, does not necessarily facilitate ongoing learning, reflection or iterative change.

We found that even when reflection on gender in the research teams or content in our project prompted attempts to change, the structures did not necessarily support sweeping changes. For example, it would not have been possible to completely change the gender composition of research teams once the project had started; ideally, this would have been considered at the project design stage. Across the life of the project, some changes were made to project structures to address gender balance and representation, such as the formation of an advisory "gender subcommittee" and the inclusion of members of the subcommittee on the project steering group. The establishment of this subcommittee was not something we, as the gender subtask team, had suggested; it is possible that it came about as a result of a growing awareness among partners of a need to "do something" to address the gender issues that were becoming more apparent as a result of our interventions. However, the subcommittee could be interpreted as an add-on to the structure rather than changing the key project objectives and structures in any far-reaching way. The gender subcommittee was made up only of those project members

who were identified as gender experts (including the three of us) and so did not provide a forum for other partners to learn from those of us deemed to be the “experts.” It had no formal role or responsibility in the project, no terms of reference, no chair and no budget – this lack of specificity meant its function was viewed differently by different project members.

For example, we found that some partners expected the subcommittee to take on an oversight role by assessing the GE sensitivity of their project activities, thus positioning the subcommittee as assessors of the research rather than partners in a collaborative process of reflection. This relegated “doing gender” to a niche, discrete activity rather than seeing it as integral to and inherent in all activities and decisions by all stakeholders. Therefore, our efforts to embed GE throughout the project were sometimes thwarted by project structures that were designed with very different goals from ours. In this way, feminist interventions are challenged by the dominant structures of scientific projects and scientific funding, in which there is often little time and space for GE work. Despite the efforts of funders to require projects to address gender, the risk is that basic requirements can be met in ways that do not fundamentally change project structures or research processes.

Pressure for quick technical fixes for GE. The structural and time constraints of the project already positioned GE as needing a quick fix rather than a slow but sustainable process of ongoing change and transformation. As the project progressed, we became aware that there was a strong sense in project meetings and workplans of an imperative to address gender issues quickly to “tick a box” and to get back to what were seen as the substantive issues, rather than reflecting more deeply on what promoting GE could actually mean for teams and tasks. This feeling was echoed by some of the partners, for example:

Time pressure due to various planning and management issues have meant that much of the work has had to be done at speed. Such speed often prevents the work of inclusivity from bearing fruit. (Partner B, SAT2)

This demand for speedy solutions manifested in a number of ways, such as pressure to address GE in a one-off, short training event for project members. For example, a common request from partners was for “gender training”. We interpret this demand for gender training as conveying that the Parallel learning process we had developed and implemented – a set of supports and resources encouraging self-assessment and reflection – was not “training” and not recognised or valued in itself as a learning process. It did not look like “training” in the conventional sense of a once-off or short series of workshops. Literature on the recent proliferation of “gender training” highlights the tendency in such training models to depoliticise gender and to view the goal of training as simple transfer of knowledge and skills, that is, a view of learners as “empty vessels” who need to acquire objective knowledge and skills that can be applied in a technical and objective way (Mukhopadhyay and Wong, 2007). As Ferguson (2019) explains, dominant models of gender training, in the gender mainstreaming tradition, tend to de-politicise gender relations, avoid reflexivity, position learners as “non-experts” and focus more on the outcomes of training than on the processes. Instead, feminist approaches to gender training seek to fundamentally challenge ways of knowing, including the separation of the professional from the personal or political (Ferguson, 2019; Mukhopadhyay and Wong, 2007). In this spirit, our Parallel approach (participatory, reflexive, relational and contextual) sought to challenge partners to re-think how they do research (the gender subtexts of doing research) and focused on ongoing processes of (un)learning rather than application of techniques.

Such processes of (un)learning take time, and we suggest that the ongoing engagement that we developed throughout the project was much more effective than running a once-off training course at the start of the project. It meant that we could reinforce our messages at regular intervals and could get to know the project better than would have been possible if we were external consultants; it also meant that we were able to work more closely with our partners as the project developed and as they grappled with the issues we were raising. Our role was slightly different at each stage of the process of embedding gender and we were able to adapt to

that. This more iterative approach to change was useful to keep stakeholders focused on the ongoing need to embed GE but also for us to reflect on how practices, opportunities and resistances were unfolding in a dynamic manner (Kalpazidou Schmidt and Cacace, 2019) and how we might respond to these. A series of gender training workshops provided by an external expert would have provided a very different learning experience, not linked to ongoing change in the project. That partners expected this type of training reflects not only dominant understandings of gender training (Bustelo *et al.*, 2016), but also, we argue, a desire for quick fixes that do not fundamentally challenge ways of knowing, and a desire for experts/others to do the difficult work of gender analysis and changing practices (discussed further below). In other words, undoing normative practices is difficult, and one common response can be to look for an easier route.

