



# GENDER AT BELGIAN UNIVERSITIES

An interuniversity meeting  
for policy officers working  
on gender equality

September 11, 2020

**REPORT**

# INTRODUCTION

On 11 September 2020, [Sophia](#), the Belgian Gender Studies Network, funded by the Institute of Equality for Women and Men, organised an online event for policy officers working on gender equality at Belgian universities. The aim of this meeting was to facilitate connections and synergies between French- and Dutch-speaking peers and exchange good practices.

This report contains the main outcomes of the [three sessions](#) during which participants exchanged ideas and shared their projects, activities, and inspiring practices.

- 1) **Gender, academic career and human resources**
- 2) **Gender, research and education**
- 3) **Gender, sexism and harassment**

Sophia is committed to give greater visibility to gender equality plans and contribute to the development of more inclusive policies at the Belgian universities.

In order to establish a platform for policy and knowledge exchange between different stakeholders, we will continue to organise regular meetings. Don't hesitate to reach out to us if you would like to be involved: [info@sophia.be](mailto:info@sophia.be).

# GENDER, ACADEMIC CAREER & HUMAN RESOURCES

## CHALLENGES



Work-life  
balance



Career  
development

## WAYS FORWARD



Resources



Awareness  
raising



Gender-fair  
procedures

## GOOD PRACTICES

[Gender awareness in education](#)

RoSa vzw

[PhD job fair](#)

KULeuven

[Cascade](#)

ULB

[Jonge Academie](#)

Interuniversity

[Identifying gender bias](#)

[Gender bias calculator](#)

[Gender bias decoder](#)

# CHALLENGES

## Work-life balance

Participants agreed that a healthy work-life balance remains one of the biggest challenges in academia. Although there is a lot of autonomy, freedom and flexibility on paper - for example when it comes to managing working hours - it is not always easy to bring this into practice and work often ends up interfering with the private lives of academics. This is all the more true in the current context: Participants mentioned the **gendered impact of Covid-19** and how it further pressures the work-life balance of many. Increased domestic burdens, challenges of combining digital work with children, and negative impact on research time and goals (such as missing deadlines for the submission of new projects, the publication of results, and so on) are some of the struggles people experienced. In general, several sources have indeed shown the unequal impact of Covid-19, citing a.o. women and scientists with young children as being the most affected. In Flanders, partly in response to a report of the Young Academy, several universities are currently taking action to decrease the gender imbalance caused by Covid-19 (especially for early career researchers), but these actions will need to be further implemented in the following months and will also require short-term and long-term follow-up.

Parental leave and other **leave arrangements** form a second challenge. The existing regulations for parental leave often go unused because it is difficult to find a replacement and academics are hesitant to switch to part-time work in the face of career goals and the continuous competition in academia.

Participants also stressed the need for **a cultural change, both inside and outside of academia**. Inside academia, **policies** concerning leave arrangements should be advertised, encouraged and facilitated more so that taking up leave becomes a positive choice. There also seemed to be a shared belief that true equality can only be achieved by stimulating men to take parental leave and holding them accountable (see the Scandinavian model).

# CHALLENGES

## Career development

There is **no interuniversity consensus** on specific (compulsory) measures to promote inclusion and gender-fair procedures. Therefore, it appears that the current measures that are adopted can vary greatly from one university to the next - and even across faculties of the same university.

In recent years, all universities have taken action to improve the gender balance in recruitment and career development: measures include the introduction of "gender vanguards" (i.e. "a full professor who is a member of the assessment committee of the faculty (or group) and guards the gender sensitivity of the assessment procedures"), the promotion or imposition of a gender balance in search committees (or the strict minimum of 1/3 gender representation), or the organisation of trainings regarding gender bias. However, in most cases, these measures are not binding, which means that a great deal of work and energy goes into persuading administrations to follow up on these actions.

Moreover, participants noted significant differences concerning gender-fair procedures between the Flemish and Francophone universities, which again illustrates **the need for communication and exchange of best practices between both regions**.

