Between policy ambitions and complex realities: exploring the effectiveness of gender policies in Balkan academia

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Abstract

Universities have systematically adopted gender equality policies over the past decades. Nevertheless, progress towards gender equality in academia remains slow. Research reveals that such policies encounter many obstacles and often yield mixed outcomes. Key obstacles indicatively include neoliberal discourses prioritising competitiveness over gender equality, unsupportive organisational environments, and absence of systemic approaches. Despite these valuable insights, university gender policies call for further scholarly attention, as questions persist as to why some policies succeed while others fail. These questions are especially intensified by the scarcity of robust, in-depth examinations capable of comprehensively revealing the dynamics at play; existing studies are often inconsistent and empirically grounded in Western-centric contexts.

Therefore, the present thesis explores the effectiveness of university gender policies. It focuses on how university members perceive and experience Gender Equality Plans' (GEPs) effectiveness in the under-explored Balkan academia, examining factors that potentially hinder those plans across the policy lifecycle (formulation, implementation, emergent outcomes) in the contexts of Greece, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Situated within the broader landscape of university gender policies, GEPs constitute an emergent policy regime where more reflections on their transformative potential are needed. GEPs' examination is enabled through theoretical integration of gendered organisations theory with the theory of Complex Adaptive Systems and the concept of complex interventions. The resulting framework and qualitative systems-based process evaluation reveal the multiple factors, in-between interdependencies and feedback loops that hinder GEPs' formulation and implementation and produce unintended adverse consequences. Theoretically, the thesis advances understanding of university gender policies through a novel conjunctive approach, arguing for the salient role of emergent causality in shaping policy unfolding and outcomes in a dynamic, non-linear way. Empirically, it contributes to the literature on GEPs. It documents factors experienced as barriers to GEPs, pertaining to broader socio-political norms, including regulatory landscapes, local organisational cultures, and stakeholders' attitudes towards gender issues and GEPs. These empirical insights yield a refined programme theory for GEPs challenging initial, linear assumptions about their progression pathways. Methodologically, the thesis operationalises the complexity of gender interventions and their hosting systems, and provides a blueprint for conducting a qualitative systems-based analysis of complex social interventions related to gender.

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Author's declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work. I am the main author and major contributor of the three papers that form the core of the thesis. Detailed co-authorship statements for these papers and corresponding chapters (Chapters 2, 3, and 4) are provided below. I am the sole author of the integrative chapters that bind these papers into the thesis (Chapters 1 and 5). This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this University or elsewhere. All sources are acknowledged as references.

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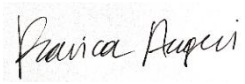
Signature of the co-author	
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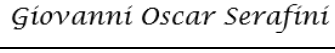
Signature of the co-author	
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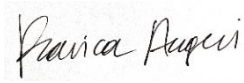
Signature of the co-author	
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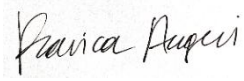
Signature of the co-author	
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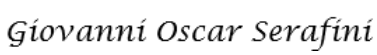
Signature of the co-author	
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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

Over the past decades, organisations have consistently been shown to produce and perpetuate gender inequality. Understanding gender as a socio-cultural construct associated with being female or male (EIGE, 2016a; Butler, 1990), gender inequality constitutes a major challenge, whereby an individual's gender shapes unequal work-related decisions and access to rights, opportunities, and rewards (Benschop, 2021; EIGE, 2016a). The field of gender, organisations, and management has systematically documented how gendered and gendering assumptions (re)produce gender inequality, addressing, for instance, occupational segregation, the gendered division of labour, gendered symbols and interactions, and power relations. Among the various types of organisations, universities hold a prominent position in this discourse, being widely framed as highly gendered organisations. Relevant research argues for the existence of persistent gender imbalances, highlighting, for example, unequal career trajectories and female underrepresentation in senior roles (O'Keefe and Courtois, 2019), gendered constructions of scientific excellence (van den Brink and Benschop, 2012a; Benschop and Brouns, 2003), dominance of entrenched masculine norms and ideals (Clavero and Galligan, 2021), and manifestations of sexism (Yarrow and Davies, 2023).

In response to these challenges, universities worldwide have adopted various policies and interventions aimed at improving gender equality. These range from affirmative action centred around quotas (e.g. Forman-Rabinovici, Mandel and Bauer 2023; Voorspoels and Bleijenbergh, 2019), work-life balance policies (e.g. Saltmarsh and Randell-Moon, 2015), through to interventions addressing gender-based violence and sexual harassment (e.g. Harris, 2017). One of the most comprehensive gender equality interventions in Europe is the Athena SWAN scheme adopted by Anglo-Saxon universities (Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2020). Institutions are required to promote and document progress in gender equality through concrete actions and interventions, and are subsequently awarded with gold, silver, or bronze distinctions based on their performance. In 2021, universities based in EU Member States and Associated Countries were also mandated by the European Commission (EC) to adopt their own gender policies, namely Gender Equality Plans (GEPs). GEPs constitute coherent policy instruments, composed of a set of actions that aim to "promote gender equality through the sustainable transformation of organisational processes, cultures and structures that produce and sustain gender imbalances and inequalities" (EC, 2021a, p. 11). The GEPs were

specifically set as an eligibility condition for funding under the Horizon Europe (HE) work programme, with this criterion coming into force in 2022.

Still, despite the systematic adoption of such gender equality policies, progress towards gender equality in universities is rather slow (Bleijenbergh, 2022) and ambiguous (Latti, 2017). In fact, these policies often fall short in achieving their intended goals or may even produce counterproductive outcomes (Yarrow and Johnston, 2023; Ovseiko et al., 2017), thus their effectiveness remains highly contested across cases (O'Connor, 2020; Palmén and Kalpazidou Schmidt, 2019). Scholars notably report multiple obstacles that university gender policies encounter. Among others, these relate to entrenched power interests and the desire to maintain the status quo, stereotypical assumptions and contextual norms that valorise traditional gender roles, as well as neoliberal discourses that divert attention away from genuine equality progress on the basis of competitiveness and business goals (Yarrow and Johnston, 2023; Rosa and Clavero, 2020). Such challenges also apply to the newly introduced policy regimes of GEPs. Rapidly adopted within tight time frames as institutionalised gender policies, there is a need to further examine GEPs' heuristic potential for changes in academia and delineate what works and what does not for meeting their target goals. This call is particularly compelling when considering emerging insights on GEPs encountering multiple obstacles throughout their lifecycle (EC, 2025; Anagnostou, 2023; Brescianini, Federici and Bannò, 2023). GEPs may even produce adverse outcomes related to exacerbating existing inequalities (O'Neil, 2023), while risking the prioritisation of administrative compliance with the HE mandate over transformative progress (Cannito, Poggio and Tuselli, 2023).

The above challenges are further compounded by the scarcity of evaluative research on university gender policies (Timmers, Willemsen and Tijdens, 2010). The progression and especially the impact of such gender interventions is rarely assessed (Kalpazidou Schmidt and Cacace, 2019; 2017), resulting in little scholarly evidence on their effectiveness (Palmén and Kalpazidou Schmidt, 2019; Kalev et al., 2006). Even in the cases of research evaluating gender policies, oversimplified approaches lacking theoretical grounding are often employed (Palmén and Kalpazidou Schmidt, 2019), and findings remain inconsistent, even for the same intervention (Xiao et al., 2020). Furthermore, university gender policies are not adequately monitored and evaluated by practitioners and institutional stakeholders either (Zabaniotou, Boukamel and Tsirogianni, 2021), for instance, due to the absence of robust institutional mechanisms and infrastructure to collect relevant data (Karydou, 2024; Palmén and Kalpazidou Schmidt, 2019).

Finally, it is noteworthy that scholarly research on university gender policies and interventions remains largely Western-centric (Grimmins and Barnard, 2022) and empirically located in the Global North (Tzanakou et al., 2025), drawing empirically mostly from the US and UK contexts (for example, see Yarrow and Johnston, 2023; Zippel and Ferree, 2019). Even at the broader European level, knowledge production remains rather concentrated in specific regions, such as the Nordic countries (Kalpazidou Schmidt and Vigsø Pedersen, 2025). Although studies outside the above contexts are gradually emerging (see, for example, O'Neil, 2023; Rulli, 2022), the continued narrow focus runs the risk of neglecting diverse perspectives and experiences. However, such experiences are essential for deepening our understanding of how gender policies work, how they are perceived in terms of their transformative potential, and which are the associated mechanisms (Post et al., 2021; Amis, Mair and Munir, 2020), to provide valuable input for future strategic interventions. Such enhanced understanding is of paramount importance particularly in light of the global backlash against DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion). Recent anti-DEI movements call for coordinated and evidence-based approaches to improve gender equality-related programmes and initiatives, and address systemic biases regarding their value in fostering inclusive environments (Aguinis et al., 2025).

1.2 Aim of the study and research questions

Considering the above, this study aims to explore the effectiveness of university gender policies, approaching it as a subjective and experienced phenomenon. It focuses on how university members interpret and make sense of gender policies' effectiveness and examines the factors that potentially hinder the different stages of their lifecycle, namely the planned policy stages of formulation and implementation, and the emergent policy outcomes (Kalpazidou Schmidt and Graversen, 2020; Mintzberg and Waters, 1985). The study specifically focuses on GEPs, as an emerging and increasingly widespread policy, for which more insights are needed on their effectiveness and capacity to stimulate the target institutional change (Cannito et al., 2023). Furthermore, GEPs implemented in Balkan academia (Greek, Serbian, and Bosnian universities) are examined, to maximise understanding of these policies through an under-explored context that can offer novel insights potentially overlooked in Western-centric settings. As Kalpazidou Schmidt and Vigsø Pedersen (2025) note, similarly to other university gender policies, research on GEPs' effectiveness has to date had a rather limited geographical focus, addressing mostly Nordic

countries and institutions, therefore calling for additional knowledge coming from diverse European contexts.

Regarding Balkan academia in particular, it constitutes a compelling and under-explored setting for examination. First, the Balkan region exhibits nascent progress in gender equality, with its countries situated within traditional and patriarchal socio-cultural contexts (Afiouni et al., 2025; Šiljak, Kovačević, and Husanović, 2022) and facing gender re-traditionalisation movements (Ćeriman and Vučković Juroš, 2024). Importantly, national-level provisions for gender equality do exist, often covering the research ecosystem of various Balkan countries, including universities. Especially in the Balkan countries that constituted former Yugoslavia, the socialist heritage laid a considerable foundation for gender equality legislation. Still, scholars note that relevant national policies throughout the entire region suffer from implementation gaps, falling short of translating into robust actions especially in universities (Anagnostou, 2023; Caprile et al., 2022), which now face the imperative to implement concrete gender policies in line with the HE mandate and EU frameworks. Additionally, Balkan academia notably lies outside Western settings typically addressed in gender policy research, and it does not constitute a formerly colonised system, such as those of the Global South. This intermediate positioning offers considerable potential to acquire novel insights that challenge Western-centric models of gender policies, while further amplifying the inclusion of marginalised voices in knowledge production.