Feminism meets gender neutrality: Epistemological differences between our feminist-inspired approach and the more objectivist underpinning of the wider project came to the fore in numerous ways. Our attempts to encourage partners to consider GE were met with variable responses, from thoughtful, highly engaged strategies, for example, to improve the gender representation in stakeholder data, to hostility, for example, in terms of questioning the categories of male/female gender (possibly as a means of disrupting attempts to capture any gendered data) or simply not engaging with the SAT. While we can draw hope from higher engagement, we can also draw learning from the manifestations of resistance or low engagement or even non-engagement. As with Van den Brink's (2015) exploration of academic leaders' defensive responses to feminist knowledge, it allows us to understand how strategies against change may be shaped and plan for them in future interventions. One strategy of resistance was to de-prioritise GE, as is evident in the following response from Partner C to the question about gender balance in sampling strategies:

Diversity balance or gender balance of respondent in each country was not actively pursued, as it would be too difficult to determine. (Partner C, SAT2)

Here, Partner C is defending their decision not to actively seek to ensure gender balance among research participants and field sites in their data collection, "as it would be too difficult to determine". In this way, while the existence of gender imbalances is not questioned, the urgency to address them is undermined (Cuthbert *et al.*, 2023).

Discourses of merit, neutrality and research excellence or at times silence/withdrawal, were also mobilised to resist change. Here, Partner D mobilises a discourse of merit in response to a SAT question about how they ensure GE in the division of tasks among the team:

Decisions are taken based on the best argument and pragmatism, and the allocation of tasks is not based on gender (Partner D, SAT2)

In response to a question about the strategies adopted to ensure that project outputs for dissemination are gender-inclusive, the same partner responded:

Reward work with co-authorship as is appropriate, i.e. gender and position of power do not automatically give one co-authorship (Partner D, SAT2).

Partner D is signalling that authorship is based on merit alone, that doing work on a paper is the only criterion for the "reward" of being listed as an author. This type of response reflects a belief in the existence of meritocracy in practices of authorship and denies the socially constructed and situated nature of practices surrounding authorship. Such gender-neutral discourses, common in science, which value objectivity or neutrality, compete with feminist epistemologies which recognise the value-laden nature of knowledge production. A gender-neutral stance was evident in assumptions that "good research methods" would naturally and automatically produce gender-balanced research, thus justifying avoidance of learning about how to achieve GE. For example, in response to a question in SAT2 about challenges in seeking to embed gender in research content, one partner responded:

Automatic scraping of email addresses was used to support traditional survey distribution pathways. This did not allow to directly address maintaining gender balance, besides through pure random chance. However, the remarkably even distribution of male and female respondents shows that gender balance could still be maintained. Arguably, using an algorithm for respondent recruitment eliminated all sources for bias towards any gender. (Partner C, SAT2).

As [Cuthbert et al. \(2023\)](#) argue, waiting for change to “just happen” is not the same as actively driving structural change.

Provoking productive tensions

Though frustrating to us at the time, such responses at least make visible the lack of awareness of how gendered processes work. As [Shore and Davidson \(2014, p. 25\)](#) argue, to achieve change one must “question the game itself, making visible its outlines, rules and referees”. While none of the partners did “in principle” object to GE, in practice, some resisted the need for, or direction of, change. Thus, part of the value of the Parallel approach is to visibilise issues around gender. This visibility provoked some disquiet and discord within the consortium. Some partners expressed dissatisfaction with what they saw as inadequate leadership on gender and diversity in the project. This was perceived by some consortium members to have resulted in unsatisfactory research instruments with less-than-optimal outcomes in some cases. For example, in SAT2, one partner drew attention to the inflexibility of some of the research instruments being used, which did not allow for gender issues to be teased out in their interviews with their research participants:

In several cases we got the responses from the participant that the gender is irrelevant [...] and that it does not influence their work and decisions, when there was discrepancy with those statements and the data considering gender balance and representativeness, especially in decision making process in their institutions and teams. We could not influence the research process and discuss the matter with the participants. (Partner A in SAT2)

Here Partner A is highlighting an issue we have frequently encountered when attempting to embed GE in research: if a research participant is bluntly asked if gender is an issue in their field and responds “No” (while separate data on gender balance in their organisation would suggest otherwise), do research teams take this “no” at face value and not pursue the issue further or are they sufficiently aware of better methods/instruments for exploring gendered dynamics? In addition, others drew attention to inconsistencies within the project in terms of the prioritisation of gender and diversity considerations.