**Structural funding for research** remains one of the biggest obstacles to pursuing an academic career and puts PhD and postdoc researchers in precarious positions. Women who arrive at a crucial stage in their academic careers - which often requires an even greater time investment - are sometimes reluctant to follow through because of the difficulties they experience in combining family life with a high level of job insecurity. Many postdocs find themselves stuck in a series of sometimes underpaid, short-term postdoc positions. This leads to the conclusion that stronger measures are needed to fix the **gap** between PhD positions and tenure-track positions (i.e. the idea of the leaky pipeline).

## CHALLENGES

Finally, participants underlined the need for **dialogue with the FWO and FNRS**. Specifically, funding agencies should prioritise **qualitative assessments** instead of quantifying research output and should take into account the **effective research time** of the candidate.

The possibility to extend contracts (as is now the case for junior postdoc fellowships at FWO, which can be extended by one year) should be considered more extensively as well. Participants noted that the FWO or FNRS have not yet commented on the prolongation of temporary contracts to tackle the research disruption caused by Covid-19, contrary to other research bodies such as Horizon 2020. Evidently, this measure in turn raises the question which researchers would qualify for additional support, as Covid-19 impacted everyone differently.

# WAYS FORWARD

## Resources for a better work-family balance

A **solidarity fund**, managed by an interuniversity cooperation, could be used to facilitate parental leave for academics. Postdoc students, for example, could then apply for temporary replacement positions. Some specific research domains even appear to have created international interuniversity “pools” for replacements, further adding to the notion that it would be beneficial to systematise these initiatives. Evidently, these solidarity funds would require consistent communication and follow-up in order to function accordingly.

Academics face specific challenges when it comes to maintaining a healthy **work-family balance**. A babysitting application per university could anticipate and accommodate the flexibility often expected of academics. Some participants pleaded to take the competition element out of promotion procedures as a way to achieve more gender-fair methods. Finally, more guidance and support for PhD researchers is needed. Career centres could guide them in their pursuit of an academic career or in their search for a job outside academia.

As for specific measures regarding the **gendered impact of Covid-19**, it should be noted that the working group on “Gender in Academia” of the Flemish Young Academy has worked out an action plan in collaboration with all five Flemish universities. Apart from university-specific measures, which will become operational over the course of the following weeks, they have gathered secondary sources (i.e. facts and figures) and compiled a tool box with measures directed both at policy makers and individual academics.

# WAYS FORWARD

## Awareness raising

Participants agreed that raising awareness of implicit gender biases based on stereotypes (e.g. gender roles) inside and outside of academia should start as early as in kindergarten. Awareness can be further stimulated through media campaigns (e.g. girls and STEM), but also by offering positive role models from a very early age. What we need to fully accomplish gender balance is a **cultural change**. In academia - as well as all other levels of society - raising awareness of underlying biases or the effect of measures such as the use of gender quota is key. Many participants agreed that these facts and figures are well-known by gender-sensitive individuals, but the challenge remains to reach those without a gender perspective.

Several initiatives can help convince **academics**, and particularly members of examination committees and boards, of the importance of awareness-raising and avoid false juxtapositions such as the one between quota and excellence. Firstly, it is crucial to build argumentation on facts and figures, as well as testimonials. Communicating widely (i.e. mainstreaming) should also be an essential part of the communication strategy. Furthermore, participants noted that efforts towards awareness raising (e.g. specific training sessions) should additionally be **aimed at HR personnel**. Training and workshops on preventing gender bias are seen as crucial interventions to create gender-fair recruitment processes. Appointing gender vanguards could be a way of facilitating continuing vigilance and awareness raising.

## Exchange of best practices

The exchange of best practices between gender and diversity policy officers as well as rectors and deans at different universities provides a solid (and monitored) foundation for further implementation at the different universities. The interuniversity approach not only facilitates the sharing of experiences, but also guarantees a follow-up mechanism that can help to move things forward.



# WAYS FORWARD

## Transparent monitoring

More awareness of the need for and impact of quota should be a first step. Transparent monitoring of initiatives and their effects can demonstrate the relevance of measures such as quota and thereby overcome initial resistance. Encouraging universities to implement quota by providing financial support could be an additional way forward.