Finally, while the countries belonging to the Balkans bear some similarities, they also exhibit differing socio-political contexts, with the region's internal diversity adding further analytical value. This is also reflected in the varying EU integration of the Balkan countries, as evident through their EU membership status. Notably, some countries are EU Member States, others are candidates in active accession negotiations, and some are potential candidates. Accordingly, EU membership is granted based on a country's adherence to the accession criteria, such as democratic governance, human rights, and the rule of law. Addressing different Balkan countries, in this case Greece as an EU member state, Serbia as a candidate, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) as a potential candidate, further enables this study to examine countries and institutions at different EU integration stages, and to provide a more nuanced understanding of how differing socio-institutional contexts shape university gender policies such as GEPs. Ultimately, the confluence of the above factors renders the region particularly promising and compelling for exploring the tensions and challenges associated

with GEPs, and for generating enriched insights into their perceived transformative potential overall.

To meet the study's aim, the following Research Questions (RQs) are addressed:

RQ1: Which are the factors that potentially hinder the formulation of GEPs of Balkan universities?

RQ2: Which are the factors that potentially hinder the implementation of GEPs of Balkan universities?

RQ3: Which are the factors that potentially evoke unintended and negative outcomes for the GEPs of Balkan universities?

1.3 Overview of theoretical and methodological approach

To address its RQs, this study adopts specific ontological and epistemological standpoints, rooted in subjectivism and interpretivism accordingly. It further develops a theoretical framework and applies it in the instrumental case study of Balkan academia. Qualitative data have been collected and analysed through reflexive thematic analysis, while acknowledging the role of the researcher in the process. The following sub-sections provide an overview of the study's theoretical and methodological approach.

1.3.1 Ontology and epistemology

Ontology refers to the theory of reality, and to the nature of the reality to be investigated (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). To rigorously explore GEPs and factors potentially hindering their policy lifecycle, the study is first positioned within subjectivism. This view regards social phenomena and entities as socially created through the actions, perceptions and cognitive structures of social actors (Johnson and Duberley, 2000). A subjective ontology rejects the notion that scientific facts are objective and stable truth statements; instead, it views them as a set of beliefs that have prevailed within given social contexts (ibid). It thus counteracts the realist ontology, which assumes that there is an external and autonomous scientific reality that exists independently of the cognitive structures of social actors and thus researchers, and independently of any social values (Lacey, 2005).

Ontology further has significant implications for epistemological perspectives, referring to assumptions about knowledge (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). The present study is aligned with the interpretivist paradigm. This constitutes a subjectivist philosophy that emphasises the

lived experiences of research participants and suggests that social actors construct meanings (Scotland, 2012). According to this, the social world is constructed by the subjective experiences and everyday interactions of individuals, and by the meanings individuals bring to the research context (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Interpretivism typically builds on qualitative inquiry, precisely in order to interpret those meanings in rich detail. It further values the role of the researcher in the research process (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011) and their reflexivity, recognising that knowledge produced is additionally grounded in researchers' personal experiences (Dowling, 2006). On the contrary, positivism suggests that reality is objective, and proposes maintaining a distance when conducting research, while typically building on quantitative methods.

Finally, an interpretive approach to gender likewise treats it as socially constructed, context-dependent, and shaped by social dynamics, emerging from actors' actions and experiences (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Within organisational settings, gender is thus shaped by both material and non-material aspects of everyday organisational life, for instance, encompassing both observable institutional interactions, and underlying gender-related symbols (Gherardi, 1994).

1.3.2 Theoretical framework of the study

Furthermore, the study develops a novel framework integrating gendered organisations theory and complex adaptive systems (CAS) theory. Universities in the present study are first conceptualised as gendered institutions (Acker, 1990). This conceptual lens acknowledges the multiplicity and interconnectedness of elements hindering equality. These are spread across both formal and informal organisational levels, and also across the societal and individual levels connected with the organisation. Acker's (1990) theory further enables the interpretive examination of gender as practice (Gherardi, 1994), whereby both the symbolic enactment of gender and situated actions determine inequalities within gendered organisational environments. By extension, they also shape institutional and remedial responses to these inequalities, including gender equality policies and interventions.

Therefore, Acker's (1990) theory enables a close examination of university settings to explore how they affect GEPs. However, within the context of this theory, the fine-grained lens for capturing the interconnections and mutually reinforcing effects of the elements hindering equality and affecting policies such as GEPs remains somewhat vague (Lansu, Bleijenbergh and Benschop, 2019). Therefore, by combining gendered organisations theory

with CAS theory, the study adopts an integrative approach and focuses in detail on the complex dynamics within university environments. Apart from being gendered institutions, universities are viewed as complex and adaptive systems (CAS). Building on the CAS definition, universities are conceptualised as open systems that comprise multiple constituent elements which are dynamic and self-organising, as they continuously adapt to their wider environment (McGill et al., 2020). These elements exhibit multiple non-linear interdependencies, whereby they interact with one another across the system levels (societal, organisational, and individual levels). They also activate reinforcing feedback loops, overall shaping the system's emergent causality. This emergent causality yields system-level responses, which, in turn, affect the interventions implemented within the system and ultimately their effectiveness (Greenhalgh and Papoutsi, 2018). Although complexity approaches have been applied predominantly to health-related interventions (Skivington et al., 2021a), scholars increasingly stress the imperative to acknowledge the complexity of gender interventions, and the systems in which they are embedded (Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2020). Such a paradigm shift transcends linear causation and unidimensional approaches (Kalpazidou Schmidt and Graversen, 2020), focuses on local dynamics and context, and further mitigates the oversimplification of organisational life (Tsoukas, 2017).

In further alignment with the CAS perspective, GEPs are viewed as complex interventions. In this way, they constitute events within systems, and are highly influenced by them, their contexts and local dynamics. Ultimately, the adopted approach enables a systems-based process evaluation, suitable for exploring and understanding the functioning of complex interventions operating within CAS, based on the latest framework complex interventions (Skivington et al., 2021a) and the guidance for the process evaluation of complex interventions (Moore et al., 2015). Based on the CAS approach and the systems-based process evaluation (Skivington et al., 2021a), and in line with critical diversity management approaches on gender-related interventions in the workplace (Leslie, Kim and Emily, 2025; Leslie, 2019), effectiveness is defined as the extent to which the GEPs (as complex interventions) achieve their intended actions and outcomes in real-world organisational settings, beyond binary notions of success and failure (Skivington et al., 2021a). Accordingly, a qualitative analysis foregrounds organisational stakeholders' perceptions and lived experiences around the GEPs as complex interventions (Moore et al., 2019); based on these, it examines the plans against the fidelity, including quality, of their implementation. Based on Moore et al. (2015), implementation fidelity inherently encompasses quality, as there is an

increasing need to understand both what is delivered and how it is delivered in context. Then, it addresses the perceived stakeholder reach of GEPs' implementation. Regarding emergent outcomes, it addresses their potential to generate unintended, adverse consequences (Moore et al., 2015; Skivington et al., 2021a). Finally, systems-based process evaluation strongly emphasises the complex, contextual pathways of the system and how they affect the intervention. Therefore, systemic elements and gender practices - and notably in-between, non-linear interdependencies – that are experienced as hindering the GEP policy stages have been addressed.

The above approach also examines GEPs' context and initial assumptions on how these interventions would unfold and operate towards intended actions and outcomes (GEP initial programme theory). Context encompasses the conditions under which interventions are developed, implemented, and assessed, including both the immediate organisational and broader environment potentially influencing them (Craig et al., 2018; Moore et al., 2015). This has enabled the study to address the formulation stage of GEPs as well, as this is highly interlinked with the remainder of the policy lifecycle, and especially with the implementation stage, potentially influencing them (Skivington et al., 2021b; Moore et al., 2015). Ultimately, the initial assumptions and expectations on GEPs are subsequently refined based on process evaluation insights, particularly regarding underlying, non-linear dynamics hindering the intervention (Rogers, 2008). In the present thesis, this has resulted in a refined programme theory for GEPs (Skivington et al., 2021b). This is first articulated through a causal loop model that captures hindering factors, in-between interdependencies and feedback loops affecting the formulation and implementation stages. Second, it is articulated through a series of dark causal loop models which unpack the emergence of unintended, adverse consequences and especially the situated, interdependent factors triggering them.

1.3.3 Research methods

In further alignment with the thesis's epistemological standpoint, GEPs are examined within an instrumental case study. Based on Stake's (2013) work, positioned within the interpretivist paradigm, case studies can be intrinsic, instrumental, or collective. In an intrinsic case study, the researcher is interested in the case itself. In an instrumental case study, the researcher addresses a specific case to understand a broader phenomenon; in other words, the case selected for analysis and its thick examination functions as a means to comprehend in depth the unique details of this broader phenomenon beyond the case's boundaries (Stake, 1995).

Finally, a collective case study entails the examination of multiple instrumental case studies, accompanied by careful coordination among them.

Therefore, this thesis has conducted an instrumental case study of Balkan academia and GEPs implemented within it, to provide a detailed comprehension of whether and how GEPs are perceived to achieve their intended actions and outcomes . While the contextual characteristics and complexity of the Balkan academia are acknowledged and explored, the primary focus lies in addressing the research questions and providing insights to inform understanding of GEPs more broadly, and by extension university gender policies. Moreover, instrumental case studies are particularly insightful when the selected case is "unusual" (Stake, 1995, p. 4). Such cases can reveal dynamics that are potentially overlooked in typical cases and thus maximise the understanding of the target phenomenon and enhance theorising (Fletcher et al., 2018). Therefore, the examination of Balkan academia as an under-explored and distinct case has the potential to advance knowledge on GEPs through novel situated insights, while also challenging assumptions often derived from predominantly Western-centric cases (more details are provided in Chapters 3 and 4).

Furthermore, in line with the ontology and epistemology orientation of the overall study and its instrumental case study approach, GEPs' examination draws from qualitative data. Qualitative data provide rich descriptions of subjective, context-based and even complex experiences and perceptions of social actors (Geertz, 1973). Additionally, qualitative research methods align best with the underpinnings of the instrumental case, where both researchers and participants alike contribute substantially to reconstructing experience (Mills, Durepos and Wiebe, 2009). Such methods are overall suitable to capture the information-richness of the selected case. Additionally, qualitative fieldwork holds a central role in the examination of interventions, especially complex ones. Namely, qualitative data collected for the purposes of a process evaluation, can answer detailed questions beyond mere intervention results, for example by illuminating context, and thus capture the lived experience of both the recipients and implementers of the interventions (Skivington et al., 2021a; Patton, 2015). Hence, qualitative methods and data can shed light on the dynamics of complex social systems and their unpredictable responses to introduced interventions (Chandler et al., 2016), such as gender policies and GEPs, especially on the basis of how relevant actors make sense of them (Moore et al., 2019).