Comparing our contributions to WorkPackage (WP)[X] and WP[Y], it is important to draw attention that gender and diversity aspect was strongly supported and encouraged to be included in all methodological steps by leader of the WP[Y]. i.e. [WPY Lead] explicitly asked us to work on this. Meanwhile leaders of WPX tasks were not that explicit about those topics. (Partner E, SAT2).

In general, gender and diversity aspects are not sufficiently implemented/mainstreamed in the project activities (Partner F, SAT2).

Thus, the SAT process made visible the project’s shortcomings in relation to GE, raised awareness of them and had the potential to provoke debate and discussion among the partners. As [Lombardo and Mergaert \(2016\)](#) point out, processes of change to the status quo tend to involve conflict and contestation. In this sense, the Parallel process can be viewed as disruptive and potentially productive in terms of provoking change. The debates that emerge in this process may reflect different understandings of gender change among the partners, differences that only become apparent once “gender and diversity” moves from being a taken-for-granted discrete subtask to a set of questions that challenges the way the research itself is conducted.

Gendering the gender work

Epistemological differences were particularly evident in the gendering of gender work in the project. The gender sub-task team (that is, the three authors of this paper) and the other gender experts in the project were predominantly female, and cast as providing support for predominantly male research team leaders. Regularly we were asked to “approve” particular pieces of research work in terms of their gender-sensitivity or gender “correctness”. This occurred despite the fact that this was not our formal role on the project. Often, the request to “approve” would come to the gender subcommittee as a whole, rather than to the subtask team specifically. Again, the gender subcommittee was not set up for this purpose, and in fact, did not have a clearly defined role in the project.

Positioning the gender subcommittee as approvers could be viewed as separating the science from the gender expertise, thus removing the responsibility for GE work from the scientists and placing it on the shoulders of designated gender “experts”. This can be understood, as [Cuthbert et al. \(2023, p. 2\)](#) put it, as “epistemic disavowal”, that is, disavowal by leaders in science of the need to act on gender issues or externalisation of the responsibility to act onto others. In other words, science leaders who lack the knowledge to act on gender inequalities frequently look to others to do the gender work. This left us, and the other female gender “experts” in the project, in the position of being expected to take on this responsibility (but without any of the power to lead the research), thus gendering the gender work. Inherent in this gendering of work responsibilities is the related burdening of women with the emotion work (that is, engaging in efforts to manage your own emotions and often those of others, to meet the demands of a job/task), here the task of having to raise the gender issue, negotiate it and work it out while balancing the emotion work of (in parallel) both challenging and supporting colleagues. Many aspects of our role and position within the project involved emotion work. Similar to [Coleman and Rippin’s \(2000\)](#) account of a participatory change process, we experienced significant tension in “balancing support and challenge” in the process of embedding gender in this project. This was particularly difficult when we met with active resistance to change and found ourselves dealing with very different understandings of both change and GE. Given the power dynamics within the project, the onus was on us to persuade others of the value of a participatory feminist approach to change.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper presents our reflections on the experience of attempting to implement a feminist informed self-assessment approach to improve GE in a large research project consortium with particular emphasis on the opportunities for, and resistances to, change in this process. Others have usefully highlighted that when change is framed as a “technical fix” for GE it often results in little meaningful change occurring ([Ahmed, 2012](#); [O’Mullane, 2021](#); [Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019](#)). Therefore, a key contribution from our work stems from how change is framed, that is, coming from a feminist epistemology. For us that means an approach to change that recognises gendering processes both in careers and also knowledge production and values ([Acker, 2006](#); [Harding, 1986](#); [Hesse-Biber, 2012](#)). Our paper highlights how interventions for GE in academic and research contexts need to address not only organisational structures and culture but also assumptions underpinning the content of the work itself – that is, the gendered nature of knowledge production and framing of research excellence.