## Gender-fair procedures for recruitment and promotion

In order to ensure more transparency in recruitment and promotion procedures, universities should develop **stronger regulation** and **clear rules** for HR processes such as the formulation of job criteria or inclusive job advertisements (see also the “gender decoder” that detects subtle linguistic gender-coding with potential discouraging effects). According to participants, expectations and criteria for promotion should also be formulated in more specific and concrete terms. Finally, re-organising employment and recruitment policies according to employees’ reproductive realities and personal lives does not only benefit women working at universities, but also enables male colleagues to spend more time with their living partners or families and take up care work.

# GENDER, RESEARCH & EDUCATION

## CHALLENGES



Legitimacy & funding



Research groups



Teaching & students' knowledge

## WAYS FORWARD



Gender-sensitive research



Gender mainstreaming



Awareness raising

## GOOD PRACTICES

### RESEARCH

[Gender in research](#)  
YellowWindow

[LGBTQ-Forum](#)  
UAntwerpen

[Les Mots d'elles](#)  
ULiège

[Portrayal in the faculties](#)  
KULeuven

### EDUCATION

[Equality network \(VEN\)](#)  
VUB

[Curriculumscan](#)  
VUB

[Diversity and sustainability](#)  
UAntwerpen

[Lecture series on racism & equality](#)

VUB

### RESEARCH GROUPS & NETWORKS

[Groupe Genre.s](#) (UMons)  
[STRIGES](#) (ULB)

[GREG](#) (UCLouvain)

[A\\*](#) (UAntwerpen)

[RHEA](#) (VUB)

[CRCG](#) (UGent)

[FNRS](#) contact group

# CHALLENGES

## Legitimacy and funding

Gender studies or research in gender is still not considered a legitimate or valid research field. Subsequently, **funding** for research projects with a gender perspective remains one of the main challenges.

## Research groups

Although participants underlined the importance of research groups, the structure and strategy of these groups vary greatly from one university to another. The question, therefore, lies in determining the **appropriate strategy** considering the scope and influence of a given research group. Informal and bottom-up groups tend to be safer spaces where people come together without a fixed agenda. However, as these initiatives happen on a voluntary basis, people often lack the energy and time to remain committed. Institutionalised research groups, on the other hand, are able to organise events and increase their visibility due to the funding they often receive.

## Teaching on gender

Currently, teaching on gender mostly reaches students who are already aware and/or interested in gender questions. Most courses that integrate a gender and intersectionality dimension are optional courses or taught in the gender and diversity master programmes, linked to the Humanities and Social Sciences faculties. Other faculties don't always feel concerned about gender or consider it as important or mandatory. Participants also noted the **opposition** that some students might have against a gendered approach or framework.

Overall, students don't know enough about gender, implicit bias, racism, intercultural competences, discrimination, etc. There is a need for more general scientific knowledge and teaching about this in order to raise awareness.

# WAYS FORWARD

## Research groups

Research groups are a place for like-minded individuals to unite, gather and connect through an interdisciplinary gender lens. According to the participants, the need for and importance of (informal) research groups is evident. This is particularly crucial given that gender studies is not always seen as a legitimate research field.

## Gender-sensitive research

According to participants, efforts should be made to promote gender-sensitive research in order to take gender into account throughout the research cycle. Researchers should be made aware of the importance of including a gender dimension and know how to avoid gender bias in their research projects.

Participants noted that **gender mainstreaming** and emphasising the importance of gender to ensure a more integrated approach to research could be a valuable strategy. Horizon 2020, for example, argues that the integration of a gender dimension in research provides added value. One of the programme's objectives is incorporating the gender dimension in research and innovation content, as this helps improve the scientific relevance of the produced knowledge. Gender mainstreaming the curriculum and offering **interdisciplinary courses** (instead of only offering specific gender courses) could be an effective strategy to sensibilise a wide range of students to gender questions.

## Awareness raising

In order to counter the lack of knowledge or awareness concerning gender, participants emphasised the need for **accessible knowledge**. Online tools or modules could make content more engaging and straight-forward. Moreover, participants agreed that awareness raising shouldn't focus solely on students and argued that the integration of a gender dimension in teacher education programmes should be a priority as well.