1.3.4 Data collection and analysis

Qualitative data were collected from 25 archival documents and 42 online, semi-structured interviews with stakeholders across seven Balkan universities, functioning as data and activity sites for the case study (Stake, 2013). Concrete criteria addressing both practical and analytical considerations were employed to select the three Balkan countries (Greece, Serbia, BiH) over others, and the specific universities to provide the study's data (see Chapter 3 and 4 for more details). The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (TA) (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Reflexive TA is a theoretically flexible TA approach which highly values qualitative data and researchers' subjectivity and reflexivity in engaging with and interpreting the data (Braun and Clarke, 2021; 2019). Its strong applicability to the present study thus lies in enabling a deeper, nuanced understanding of data and especially lived realities around intricate gender-related issues. Such issues require moving beyond surface-level descriptions and the pursuit of objective facts by embracing researcher experiences and positionality. Implications related to the researcher's positionality and reflexivity are also documented with transparency (section 1.4), thus adding further value to the analytical process.

Different groups of themes were developed during the analysis, in line with the different GEP policy stages and aspects addressed. A first group of themes captured specificities of GEPs' strategic design, anticipated pathways, and intended outcomes. In this way, insights were gained into the GEP formulation procedures, content (including objectives and embedded measures), implementation plans, stakeholders involved, beneficiary groups, and intended outcomes. These themes, mainly building on the archival documents and drawing complementary information from the interviews, provided input for developing the initial GEP programme theory, which was revealed to be largely linear. Then, a second group of themes captured factors hindering the formulation stage. A third group of themes focused on factors hindering implementation fidelity, including implementation quality. A fourth group of themes addressed factors hindering the stakeholder reach of the implementation. A fifth group of themes addressed GEPs' unintended adverse consequences and factors precipitating them. The second, third, fourth, and fifth group of themes drew primarily from the analysis of the interview data and participants' experiences and perceptions. Secondary information was occasionally acquired from the documents; this information mostly contextualised long-lasting obstacles the universities were facing in terms of promoting gender equality. Taken together, the insights provided by the second, third group, fourth, and fifth groups of themes enabled the development of the updated GEP programme theory, refining the initial linear

expectations in an evidence-based way, based on real-world, lived experiences. Concrete details on the data analysis and theme development are further provided in chapters 3 and 4.

Lastly, the study and all its procedures acquired ethical approval from the Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology Ethics (ELMPS) Committee of the University of York. The ethics procedures of the study and relevant materials submitted to the ELMPS Committee, such as the participant consent form and the participant information sheet, are included in Appendices A, B, and C. Appendix D further provides details on conducting the interviews, including the interview guide used.

1.4 Researcher positionality and reflexivity

An additional aspect of the study, especially pertaining to its methodological execution and the interpretative analyses taken place, refers to the positionality and reflexivity of the researcher. In further accordance with the epistemological underpinnings of the study and the reflexive thematic analysis applied to the collected data, the researcher is seen as an integral part of the research process. Thus, this sub-section provides information on the researcher's background, especially on her experiences and consequent implications for the study, starting from the motivation to conduct this study up to data analysis and interpretation of results.

1.4.1 Researcher's background

First, the researcher identifies herself as a White, Greek cisgender woman. As also outlined throughout the rest of the thesis, the Greek community is situated within a patriarchal context, where traditional gender roles persist, albeit gradually changing, particularly among younger generations. During her graduate studies in English Language and Literature, she engaged critically with issues of sexist language and gender discrimination, which cultivated a deep interest in gender equality. Consequently, in the early steps of her professional career, she worked as a researcher on EU projects that focused on gender equality in Research and Innovation (R&I). Hence, she engaged in research on workplace inequality and discrimination, including among others, career progression challenges and sticky floor phenomena, work-life balance issues, and workplace harassment (e.g. mobbing). Concurrently, given that the researcher entered the workforce in the aftermath of the Greek financial crisis (2009 onwards), she encountered a labour market that rather undervalued young professionals, with gender implications occasionally prominent as well. Collectively, all the above experiences fostered a strong motivation to explore issues of gender (in)equality in the workplace and within organisational settings. They especially informed her interest in

gender policies and strategies, which she regarded as essential for fostering inclusive and gender-responsive organisational environments.

1.4.2 Researcher's positionality and reflexivity

The researcher's Greek background afforded a degree of cultural proximity in the execution of the thesis, deepening the analysis of both the Greek and wider Balkan contexts. Her background also facilitated liaising with participants and the consequent rapport-building. Several participants from all three countries showed heightened engagement in the discussion, additionally engaging in cross-country comparisons and reflections. However, certain challenges also emerged. Occasionally, some Greek interviewees appeared more hesitant to share personal experiences related to their university's GEPs or provided conventional answers reflecting possible biases. Also, when describing the GEPs as policy instruments, they were cautious not to describe it in a way that misaligned with the official document description. Finally, during the study's data collection period, the researcher was also collaborating with one of the participating Greek universities to support GEP implementation. This role evoked mostly positive effects, facilitating interaction with the participants from this university and fostering trust during the corresponding interviews. Still, it may also have led to increased participant caution, as the researcher could have been perceived as an insider within the research setting. This concern was potentially exacerbated by the fact that gender issues are still perceived as taboo topics, as suggested throughout the thesis' findings based on participants' accounts.

Furthermore, the researcher's young age proved to be a facilitating factor in the interviews conducted with young university employees, especially researchers. Apart from showing an increased willingness to help in the execution of the PhD research and engage as participants, those interviewees proved to be very open in the reporting of their experiences.

Then, with regards to the analysis and interpretation of the data collected, this was considerably enhanced by the researcher's background and the aforementioned cultural proximity. Her familiarity with national norms and prevailing gender ideologies in the Balkan region enabled her to easily comprehend challenges posed to the GEPs. Additionally, having studied as a bachelor student in a Greek public university, she was able to comprehend obstacles posed by structural issues and challenges, such as bureaucracy and lack of resources. Still, the researcher had to remain reflexively aware of her own assumptions, especially the risk of foregrounding preconceived ideas or selectively verifying them. Thus,

she remained open and flexible throughout the iterative coding process, to develop themes that genuinely capture participants' voices, and any unexpected nuances. A notable example refers to findings on power dynamics affecting GEP implementation, as the researcher was not familiar with the hierarchical structure of Balkan academia. Similarly, while the researcher was more aware of phenomena in which organisations simply overlook gender equality goals and DEI agendas, she developed codes and themes that captured overt opposition as well, by being open to the data and immersing herself in them.

1.5 Overview of thesis contributions

The present thesis offers a set of theoretical, empirical, and methodological contributions. The following sub-sections provide a relevant overview, reflecting the study's significance.

1.5.1 Theoretical contributions

In theoretical terms, the thesis advances understanding of organisational and university gender policies, and their perceived effectiveness, in a novel way. In contrast to approaches on gender equality interventions that may often sideline theoretical grounding (Kalpazidou Schmidt and Graversen, 2020), this study grounds its framework in an integration of gendered organisations theory with CAS theory. In this way, it illuminates the salient role of emergent causality in shaping these interventions. It sheds light not only on the multiplicity of factors and gender practices that can hinder gender policies' lifecycle, but also on their non-linear, interdependent nature that evokes unpredictable effects, thereby also extending the use of gendered organisation theory. Additionally, the study extends the integrative exploration of the unintended consequences of gender-related interventions. While such consequences have been examined by scholars (see, for example, Burnett and Aguinis, 2024; Tzanakou, 2019), the thesis further advances this work by addressing the multi-dimensionality of antecedents across system levels and their interdependence (Leslie, 2019). Overall, the thesis enhances scholarship that calls for attention to the intricate nature of gender equality interventions and their systems (Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2020), the overall complexity of organisational life (Tsoukas, 2017) and associated organisational gender inequalities (Benschop, 2021).

Finally, the thesis theorises gender as practice in a context-based way. The CAS-informed application of gendered organisations theory suggests the strong role of societal, organisational, and individual context in shaping both the symbolic gender enactment and concrete institutional actions around gender equality. In doing so, the study calls for further

focus to local dynamics and geographically diverse settings in both the theorising and empirical examination of gender equality policies.

1.5.2 Empirical contributions

Empirically, the thesis contributes to the literature on GEPs. To date, especially since their institutionalisation by the HE mandate, scholarly insights into GEPs and their capacity to deliver intended actions and outcomes remains limited. Thus, the present thesis reveals that these university gender policies are experienced and perceived as exhibiting to date an ambivalent effectiveness, in terms of implementation fidelity (including quality) and stakeholder reach, and their risk to evoke emergent counterproductive outcomes, that is, unintended adverse consequences (Tzanakou, 2019). The thesis findings suggest that broader socio-political norms often operating at national level, local organisational culture, and university stakeholders' dispositions and attitudes towards gender issues and GEPs create complex and systemic barriers to the entire policy lifecycle. Empirical findings especially contribute to emerging discussions of GEP adoption under the HE mandate, including risks of performativity and box-ticking compliance approaches (Cannito et al., 2023). Finally, the thesis' qualitative insights enrich the literature on how GEPs unfold in non-Western-centric contexts (Göker and Polatdemir, 2022), particularly in the under-explored Balkan region (Karydou, 2024; Caprile et al., 2022). In that regard, the study also provides novel evidence on how GEPs unintentionally exacerbate covert and overt resistances when perceived as clashing with local legacies and ideologies, and traditional norms. This highlights the salient role of local context in shaping the unfolding and transferability of GEPs that are initiated in a top-down way.

Concurrently, the thesis enriches emerging empirical insights into how GEPs unfold in dynamic and non-linear ways within universities (Kalpazidou Schmidt and Vigsø Pedersen, 2025). It pays critical attention to factors viewed as hindrances across system levels, encompassing societal, organisational, and individual domains. It suggests how their obstructive effects to the different GEP policy stages are exacerbated by non-linear interdependencies and reinforcing feedback loops, with consequences that may persist in the long term. Notably, the intensity and manifestation of these hindering factors and consequences also exhibit subtle nuances across the three countries that constitute the study's empirical basis, due to local peculiarities. Furthermore, some hindering factors are encountered in more than one policy stages, but their effects unfold under different pathways.