A second contribution stemming from this work is to explore “*how*” transformative change might be stimulated in practice, answering calls by for example, [Benschop et al. \(2015\)](#) and [Kalpazidou Schmidt and Cacace \(2019\)](#) for more practical guidelines on how to achieve meaningful change for GE. Going beyond a “technical” fix, the Parallel approach shown here incorporates PArticipatory, ReLAational and contExtual principles. This approach speaks to the need for: change to run in parallel with continuity; implementation and reflection on

change to occur in parallel; and supporting stakeholders in parallel with challenging them. The self-assessment approach we propose seeks to encourage reflection and development of actions that involve a change in praxis. Our work echoes that of O'Grada *et al.* (2015), which shows how the dynamic interaction of GE interventions with existing practices of actors in a given context shapes any change efforts. Similar to Ní Laoire *et al.* (2021), collectively this stream of work shows that context matters – that one intervention will not necessarily work in all contexts, thus underlining the need for participatory, contextualised and relational methods of approaching change interventions. We demonstrate that there are opportunities for change using this approach, ranging from raising awareness, making visible the issue of GE, provoking tensions, initiating actions, generating contextualised solutions to situated challenges and building capacity through learning for sustained changes.

However, it is also important to recognise that this approach is not easy, not least as it can challenge existing normative discourses of gender neutrality, merit and excellence in research content and careers. O'Connor (2023) argues that such discourses form resistances to attempts to achieve gendered change and uses the metaphor of “bonsai-ing” to describe how subtle (yet pervasive) institutional resistance can limit (or prune back) the potentially radical or disruptive impact of gendered change. GE in scientific research is challenged by epistemological tensions relating to: scientific research funding processes; normative, linear ways of organising large projects; time and workload pressures leading to demands for technical fixes or once-off training for GE and militating against taking time for reflection and learning; and objectivist and positivist scientific assumptions underpinning the research content. Epistemological tension can be productive – as it makes visible the changes required. By provoking questions about concrete research activities, issues were raised from the level of the taken-for-granted to being the focus of conscious attention, “uncovering the unthought categories of habit” (Adkins, 2003, p. 25). Uncomfortable though it may be, there is value in provoking productive tensions in terms of challenging norms around objectivity in research and more broadly, meanings around research merit and excellence and the neutrality of science in research content. Thus, taking gender and diversity seriously means taking a feminist approach and challenging some of the deep-rooted assumptions underlying knowledge production. In other words, the gender question is not a technical one but is also an epistemological one. Scientific research funders and organisations need to recognise this and to consider how best to meet their GE obligations in this context.

We conclude by recognising the value of sharing our experiences of trying to effect change. Our lived experiences of seeking to implement change for GE echo those of Hardcastle *et al.* (2019) in their exploration of effective means of broadening participation in STEM at one US university. They argue that “institutional change in the academy requires a completely different sort of approach, one that is multi-source and multi-method, emergent, dynamic, iterative, and nonlinear”. (p. 350). They outline how they lived this complexity in seeking to effect change. We share many colleagues' frustration that the hard task of trying to progress GE in our projects and organisations is often left to women to take on. At other times, we are given this task, as others, by sins of omission or commission, “gender the gender work”. Given the often precarious nature of research careers, it is difficult to dispute the rules of the game as a precarious researcher; therefore, some of us are in a more privileged position, as tenured academics, to be a bit more disruptive. As Van den Brink (2015) highlights, there is value in sharing our collective stories of dealing with this “hard task” of seeking to implement GE initiatives. The stories may not always be pretty and may show the depth of further change required, but they offer us opportunities to make connections and to assert the value of going beyond the technical fix.