# GENDER, SEXISM & HARASSMENT

## CHALLENGES



Misinformation  
& lack of  
awareness



Reporting



Regulations

## WAYS FORWARD



Confidants



Expertise



Institutionalisation

## GOOD PRACTICES

### CONFIDENTIAL COUNSELLORS & HELPDESKS

[MindMates](#)  
KULeuven

[cash-e](#)  
ULB

[Report it](#)  
VUB

### AWARENESS RAISING

[SSIRS](#)  
(Sharing Stories of Institutional  
Racism & Sexism )

[Campaign Together](#)  
[USaint-Louis](#), [UCLouvain](#),  
[UNamur](#)

[Campaign #RESPECT](#)  
ULiège

[Plan SASHA](#)  
USaint-Louis &  
UCLouvain

[Safe Campus](#)  
France

[#MeTooAcademia](#)  
Het Acteursgenootschap

# CHALLENGES

## Misinformation and lack of awareness

Misinformation and a lack of awareness seem to contribute to the limited power of the efforts to combat harassment that are currently in place. Authorities rarely seem to take the initiative in these matters and communication often remains heteronormative, even if non-stereotypical communication tactics are emphasised. Sexism and harassment are too often assumed to be mere “misunderstandings” or altercations that occur between students exclusively. More awareness needs to be raised among university authorities and dominant profiles to improve the cultural understanding of harassment as a **structural issue** that needs to be dismantled.

## Reporting

Sexism and (fear of) harassment still prevents women from progressing in their careers at the same pace as their male colleagues. For example, some female PhD researchers avoid working with a male supervisor to avoid experiencing everyday sexism. Women in academia also reported being more comfortable reporting instances of harassment when they had already obtained a more definitive academic status. These testimonies suggest that sexism and harassment are a tangible problem in Belgian universities and victims often **struggle to talk about these issues and/or feel heard**.

## Regulations

The lack or poor quality of regulations for reporting cases of harassment or sexism makes it difficult for those involved to tackle these situations. For this reason, it is crucial to have a clear understanding about matters such as the boundaries of confidentiality, the role and goal of existing procedures, finding legal frames, meeting with trained professionals, and so on. These issues are even more crucial when there is a power imbalance involved (e.g. gender-based violence between a professor and a student).

# WAYS FORWARD

## Confidants

In case of harassment, having someone to confide in often forms an important first step in dealing with the issue. As written above, the gender and position of a confidant within the work environment can determine whether a harassed employee feels **safe** enough to open up. Since PhD researchers are in a hierarchical relationship with their supervisors, they have to be able to feel confident to talk to someone of a higher rank. One way to achieve a higher feeling of safety could be to assign PhD researchers to multiple supervisors to increase the presence of confidential actors.

## Expertise

The British-Australian scholar **Sara Ahmed** is an independent feminist scholar and writer. Her work is concerned with the ways in which power is experienced and challenged in everyday life and institutional cultures. Her talk at Kaaitheater in February 2020 focused on the conceptualisation of complaints as diversity work. She went on to illustrate how complaints usually happen “behind closed doors,” and showed how doors are often closed even when they appear to be open. By exposing the hidden structures that keep existing inequalities in academic institutions in place, Ahmed’s work is crucial for developing concrete strategies towards awareness raising and knowledge building.

The Norwegian feminist psychologist **Berit Ås** developed the theory of the five master suppression techniques. Suppression techniques are defined as strategies of social manipulation by which a dominant group or person maintains their position in a hierarchy. Ås’s theory thereby helps to identify power structures and techniques that keep them in place.

In June 2020, a European working group on gender in research and innovation published several recommendations on addressing and ending gender-based violence in research and higher education.

# WAYS FORWARD

## Institutionalisation

The fight against harassment needs **further institutionalisation**, which means that awareness needs to be raised among authorities and dominant profiles in academia. The procedures and tools that have been implemented by authorities and their administrations have fostered some success (e.g. significant increases in reported harassment cases and a bigger focus on non-stereotypical communication), but improvements are still needed. Despite the implemented changes, individual experiences still hardly reach top level discussions and the lack of clear guidelines for reporting harassment or sexism makes it hard to tackle these situations in an effective manner.