Overall, the empirical analysis moves beyond a reductionist examination of GEPs and offers a refined, evidence-based programme theory that identifies their intricate and integrative pathways. This refined programme theory also carries theoretical implications beyond the study's context, serving as integrative framework that can further guide the comprehension and examination of GEPs' effectiveness.

1.5.3 Methodological contributions

In methodological terms, the thesis operationalises the complexity of gender interventions and the systems within which they operate. In particular, to examine how the systems and their contextual dynamics affect interventions, it employs a qualitative systems-based process evaluation; as Skivington et al. (2021b) argue, such systems thinking approaches to complex interventions remain rare, especially beyond health interventions. Thus, the study provides a methodological blueprint for qualitative, systems-based analyses. This is further enriched by the use of system archetypes (causal loop models) to articulate and illustrate the complex causal pathways that shape gender interventions across the policy lifecycle. The application of dark causal loop models to delineate systemic interdependencies evoking unintended adverse consequences constitutes a novel methodological approach. It extends the use of the dark logic models of Bonnell et al. (2015), which build on a rather linear logic, by adapting them to trace non-linear and intricate dynamics leading to such consequences.

1.6 Thesis structure and individual papers

The present thesis is structured into five chapters. The first chapter is the introductory one. The second, third, and fourth chapters constitute standalone papers. The fifth chapter articulates the thesis' conclusions. An overview of each of the chapters is provided below.

1.6.1 Overview of Chapter 1

The introductory chapter articulates the background and motivation of the study as a whole. It further presents its aim and research questions, and offers a brief overview of the theoretical and methodological approaches underpinning the research. In particular, the first chapter has argued on how the study's framework and research methods have been applied throughout the entire study. Likewise, it briefly presents the data collection and analysis processes, along with details on the researcher's background and consequent implications on the entire study. An overview of the main contributions is finally provided.

1.6.2 Overview of Chapter 2

The second chapter is a systematic literature review paper, entitled “Gender policies in organisations: A complex adaptive systems perspective on emergent challenges and multi-level dynamics”. This review examines thoroughly the existing literature on a range of organisational gender policies across various contexts. In doing so, it first maps existing theories and concepts central to the study of gender equality issues and policies in organisational settings. Then, it explores the effectiveness of gender policies, focusing on the antecedents of their reported ambivalent effectiveness, in terms of falling short of achieving the desired gender progress and change, or producing unintended adverse consequences. Overall, this paper establishes a strong theoretical foundation for the thesis to build upon. By examining this body of literature, the review applies a CAS-oriented lens and perspective to synthesise and interpret the fragmented knowledge on gender policies’ effectiveness. Its application throughout the paper has verified its value and contribution in exploring in a conjunctive way organisational gender issues, hence laid the groundwork for its broader use in the subsequent empirical papers as well.

Furthermore, the review contributed to setting the aim and RQs of the thesis. Review findings suggested the need for further empirical exploration of gender policies’ effectiveness, and especially to shed light on the factors that often hinder these policies. The findings also aided in narrowing down the thesis’ focus on university gender policies and GEPs, by indicating that universities and their policies indeed face numerous and persistent obstacles, which pertain even to newly introduced policy instruments such as GEPs. Finally, the review identified research gaps, notably regarding the limited integrative exploration of the mechanisms causing ambivalent policy effectiveness, and the limited geographical coverage of current scholarly inquiry, especially in under-explored contexts such as the Balkan region.

1.6.3 Overview of Chapter 3

The third chapter is an empirical paper, entitled “When obstacles are complex and systemic: exploring the effectiveness of Gender Equality Plans in Balkan academia”. This paper addresses the first and second RQ of the thesis. It examines GEPs implemented in Balkan academia, drawing from the archival and interview data collected from seven universities across Greece, Serbia, and BiH. It conceptualises GEPs as complex interventions operating in gendered and CAS-driven institutions, and conducts the systems-based process evaluation. In this paper, the process evaluation specifically explores GEPs’ effectiveness, as perceived and

experienced by organisational actors, against the two following dimensions: fidelity (including quality) of implementation, and stakeholder reach of implementation. The focus is particularly on the systemic, situated factors and interdependencies that hinder implementation fidelity and reach. At the same time though, in line with complex interventions frameworks (Skivington et al., 2021a), the study further provides a holistic comprehension of GEPs as complex interventions including their surrounding context, before delving deeper into their implementation. In this way, this paper also investigates GEPs' formulation. It provides insights on the processes through which GEPs have been formulated and developed. Most importantly, it reveals some obstacles encountered throughout those processes, most often expanding to hinder the implementation fidelity and reach as well. Hence, and to further accommodate the requirements of the standalone paper, findings on factors hindering GEPs' formulation are presented in a synthesised way with the findings on factors hindering the implementation (see Chapter 5 and section 5.1 for a dedicated argumentation on findings pertaining to the formulation stage).

Ultimately, the third chapter provides rich and nuanced insights on complex and systemic barriers rooted in local organisational culture, broader national-level norms and the situated practice of gender. In particular, factors related to university stakeholders and their dispositions and attitudes towards GEPs, constraining university structure, and the socio-cultural environment, including the regulatory landscape, significantly hinder GEPs throughout their first two policy stages . These insights have culminated in the development of an integrative, causal loop model, which serves as the first part of the refined programme theory for GEPs. This problematises initial, reductionist assumptions on how GEPs are expected to unfold throughout the formulation and especially their implementation stage.

1.6.4 Overview of Chapter 4

Proceeding to the fourth chapter, this is also an empirical paper. It is entitled "The dark side of Gender Equality Plans: exploring their unintended consequences". This paper responds to the third RQ of the thesis. It critically examines GEPs' emergent outcomes and perceived impact, addressing their potential to evoke unintended, adverse consequences. It first identifies GEPs' intended consequences and pathways for achieving them. Then, prioritising organisational members' rich experiences and realities, it delineates which are their unintended negative consequences. It further explores the non-linear and contextual mechanisms (complex relational links between the intervention and its implemented

activities, and system outcomes) that produce them. Similarly to the previous paper and building on the interview data and some of the archival documents, it applies the systems-based process evaluation of GEPs as complex interventions; however, the analytical and interpretative focus has shifted on the policy stage of emergent outcomes. The paper findings reveal that GEPs can evoke overt resistance and covert resistance as a back-firing effect that works against the intended outcome of inclusive organisational culture. They also trigger performative compliance to the HE mandate as a negative spillover effect against the intended outcome of gender-responsive organisational structures. Furthermore, owing to the theoretical integration of gendered organisations theory and CAS theory, this paper reveals which interdependent elements and gender practices across the societal, organisational, or individual level of the system, are perceived to produce these unintended consequences. For instance, these include traditional norms and fear for Westernisation, top-down policy initiation and consequent box-ticking exercises, and broader reluctance towards change. These dynamics are articulated and illustrated through the dark causal loop models, suitable for capturing the emergence of complex interventions' adverse outcomes (Bonell et al., 2015) (see also section 5.4.2 for contextual, local nuances in the emergence of unintended outcomes across the three different countries).

Ultimately, the analysis conducted for this paper and its results challenge the initial and highly linear assumptions about GEPs' impact mechanisms and pathways towards achieving their outcomes. They complement the thesis' contribution by providing the second part of the GEPs' refined programme theory through dark causal loop models. Collectively, the two empirical papers provide a rich , interpretative account of GEPs' lifecycle in gendered and CAS-driven institutions. They capture the intricate dynamics that shape formulation, implementation, and emergent outcomes, and are ultimately experienced as obstructing gender policies in terms of meeting intended actions and intended outcomes.

1.6.5 Overview of Chapter 5

The fifth concluding chapter summarises the thesis' main findings. It integrates and contextualises the findings of each individual paper with respect to the overarching thesis' aim and revisits each research question. A few insights not reported in the individual standalone papers due to their tailored requirements are also provided. Indicatively, these refer to exceptions to the hindering factors identified, such as perceived enablers by the participants with respect to the GEPs' formulation and implementation stage. Similarly, this

chapter notes nuanced differences in GEPs' unfolding, hindering factors and unintended consequences encountered across the three different geopolitical contexts of Greece, Serbia, and BiH, ultimately providing a cumulative reflection on the role of local context. The chapter also presents in detail the key contributions of the entire study, encompassing empirical, theoretical, and methodological contributions. Study limitations and recommendations for future research are finally discussed, pointing to promising research avenues.

Chapter 2. Gender policies in organisations: A complex adaptive systems perspective on emergent challenges and multi-level dynamics

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(i) the candidate has accurately represented their contribution to the work;

(ii) if required, permission is granted for the candidate to include the work in their thesis (note that this is separate from copyright considerations).

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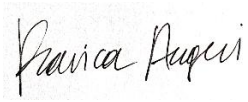
Signature of the co-author	
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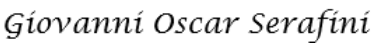
Signature of the co-author	
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Abstract

Understanding organisational gender dynamics has been on the agenda of management and organisation scholars for several decades. Nevertheless, the pursuit of gender equality continues to prove highly complex, as gender policies within organisational settings often fall short to achieve the target change or even produce unintended, adverse consequences. Relevant literature, however, still lacks a comprehensive understanding of why this happens and persists. This study aims to address this gap by conducting a systematic review, with the objective to synthesise the existing and fragmented body of knowledge on gender policy effectiveness. Conceptualising gender policies as complex interventions in complex and adaptive systems (CAS), we investigate the macro-meso-micro nature of gender policy ambivalent effectiveness and its antecedents, by shifting the attention in particular to the interdependencies across levels of analysis. Unintended consequences of gender policies are also explored. This paper contributes a novel framework that reflects the non-linear interactions and reinforcing feedback loops that exist between the identified antecedents and system levels, overall resulting in gender policy ambivalent effectiveness as an emergent system property. The findings provide an integrative, innovative view of gender policy effectiveness, suggesting the salient role of emergent causality and self-organisation that is largely overlooked. We encourage practitioners to proactively integrate CAS elements in gender policies, opting for emergent strategies, dynamic preparedness, and dynamic policy implementation that enable the reconsideration of policy plans in response to emergent needs. Based on gaps identified, we propose future research directions, which also strengthen the interpretative, multi-level examination of gender policies.

2.1 Introduction

Despite the growing body of systematic research on organisational gender policies, achieving gender equality is still regarded as a highly complex challenge, a wicked problem (Rittel and Webber, 1973; Churchman, 1967), often met with resistance and backlash (Bleijenbergh, 2022; Eriksson-Zetterquist and Renemark, 2016). Progress in meeting predetermined gender goals is similarly slow (Peterson and Jordansson, 2022), and ambiguous (Lätti, 2017). In fact, many gender policies and interventions exhibit a disconnect between policy and actual practice (Gould Kulik and Sardeshmukh, 2023; Ní Laoire at al., 2021; Williamson et al., 2020). In such cases, they fail to achieve their intended outcomes with organisational culture and structures exhibiting inertia towards change, or even produce adverse outcomes against intended ones (Salmon, 2022; Wynn 2020), that is unintended consequences (Leslie, 2019). In this way, they exhibit what can be described as ambivalent gender policy effectiveness (Leslie et al., 2025).