Note

1. <https://eige.europa.eu/>

References

- Acker, J. (2006), "Inequality regimes: gender, class, and race in organizations", *Gender and Society*, Vol. 20 No. 4, pp. 441-464, doi: [10.1177/0891243206289499](https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243206289499).
- Acker, J. (2012), "Gendered organizations and intersectionality: problems and possibilities", *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, Vol. 31 No. 3, pp. 214-224, doi: [10.1108/02610151211209072](https://doi.org/10.1108/02610151211209072).
- Adkins, L. (2003), "Reflexivity: freedom or habit of gender?", *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 20 No. 6, pp. 21-42, doi: [10.1177/0263276403206002](https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276403206002).
- Ahmed, S. (2012), *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, Duke University Press, Durham.
- Archibong, U., O'Mullane, M., Kállayová, D., Karodia, N., Ní Laoire, C. and Picardi, I. (2016), "Guided reflection as an organisational learning and data collection tool in a gender equality change management programme", *The International Journal of Organizational Diversity*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 19-34, doi: [10.18848/2328-6261/CGP/v16i01/19-34](https://doi.org/10.18848/2328-6261/CGP/v16i01/19-34).
- Benschop, Y., Mills, J.H., Mills, A.J. and Tienari, J. (2012), "Editorial: gendering change: the next step", *Gender, Work and Organization*, Vol. 19 No. 1, pp. 1-9, doi: [10.1111/j.1468-0432.2011.00580.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0432.2011.00580.x).
- Benschop, Y., Holgersson, C., Van den Brink, M. and Wahl, A. (2015), "Future challenges for practices of diversity management in organizations", in Bendl, R., Henttonen, E., Bleijenbergh, I.L. and Mills, A. (Eds), *Handbook for Diversity in Organizations*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 553-574.
- Bleijenbergh, I. (2018), "Transformational change towards gender equality: an autobiographical reflection on resistance to participatory action research", *Organization*, Vol. 25 No. 1, pp. 131-138, doi: [10.1177/1350508417726547](https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508417726547).
- Bleijenbergh, I. and Van Engen, M. (2015), "Participatory modelling to support gender equality: the importance of including stakeholders", *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, Vol. 34 No. 5, pp. 422-438, doi: [10.1108/EDI-06-2013-0045](https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-06-2013-0045).
- Bustelo, M., Ferguson, L. and Forest, M. (2016), *The Politics of Feminist Knowledge Transfer: Gender Training and Gender Expertise*, Palgrave Macmillan Houndmills, Basingstoke.
- Coleman, G. and Rippin, A. (2000), "Putting feminist theory to work: collaboration as a means towards organizational change", *Organization*, Vol. 7 No. 4, pp. 573-587, doi: [10.1177/135050840074004](https://doi.org/10.1177/135050840074004).
- Cuthbert, D., Barnacle, R., Tadesse Sidelil, L., Henry, N., Latham, K. and Spark, C. (2023), "‘If someone, somewhere had a plan’: disavowal in the gender-equality resistance talk of STEMM leaders", *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 100, 102815, doi: [10.1016/j.wsif.2023.102815](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2023.102815).
- De Vries, J. and Van den Brink, M. (2016), "Transformative gender interventions: linking theory and practice using the 'bifocal approach'", *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, Vol. 35 No. 7/8, pp. 429-448, doi: [10.1111/gwao.12658](https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12658).
- European Commission (2021), "Directorate-general for research and innovation", *She figures 2021: Gender in Research and Innovation: Statistics and Indicators*, available at: <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/06090>
- European Institute for Gender Equality (2022), "Gender in research report", *Luxembourg: Publications office of the European Union*, doi: [10.2839/883780](https://doi.org/10.2839/883780).
- Fassa, F. (2015), "Excellence and gender: playing the game of scientific excellence or being played by the game? The Swiss example", *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, Vol. 34 No. 1, pp. 37-54, doi: [10.1108/EDI-05-2013-0041](https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-05-2013-0041).
- Ferguson, L. (2019), "Exploring privilege through feminist gender training", *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, Vol. 2 No. 1, pp. 113-130, doi: [10.1332/251510819X15471289106059](https://doi.org/10.1332/251510819X15471289106059).