Understanding the ambivalent effectiveness of gender policies and its root causes is further complicated by the fragmented nature of existing research. Relevant insights are often inconsistent (Xiao et al., 2020), as the diverse and rapidly expanding body of research from different disciplines and contexts has led to scattered and disconnected findings (Warren et al., 2019). Similarly, studies that rigorously evaluate gender policy effectiveness tend to focus narrowly on specific interventions, yielding useful but siloed findings (Atewologun, Cornish and Tresh, 2018). As for existing reviews, they often address broader diversity management practices (Köllen, 2021; Yadav and Lenka, 2020; Nishii et al., 2018; Holck, Muhr and Villesèche, 2016) or specific gender challenges and interventions, such as those related to career progression (Kossek, Su and Wu, 2017) or social justice (Guthridge et al., 2022). In addition, reviews tend to selectively analyse specific organisational levels, such as the micro or macro levels (Nishii et al., 2018). Studies holistically addressing macro, meso, and micro organisational levels affected by these policies are generally not review papers but rather conceptual or empirical studies focusing on topics such as diversity management (Pringle and Ryan, 2014; Syed and Özbilgin, 2009), intersectionality and DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) initiatives (Thatcher, Hymer and Arwine, 2023), or career progression (Bozzon, Murgia and Poggio, 2018). This fragmented focus may thus overlook or even simplify the diverse, intricate manifestations of gender policy effectiveness and its antecedents. It results in undoubtedly valuable but scattered insights that pertain to specific aspects of

organisational life under reductionist and disjunctive theorising practices, prominent in management and organisation studies (Tsoukas, 2017).

Hence, this systematic review aims to address the knowledge gap regarding the ambivalent effectiveness of gender policies by critically examining and synthesising evidence on its antecedents across diverse contexts. Gender policies as defined here include all the institutionalised or formal policies, strategies, and interventions in various organisational contexts, aiming to address organisational gender inequalities and gendered processes, or broadly have a positive impact on gender equality (for example, see De Coninck and Verhulst, 2024; Van den Brink and Stobbe, 2014). We adopt a complex systems perspective (Petticrew et al., 2019), conceptualising gender policies as complex interventions designed to address the wicked problem of gender inequality in organisational settings. Gender inequality is defined here as the unequal access to or enjoyment of rights and opportunities in these settings (EIGE, 2016a). The gender policies then operate within a complex adaptive system (CAS) encompassing macro, meso, and micro levels. We begin by identifying and examining in detail the antecedents of policy effectiveness at each level. Subsequently, we explore the non-linear interdependencies between these antecedents across system levels. These interdependencies and the mechanisms that drive them (feedback loops) are detailed within a novel framework in the form of a causal loop model. This framework provides an integrative understanding of the emergent phenomenon of gender policy ambivalent effectiveness, and suggests the determining role of the system's self-organisation and emergent causality. Additionally, we examine the unintended consequences of gender policies, particularly their tendency to reinforce existing power dynamics and the organisational status quo.

Thus, by adopting a CAS approach, we reveal under-explored aspects and causal relationships underpinning gender policies right at the intersection of multiple levels of analysis of organisational life, with a view to inform future research, policy, and practice. We move beyond fragmented and reductionist approaches that have characterised previous studies, responding to emerging scholarly calls to acknowledge the inherent complexity of gender interventions and apply it within robust frameworks for investigating their effectiveness (Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2020). As Kalpazidou Schmidt and Ovseiko (2020) stress, such a paradigm shift beyond linear causation is necessary.

The paper is structured as follows: first, we present key theories and concepts at the intersection of gender and organisations, and subsequently frame in detail the topic of

organisational gender policies and their effectiveness. Then, we detail the CAS approach of the review, and present the methodology applied. This is followed by the analysis of findings, with a focus on the antecedents of gender policies' ambivalent effectiveness, presented through thematic exploration. We then introduce the study's framework that articulates the interdependencies between antecedents and system levels and further describe the identified unintended consequences. The final sections discuss theoretical and practical implications, and present recommendations for future research.

2.2 Theoretical background

This section firstly presents theories and concepts central to research about gender in organisations. Given the extensive scope of this field, the discussion selectively focuses on those especially relevant to the examination of gender policies and their effectiveness. They are grouped in three overarching categories: gendered organisations and gender mainstreaming; intersectionality and inequality regimes; postfeminism and neoliberalism. Then, it introduces key organisational gender policies. Finally, we present the theoretical approach of the review, building on the adoption of a complex systems perspective.

2.2.1 Gendered organisations and gender mainstreaming

The literature on gender and organisations largely traces its origins to the 1970s, focusing on unequal career progression (Joshi et al., 2015; Kanter, 1997). Afterwards, gender as a social construct gained prominence. Referred to as doing gender (West and Zimmerman, 1987), it emphasised gender as a social dynamic prominent in organisational practices and culture (Gherardi, 1994). The seminal work of Joan Acker (1990) further revealed that organisations are gendered and gendering, identifying various processes that contribute to gendering at formal and informal organisational levels (Meyerson and Kolb, 2000). Consequently, gendered organisations pose multiple obstacles to gender policy effectiveness. For instance, informal dynamics significantly perpetuate inequality (Conzon, 2023), yet remain largely invisible, complicating efforts to address them through concrete interventions (Bishu and Headley, 2020). Additionally, gendered and hierarchical divisions of labour are deeply embedded within organisations (Caffrey et al., 2016), reinforcing and normalising masculine ideals and sexism (Lo and Lim, 2023). Faced with the imperative, and occasionally social pressure, to address these issues, organisations may resort to superficial interventions, seeking a panacea or striving to appear responsive (Yarrow and Davies, 2022). Similarly, the

ideal of the disembodied worker with minimal caregiving responsibilities often leads to the sidelining of WLB policies in favour of business priorities (Charlesworth and Baird, 2007).

Acknowledging the need to intensify efforts towards gender equality, gender mainstreaming emerged as an official commitment and prominent mechanism to achieve gender equality after the United Nations (UN) Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995. Since then, it has expanded beyond policy-making to organisational strategies to achieve gender equality (Peterson and Jordansson, 2022; Lätti, 2017; Rees, 1998). Still, there are numerous concerns and criticisms (Walby, 2005). These include ambiguity in its definition (Rittenhofer and Gatrell, 2012),lack of mechanisms for accountability (Moser and Moser, 2005), and inconsistent implementation relying on a best-practices paradigm (Evans, 2014). Gender mainstreaming may also encourage merely integrationist, rather than transformative, approaches to gender equality (Peterson and Jordansson, 2022).

2.2.2 Intersectionality and inequality regimes

The challenges posed by intersecting inequalities also gained widespread recognition in organisational contexts in later years (Walby, Armstrong and Strid, 2012). Intersectionality, originally coined by Crenshaw (1989), refers to the oppression, discrimination and inequalities experienced by individuals with multiple identities. In the organisational sphere, inequality regimes accordingly describe the organisational practices, processes, and meanings that are interrelated and reproduce inequalities at the intersection of multiple features, such as gender, class, and race, among others (Acker, 2006).

Organisations and workplaces are critical sites in (re)producing mutually reinforcing inequalities; hence, gender policies gradually attempt to adopt an intersectional lens beyond the gender binary (Collins and Bilge, 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2016), despite the delay in embracing such agendas (Holvino, 2010). Still, the mere integration of intersectionality does not ensure that policies manage to address complex gender issues. Gender policies may lack a proactive intersectional design (Ovseiko et al., 2017) due to the absence of guidelines on collecting intersectional data to inform gender policy formulation (Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019). Furthermore, the intersectional lens can emphasise competing intersectionality concepts, risking a siloed, subjective, approach to identity that overlooks the interplay among various elements, including macro- and meso-level organisational structures (Alberti and Iannuzzi, 2020). Additionally, the assumed shared meaning of intersectionality may lead practitioners to adopt different intersectional strands simultaneously, with no coherent policy

goals being formulated. Intersectionality may even be seen as a broad, pan-equality approach (Christoffersen, 2021); while this ensures that broad issues affecting most marginalised groups are addressed, policies may fail to acknowledge nuanced differences that exist within diverse groups themselves (ibid).

2.2.3 Postfeminism and neoliberalism

Further concerns involve postfeminist regimes permeating organisations and their policies. Often referred to as market feminism (Kantola and Squires, 2012), or (transnational) business feminism (Roberts, 2012), postfeminism reflects an individualistic shift in feminist thinking (Gill, 2017; Gill, Kelan and Scharff, 2017; Gill, 2014). This suggests that female empowerment and emancipation can be achieved solely through professional development (Fodor, Glass and Nagy 2019). Such discourses of self-realisation further gain prominence within neoliberalist regimes (Rottenberg 2017; 2014), with individuals becoming "capital-enhancing agents" oriented towards market imperatives (Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg, 2020, p. 8).

Challenges found at the intersection of postfeminism and neoliberalism can notably deprive gender policies from their transformative potential and render them ineffective. They often assign a performative character to policies for the purposes of institutional gain over genuine change (Yarrow and Johnston, 2023). By fostering individual over collective responsibility, efforts to address inequality also become individualistic and moderate (Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019). Such discourses conceal the mechanisms behind organisational inequalities (Eisenstein, 2017) and reinforce assumptions that gender equality has been achieved, reducing responsiveness to gender policies (Szczepanska, 2023).

2.2.4 Organisational gender policies and reported effectiveness

As already reflected in the overview of theories and concepts central to gender and organisations, existing research has examined the rise in gender policy adoption. It has critically explored their effectiveness, often arguing about challenges to achieving target goals or about the production of unexpected results (Galea et al., 2020). Notably, such phenomena are observed among many gender-related interventions and policies. Key interventions, such as DEI policies, address various organisational inequalities (Pizarro Milian and Wijesingha, 2023; Theodorakopoulos and Budhwar, 2015), often under an intersectional lens; however, there is a slow uptake of such principles, exacerbated by the risk to be marginalised within workplace narratives (Özbilgin and Erbil, 2024; Rodriguez et al.,

2016; Holvino, 2010). Other policies that frequently encounter obstacles address specific gender-related challenges, such as work-life balance (WLB), or gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual harassment (Gui, 2023; Pizzaro and Gartzia, 2023). As for addressing unequal career progression, affirmative measures such as quotas and development programs are often applied. Still, prominent debates on affirmative action, especially quotas, stress their ambiguous effectiveness in redistributing power (O'Brien, Hanlon and Apostolopoulos, 2023; Galea and Chappell, 2022) and changing organisational culture (van't Foort-Diepeveen, 2022).

Gender policies implemented under accreditation schemes in universities are also becoming increasingly widespread, including the UK-based Athena SWAN (Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019; Ovseiko et al., 2017). These policies are reported to have limited impact, even in addressing representation issues (O'Connor, 2019). Also, a failure to properly address intersectional challenges is often stressed (Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019; Ovseiko et al., 2017), along with the prioritisation of neoliberal, market-driven goals (Yarrow and Johnston, 2023). Similar schemes have emerged across Europe under European Commission mandates, including the Horizon Europe funding programme, which introduced Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) as institutionalised gender policies for universities and research organisations (Cannito et al., 2023). Concerns have similarly arisen for the financial motivations driving their adoption (Clavero and Calligan, 2021), their endorsement of traditional, binary-centered approaches (Picardi, Addabbo and Cois, 2023), and the challenges posed by institutionalised resistance (Tildesley, Lombardo and Verge, 2022).

Overall, scholars have consistently stressed the numerous challenges that gender policies encounter, rooted in both the formal and informal dynamics of gendered organisations and their intricate interplay (Acker, 2006; Meyerson and Kolb, 2000; Acker, 1990). A holistic but concurrently fine-grained approach is thus needed to bridge the fragmented knowledge on these policies' ambivalent effectiveness, especially regarding their inability to achieve the intended outcomes and their potential to produce unintended consequences.

2.2.5 Complex adaptive systems perspective

Complexity-driven frameworks are gradually but slowly adopted for examining organisational gender interventions, including investigating in-depth how the interventions interact with the systems within which they operate (Kalpazidou Schmidt and Ovseiko, 2020; Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2020). Especially the CAS perspective, rooted in General Systems

Theory (Simon, 1996), transcends reductionist approaches; it views system-level interventions as events within systems rather than decontextualised components, offering valuable insights into how interventions depend on multiple contextual and systemic factors (Hawe, Shiell and Riley, 2009). Therefore, we conceptualise organisational gender policies as complex interventions within organisations that are CAS, influenced by the CAS concepts of system elements, multi-levelness, non-linear interdependencies, self-organisation, emergent causality, and feedback loops (Hawe, Shiell and Riley, 2004).

In more detail, a CAS is composed of multiple elements. These are spread across the system levels. As Eppel, Matheson and Walton (2011) argue, in CAS "levels" describe the structure of a system and can be defined based on the intervention examined, ranging from individual up to systemic levels (Petticrew et al., 2019). Then, the system elements exhibit non-linear interdependencies, that is they interact with one another, within and between system levels (Westhorp, 2012), overall adapting to and co-evolving with their environment. In this way, they are viewed as dynamic and self-organising (Finegood et al., 2014), not applying to the usual transformation rules (Tsoukas, 2017).

Ultimately, the system's self-organisation and its interdependencies result in emergent causality, which produces emergent properties at the system level, including unintended consequences (Petticrew et al., 2019). Such properties and consequences are inherently unpredictable (Anderson, 1999), as they do not represent a mere sum of the system's parts or levels and cannot be attributed to any individual element (Greenhalgh and Papoutsi, 2018). It is vital to explore both the system as a whole and its interdependencies to comprehend the target emergent properties and phenomena (Byrne and Callaghan, 2022), for instance through evaluation processes addressing multiple system levels, such as micro- and macro-levels (Buijs, Eshuis and Byrne, 2009). Finally, the system's emergent causality is reinforced or balanced through the mechanisms known as feedback loops (Petticrew et al., 2019; Anderson, 1999). Reinforcing feedback loops, also called positive loops, amplify change towards one direction and often cause extreme states. Their polarity is symbolised with "+" (Sterman, 2002). Therefore, they overall lead the system either to expanding growth or decay (Hawe et al., 2009). On the contrary, balancing feedback loops, also called negative loops, counteract change and ensure the system's stability (Anderson, 1999). Their polarity is symbolised with "-" (Sterman, 2002).

Overall, the CAS perspective enables us to focus on the complex and adaptive organisational contexts where the gender policies operate. We identified through thematic analysis contextual system factors that negatively influence gender policies and act as antecedents to their ambivalent effectiveness. Considering also the multi-levelness of CAS and the need for multi-level evaluations, antecedents, non-linear interdependencies and feedback loops between them have been identified across the macro-, meso-, and micro-level. Following definitions from research that employs a multi-level analytical perspective (Geels, 2010; 2002) to examine organisational gender-related issues (Bozzon et al., 2018; Syed and Mustafa O'zbilgin, 2009), we frame the different levels as follows: national conditions and gender regimes (macro level); organisational culture and practice (meso level); and individual experiences and norms (micro level). Regarding organisational culture, we follow Gherardi's (1994) arguments that it is intertwined with the social construction of gender, encompassing both the "gender we do" (e.g. institutional behaviours) and the "gender we think" (e.g. symbols) (p. 595).

2.3 Methodology

We have conducted a systematic review comprising 180 papers published between 1995 and 2024. The review followed the methodology of Tranfield, Denyer and Smart (2003), with additional insights from Denyer and Tranfield (2009) and Williams et al. (2021). The process was structured into three stages: planning, conducting, and reporting. The first step involved defining the research question (RQ) on the multi-level antecedents of gender policy ambivalent effectiveness, followed by establishing conceptual boundaries. Defining these boundaries was challenging, as scholarly inquiry has expanded beyond gender binaries to encompass diversity, inclusion, and intersectionality. To comprehensively examine gender policy effectiveness while recognising the multifaceted nature of organisational inequalities (Benschop, 2021), this review included all policies aimed at fostering gender equality, also covering studies exploring DEI policies with gender implications. Finally, following CAS-driven guidelines for systematic reviews (Petticrew et al., 2019), we examined broadly similar policies acknowledging potential variations in context and content.

Three databases were selected to ensure a diverse range of sources (Williams et al., 2021): Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and EBSCOhost. These open access databases are widely used and among the largest available (Okoli, 2015), providing a substantial volume of publications suitable for systematic reviews (Creevey, Coughlan and O'Connor, 2022).

A 2-level keyword structure was developed to retrieve papers. The keywords were selected based on the review topic, informed by those used in relevant papers and reviews, and refined through trial database searches. Acknowledging that some journals utilise controlled keyword lists instead of allowing authors to provide their own keywords, we also incorporated broader terms such as "organisational change" and "organisational transformation" in our search strategy to ensure relevant papers were not overlooked. The final keywords were the following: "organi?ational change" OR "organi?ational transformation" OR "organi?ational dynamics" OR "organi?ational progress" OR "organi?ational development" OR "organi?ational polic*" OR "organi?ational intervention" OR "organi?ational learning" OR "organi?ational response" OR "organi?ational adaptation" AND "gender" OR "gender change" OR "gender transformation" OR "gender equality" OR "gender inequality" OR "gender equity" OR "equality" OR "gender dynamics" OR "gender polic*" OR "gender intervention" OR "wom?n" OR "intersectionality" OR "diversity" OR "gender relations".

The initial keyword search yielded 7,665 papers. We applied database exclusion criteria, such as publication date, source type, subject area, and language (limited to English). For publication year, 1995 was chosen as the starting point. This date marks the UN's Beijing Declaration. This established gender mainstreaming at organisational level as an official commitment and encouraged the systematic adoption of organisational gender policies (Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2023), which have primarily evolved over the past two decades (Clavero and Galligan, 2021). As Broadbridge and Hearn (2008) further note, earlier literature from the l970s and 1980s largely focused on foundational issues, such as the gendered division of labour and hierarchy, laying the groundwork for the prioritisation of gender practices and policies in the 1990s. Additionally, the trial database searches revealed limited work on organisational gender policies in the early 1990s, supporting the choice of this starting point. For subject areas, those related to management, gender studies, and social sciences were selected.

These criteria reduced the sample to 3,993 papers. Metadata on these papers were extracted from the databases (e.g. paper title, authors, journal, publication date) and integrated into an Excel spreadsheet (Rashman, Withers and Hartley, 2009). 1,165 duplicates were identified among them and removed, resulting in 2,828 papers. These were then screened for relevance to the RQ, resulting in 287 papers. A full-text review assessed their relevance in greater detail, focusing on information related to gender policy ambivalent effectiveness, the organisational contexts addressed, and the specific gender approach. For instance, studies

with a DEI approach but lacking gender implications, such as those addressing only racial implications of DEI policies, were excluded. Similarly, studies addressing professional associations and organisational clubs were excluded. Ultimately, 164 papers met the criteria for inclusion. Then, following existing reviews (Saggese, Sarto and Cuccurullo, 2016; Siebels and zu Knyphausen-Aufseß, 2012), we also identified an additional 16 papers when analysing the retrieved sample. Hand-searching and cross-referencing enabled the inclusion of a few seminal papers, and mostly papers that referenced specific gender policies and interventions in the keywords and abstracts, such as Athena SWAN and GEPs. The comprehensive coverage of relevant literature was strengthened in this way (Hiebl, 2023; Greenhalgh and Peacock, 2005). Overall, for each of the 180 papers, the authors coded additional information in the excel spreadsheet. Descriptive information included theoretical approach and methodological details (e.g. type of quantitative or qualitative analysis, data sources, organisation type addressed, geographical scope). Content-wise information included an overview of each paper's aim, core arguments, and findings in response to the review's RQ (Calabrò et al., 2019).

Figure 2.1 summarises the systematic review process. Figure 2.2 further illustrates the temporal distribution of retrieved papers and research on organisational gender policies, marking a notable increase in scholarly attention after 2014. Table 2.1 showcases the journals publishing this research and article frequency, and highlights the topic's multidisciplinary scope across fields like management and organisational studies, gender studies, psychology, and some sector-specific fields. This distribution also underscores both the topic's broad relevance within the social sciences, and the fragmented nature of the research landscape. Beyond a few core journals with high article frequency, the remaining research is scattered across diverse outlets, raising concerns about disciplinary silos in the study of gender policies and strengthening the need for a comprehensive review.