- Hardcastle, V., Furst-Holloway, S., Kallen, R. and Jacquez, F. (2019), "It's complicated: a multi-method approach to broadening participation in STEM", *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, Vol. 38 No. 3, pp. 349-361, doi: [10.1108/EDI-09-2017-0200](https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-09-2017-0200).
- Harding, S. (1986), *The Science Question in Feminism*, Open University Press, Milton Keynes.
- Hesse-Biber, S.N. (2012), *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis*, SAGE Publications, London, doi: [10.4135/9781483384740](https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483384740).
- Kalpazidou Schmidt, E. and Cacace, M. (2019), "Setting up a dynamic framework to activate gender equality structural transformation in research organisations", *Science and Public Policy*, Vol. 46 No. 3, pp. 321-338, doi: [10.1093/scipol/scy059](https://doi.org/10.1093/scipol/scy059).
- Lennon, K. (1995), "Gender and knowledge", *Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 4 No. 2, pp. 133-143, doi: [10.1080/09589236.1995.9960600](https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.1995.9960600).
- Lombardo and Mergaert (2016), "Resistance to gender training and mainstreaming processes", in Bustelo, M., Ferguson, L. and Forest, M. (Eds), *The Politics of Feminist Knowledge Transfer: Gender Training and Gender Expertise*, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lykes, M. and Hershberg, R. (2012), "Participatory action research and feminisms: social inequalities and transformative praxis", in Hesse-Biber, S.N. (Ed.), *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Practice*, 2nd ed., SAGE Publications, pp. 331-367, doi: [10.4135/9781483384740.n16](https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483384740.n16).
- Mukhopadhyay, M. and Wong, F. (2007), *Revisiting Gender Training - the Making and Remaking of Gender Knowledge: A Global Sourcebook*. KIT Publishers; Oxfam Publishing, available at: <https://www.kit.nl/institute/publication/revisiting-gender-training-the-making-and-remaking-of-gender-knowledge/> (accessed 16 August 2024)
- Ní Laoire, C., Linehan, C., Archibong, U., Picardi, I. and Udén, M. (2021), "Context matters: problematising the policy-practice interface in the enactment of gender equality action plans in universities", *Gender, Work and Organization*, Vol. 28 No. 2, pp. 575-593, doi: [10.1111/gwao.12594](https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12594).
- O'Connor, P. (2023), "Is gendered power irrelevant in higher educational institutions? Understanding the persistence of gender inequality", *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, Vol. 48 No. 4, pp. 669-686, doi: [10.1080/03080188.2023.2253667](https://doi.org/10.1080/03080188.2023.2253667).
- O'Gráda, A., Ní Laoire, C., Linehan, C., Boylan, G. and Connolly, L. (2015), "Naming the parts: a case-study of a gender equality initiative with academic women", *Gender in Management: International Journal*, Vol. 30 No. 5, pp. 358-378, doi: [10.1108/GM-09-2013-0118](https://doi.org/10.1108/GM-09-2013-0118).
- O'Mullane, M. (2021), "Developing a theoretical framework for exploring the institutional responses to the Athena SWAN Charter in higher education institutions—a feminist institutionalist perspective", *Irish Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 29 No. 2, pp. 215-235, doi: [10.1177/0791603521995372](https://doi.org/10.1177/0791603521995372).
- Powell, S., Ah-King, M. and Hussénus, A. (2018), "'Are we to become a gender university?' Facets of resistance to a gender equality project", *Gender, Work and Organization*, Vol. 25 No. 2, pp. 127-143, doi: [10.1111/gwao.12204](https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12204).
- Schiebinger, L. (2014), "Scientific research must take gender into account", *Nature*, Vol. 507 No. 7490, p. 9, doi: [10.1038/507009a](https://doi.org/10.1038/507009a).
- Shore, C. and Davidson, M. (2014), "Beyond collusion and resistance: academic-management relations within the neo-liberal university", *Learning and Teaching*, Vol. 10 No. 1, pp. 12-28, doi: [10.3167/latiss.2014.070102](https://doi.org/10.3167/latiss.2014.070102).
- Tzanakou, C. and Pearce, R. (2019), "Moderate feminism within or against the neoliberal university? The example of Athena Swan", *Gender, Work and Organization*, Vol. 26 No. 8, pp. 1191-1211, doi: [10.1111/gwao.12336](https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12336).
- Van den Brink, M. (2015), "The politics of knowledge: the responses to feminist research from academic leaders", *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, Vol. 34 No. 6, pp. 483-495, doi: [10.1108/EDI-01-2015-0004](https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-01-2015-0004).
- Van den Brink, M. and Benschop, Y. (2012), "Gender practices in the construction of academic excellence: sheep with five legs", *Organization*, Vol. 19 No. 4, pp. 507-524, doi: [10.1177/1350508411414293](https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508411414293).

Yarrow, E. and Johnston, K. (2023), "Athena SWAN: 'Institutional peacocking' in the neoliberal university", *Gender, Work and Organization*, Vol. 30 No. 3, pp. 757-772, doi: [10.1177/1350508417726547](https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508417726547).

Further reading

European Commission (n.d.), "Directorate-general for justice and consumers, A union of equality: gender equality strategy 2020-2025", *Communication*, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0152>

Corresponding author

Caitríona Ní Laoire can be contacted at: c.nilaoire@ucc.ie