Figure 2.1 Overview of the systematic review process

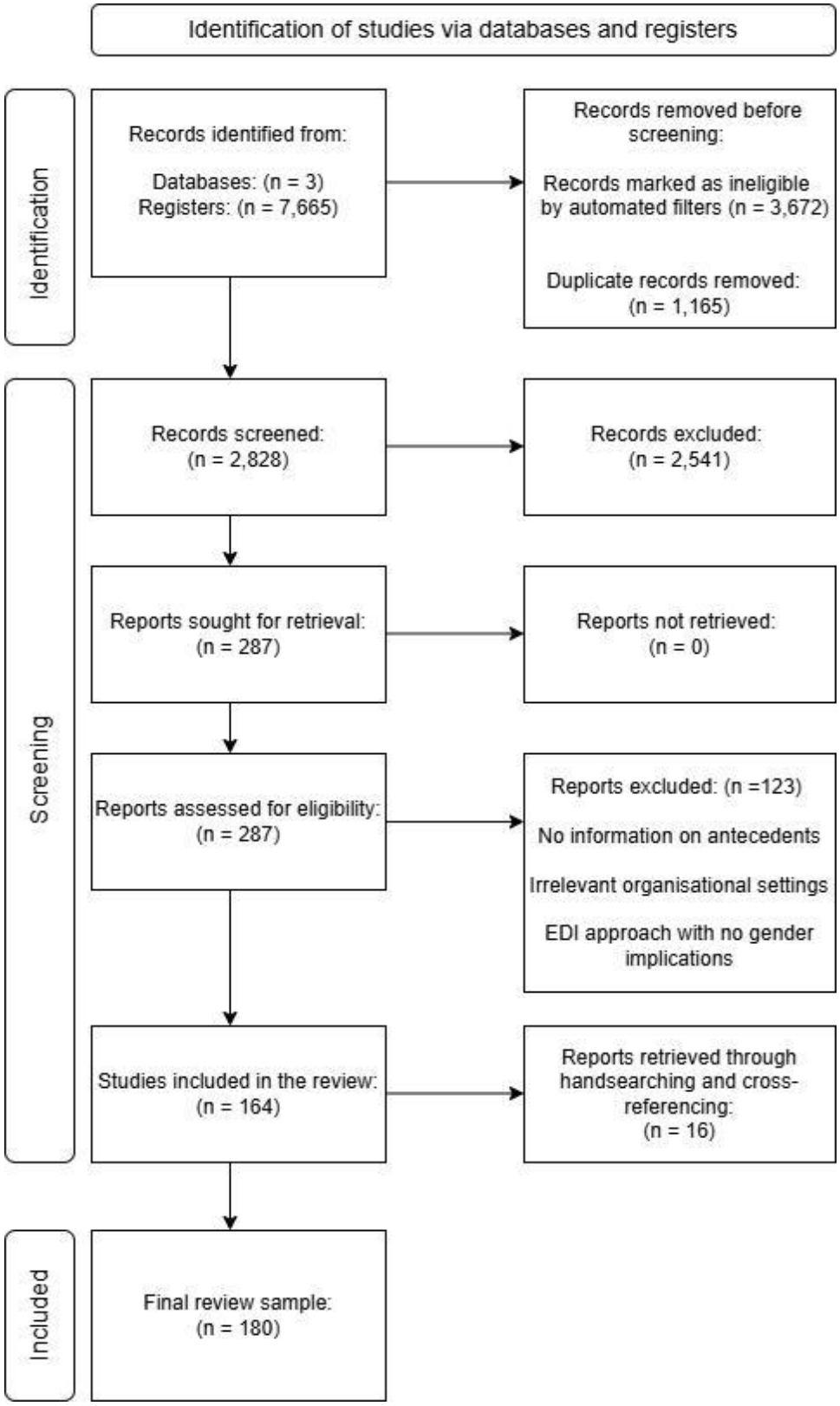


Figure 2.2 Temporal distribution of retrieved papers on organisational gender policies

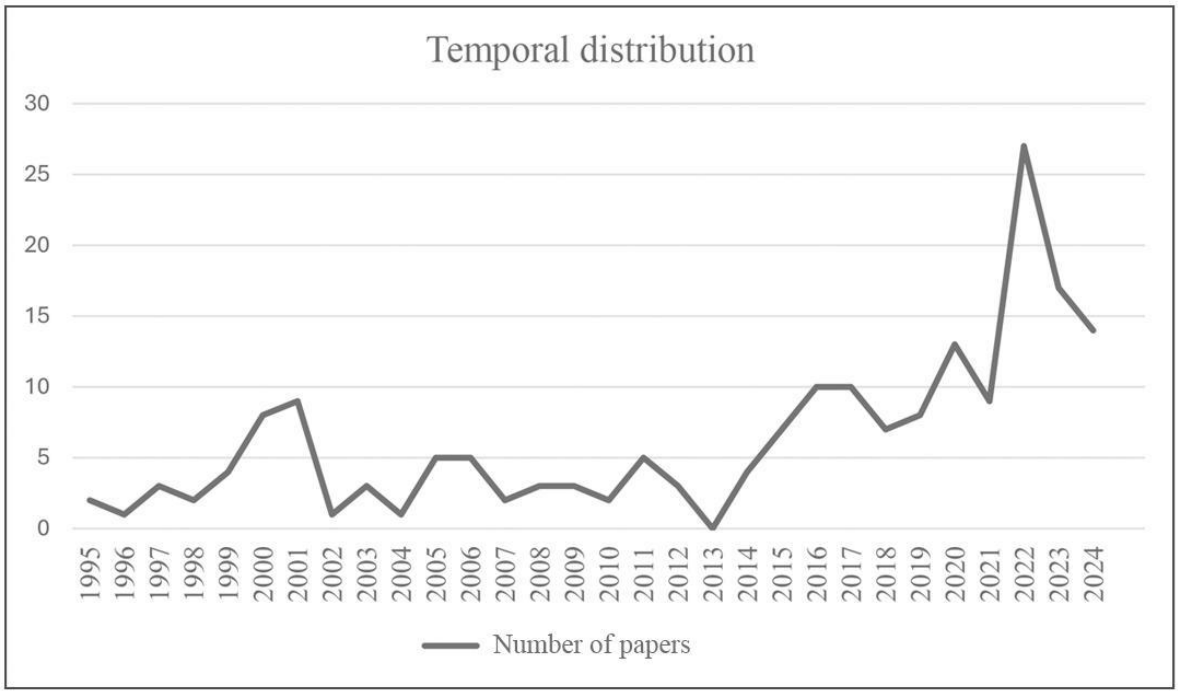


Table 2.1 Frequency of articles by journal

Journal title	**Articles' frequency**
Gender, Work & Organization	36
Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An international journal	12
Gender & Society	8
Organization	7
Human Relations, Human Resource Management	5
Journal of Organizational Change Management, Organization Studies	4
Administrative Science Quarterly, AG About Gender – International Journal of Gender Studies, Employee Relations, Health Research Policy and Systems	3
BMJ Open, Higher Education, International Feminist Journal of Politics, International Journal of Human Resource Management, Journal of Business Ethics, Journal of Gender Studies, Journal of Sport Management, Labour and Industry, Management Communication Quarterly, Organization Science, Research in Organizational Behavior, SAGE Open, Scandinavian Journal of Management, Women in Management Review (renamed to Gender in Management)	2

Academy of Management Journal, Academy of Management Review, Accounting Horizons, American Behavioral Scientist, American Journal of Sociology, Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources, Business & Society, California Management Review, Critical Perspectives on Accounting, Critical Studies in Education, Education Sciences, European Education Research Journal, European Journal of Training and Development, European Management Review, Evaluation and Program Planning, Forest Policy and Economics, Frontiers in Psychology, Gender and Development, Gender and Education, Harvard Business Review, Human Resource Development International, Human Resource Development Quarterly, Human Resource Development Review, Human Resource Management Journal, Human Resource Management Review, Industrial and Labor Relations Review, Innovative Higher Education, Issues in Accounting Education, Journal of Higher Education, Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies, Journal of Leisure Research, Journal of Management, Journal of Management and Governance, Journal of Management Development, Journal of Management Inquiry, Journal of Managerial Psychology, Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, Journal of Vocational Behavior, Journal of Women and Minorities in Science and Engineering, Journal of World Business, Leadership and Organization Development Journal, Managerial and Decision Economics, NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research, Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies, Organization Theory, Organizational Dynamics, PLoS ONE, Politics and Gender, Review of Policy Research, Scandinavian Journal of Technology, Social Forces, Social Science Research, Socio-Economic Review, Sociology Compass, Sport Management Review, Strategic Organization, Violence Against Women, Western Journal of Communication, Work and Occupations	1

After retrieving the final sample of 180 papers, we applied a reflexive thematic analysis (TA). Reflexive TA is a distinct, theoretically flexible TA approach that moves beyond the descriptive and positivist notions of other TA approaches. It values qualitative data and researchers' subjectivity and reflexivity in engaging with and interpreting the data (Braun and Clarke, 2021; 2019). This approach enhances the development of themes as contextual "shared meanings" (ibid, p. 341), instead of focusing on coding reliability and bias mitigation as seen in the positivist paradigm.

The first author followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for engaging with and coding the data included in the spreadsheet for each paper (content-wise information), employing primarily inductive coding that emphasised data-based meanings. Open coding led to identifying in the reviewed studies concepts functioning as antecedents to ambivalent gender policy effectiveness. The names of final themes aimed to reflect in a comprehensive

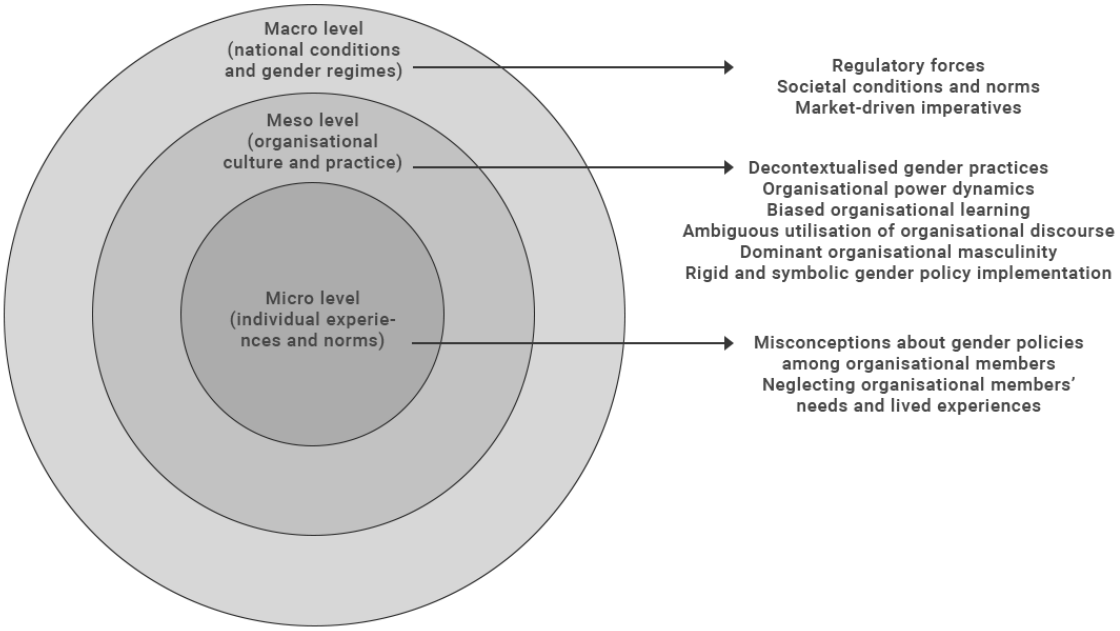
way encapsulated details about these antecedents (Sterman, 2002), while integrating macro-, meso, and micro-level perspectives and subsequently the overall CAS concept of multi-levelness. Thus, themes provided both valuable information and theoretically-informed responses to the review's RQ (Byrne, 2022).

The final themes present the macro-, meso-, micro-level antecedents of gender policy ambivalent effectiveness, illustrating how these factors either hinder the achievement of policy goals or produce unintended consequences. These themes were further interpreted to identify links between them (Thomas, 2006), and subsequently connections between the antecedents. This second phase of analysis represents the culmination of the thematic analysis (Naeem et al., 2023),being primarily driven by inductive reasoning and aligned with the foundational CAS principles of non-linear interdependencies across multiple system levels, and feedback loops. In this way, the first author engaged with the coded, synthesised material encapsulated under each theme to identify overlaps and relational patterns and across them. These patterns were recorded separately in a new document. Accompanying annotations indicated cause factors and effect factors (i.e. themes and corresponding antecedents with a hindering influence), and link polarity (i.e. reinforcing relations between antecedents, symbolised with “+”) (Buzogany, Kopainsky and Gonçalves, 2024). Overall, these patterns and relations reflect the interconnections among the identified antecedents, and have been translated into the components and links of a newly developed framework of gender policy effectiveness. This framework, underpinned by the integration of data-driven and theory-driven insights, is presented accordingly in the discussion section.

2.4 Findings

We present a range of macro-, meso-, and micro-level antecedents to gender policy ambivalent effectiveness. Macro-level antecedents refer to regulation, broader societal norms, and market-driven, neoliberal imperatives; meso-level antecedents encompass organisational culture and practices, such as organisational masculinity, power dynamics, and rigid policy implementation; and micro-level antecedents involve neglecting organisational members’ needs and experiences, and misconceptions about gender policies. These are illustrated in Figure 2.3, followed by a detailed description.

Figure 2.3 The antecedents of gender policy ambivalent effectiveness across system levels



2.4.1 Macro organisational level

Regulatory forces

External influences can often drive gender policies (Laursen and de Welde, 2019; Stavrou and Ierodiakonou, 2018; Bilimoria Joy and Liang, 2008; Nielsen, 2001), yet regulatory forces pose significant impediments. While legislation discourse can enable the introduction of workplace equality measures - especially when aligned with existing organisational initiatives (Mun, Vican and Kelly, 2024) - it can also translate into passive conformity, as seen in mandatory diversity disclosure for firms (Oelrich, Siebold and Ketelhut, 2024). Similarly, it can promote superficial compliance (Lätti, 2017), a phenomenon akin to coercive mimeticism (French and Strachan 2015). National and EU mandates similarly encourage moderate feminist practices, as evidenced in Athena SWAN (Yarrow and Johnston, 2023; Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019). Symbolic compliance is further reported in GEPs' adoption, often motivated by financial incentives (Clavero and Galligan, 2021).

Furthermore, regulations can create confusion regarding gender policies' practical implications. Pizarro and Gartzia (2023) argue that working fathers are hesitant towards taking paternal leaves due to the lack of explicit differentiation between the availability and utilisation of leaves by them as compared to working mothers. The authors conclude that paternity leaves should be more clearly defined and regulated at organisational level, based on the mandates of public policies. These arguments align with Tildesley, La Barbera and

Lombardo (2023), who note that legislation discourse requires follow-up interpretation and adaptation to be effectively shaped into an approach that drives change through compliance. Michaelides, Anderson and Vinnicombe (2023) conversely suggest that the absence of national proactiveness and regulatory mechanisms can be leveraged positively to cultivate an informal supportive culture, indicatively through flexible arrangements with managers.

Finally, national-level policies are highly susceptible to disruptive events and crises. Parker et al. (2022) argue that the COVID-19 pandemic deprioritised the mainstreaming of national equality policies at the organisational level, and especially sidelined ambitious policies aimed at addressing multiple equality dimensions.

Societal norms and conditions

Societal norms can significantly impede intended policy enactment and application, as evidenced by Kronberg and Gerlach's (2024) examination of policies addressing gender pay gaps in German companies. Most employees are unable to experience the benefits of these policies over their tenure, largely due to Germany's national institutional context which favours collective bargaining agreements negotiated when employees start a new job. Similarly, child-care support policies have mixed effects on career progression due to the motherhood penalty in Germany. Intersectional implications are also evident, with lower-educated employees experiencing greater career impacts (cf. Huffman, King and Reichelt, 2017). Furthermore, Kusku et al. (2022) highlight that the limited state provisions in Turkey - exacerbated by socio-economic crises, conservative attitudes, and "patriarchal traditionalism" (p. 10) - result in insufficient attention to organisational diversity policies. Traditional values can further sustain outdated gender policies, as also illustrated by Middle Eastern women's perspectives on career progression and WLB (Abadi, Dirani and Rezaei, 2022). Such values further reinforce binary-oriented and stereotypical fixing-the-women approaches (O'Neil, 2023), even within newly introduced GEPs (Picardi et al., 2023). As Dobbin and Kalev (2016) overall argue, such approaches primarily target white workforces, failing to nurture genuine inclusion and calling for feminist alliances that embrace intersectional values (Erskine and Bilimoria, 2019).

Neglecting social conditions underpinning gender (in)equality may similarly hinder gender policy effectiveness. Striedinger (2017) addresses co-optation as a means for transforming feminist and social movements to organisational policies. This approach fails to consider the complex nature of social change efforts, and deprives gender policies from their radical,

transformative nature. It may even back-fire, as in the case of gender budgeting easily transformed to body counting (Alvesson and Billing, 2003). Sexual harassment policies also prove ineffective when not corresponding to social reality and being detached from time and space (Townsley and Geist, 2000). Indicatively, Dougherty and Goldstein Hode (2016) argue that the sexual harassment policy of a US government organisation proved inadequate due to relying on a binary logic. This favoured a rational approach overlooking the social, nuanced complexity of the harassment phenomenon, and evoked feelings of fear instead of organisational safety. Instead, the varying and intricate manifestations of harassment should be addressed through informative, proactive, and reactive procedures (Gruber, 1998). Finally, overlooking the social and systemic construction of problems like GBV and sexual harassment can encourage micro-level responses (Zippel, 2003). Perpetrators are often framed as "bad apple" people (Forsdike and Fullagar, 2021, p.4), and relevant narrow interventions fail to address the systemic roots of the problem (Harris, McFarlane and Wieskamp, 2020).

Conversely, Prasad, Prasad and Mir (2011) note the risks of policies blindly following societal trends. Such policies entail a subconscious level of isomorphism and disregard local dynamics. Similarly, gender policies that adhere to the dominant gender binary conceptualisation of the Global North may eventually overlook the non-binary identity rights in the workplace (Özbilgin and Erbil, 2024; Syed and Özbilgin, 2009). Policies that incorporate western ideals in a context-blind way, particularly when situated in non-colonial countries (Deem, Case and Nokkala, 2022), also run the risk of incorporating colonial, white standards (Armstrong, 2024; Jansen, 2019).

Market-driven imperatives

Gender equality is often framed as a neoliberal, business case and is accompanied by dual change agendas aiming to enhance organisational performance by pursuing equality goals (Yarrow and Johnston, 2023). This tendency frames gender equality and corresponding policy measures as a tool for legitimisation (Cucari et al., 2018), and as a means for projecting an attractive image to external audiences and gaining a competitive advantage (Blanco-González, Díez-Martín and Miotto, 2023; Ashley and Empson, 2016). In such cases, organisational members, and especially decision-makers (Johansson, Johansson and Andersson, 2023), may prioritise the business-oriented agenda and divert focus from genuine equality goals (Coleman and Rippin, 2000; Meyerson and Kolb, 2000). Maintaining a focus

on gender is overall challenging, as organisational members must be authentically committed to achieving gender equality (Charles and Baird, 2007) and proceeding beyond isomorphic best practices (Evans, 2014).

Furthermore, business cases that align with fluid market trends cannot ensure long-term equality results (Johansson and Ringblom, 2017). They also prove unable to challenge organisational power dynamics and entrenched stereotypes. Szczepanska (2023) indicatively observes that the Swedish game industry adheres to gendered and stereotypic practices to meet client demands and prevent potential conflicts and financial instability. Connell (2006) further argues that business-driven approaches may prioritise gender-neutral workplaces that conceal male advantages and female disadvantages. Thus, they fail to challenge sexual politics and power-based control relationships across groups (Sharp et al., 2012). Finally, disruptive changes driven by business strategies, such as mergers and organisational restructurings, hinder the continuous application and monitoring of gender policies (Woodall, Edwards and Welchman, 1997). They may even trigger adverse effects for female career progression due to downsizing (Collins, 2005).

Then, the growing emphasis on gender equality as a business case, especially within universities, is increasingly shaped by neoliberal and postfeminist paradigms (Yarrow and Johnston, 2023). Yarrow and Davies (2022) argue that neoliberal equality often masks organisational inequality and facilitates the emergence of hostile dynamics and gendered oppression, which are in stark contrast to the attractive image projected to external stakeholders. These dynamics can ultimately legitimise inappropriate behaviours and provoke "organisational myopia" (p. 6), rendering it difficult for policies to effectively address inequalities. Neoliberalism and "performance management regimes" (Yarrow and Johnston, 2023, p. 761) can further lead universities to prioritise symbolic policies and compliance over genuine action, a phenomenon referred to as "doing the document" (Ahmed, 2007, p. 590). This tendency ultimately undermines the effectiveness of various policies, including the well-established Athena SWAN (Yarrow and Johnston, 2023; Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019). Such schemes may further produce counterproductive outcomes, such as unequal and unacknowledged workloads, and a stereotypical division of labour for female and minority groups (Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019; Ovseiko et al., 2017; Caffrey et al., 2016).

Finally, at the intersection of macro and micro levels, equally important is the potential for neoliberal narratives to shape employees', especially women's perception about gender

policies, and trigger subconscious resistance to gender policies. Notably, Huppatz, Sang and Napier (2019) employ Foucault's concept of technologies of the self to suggest how female academics experience self-imposed pressure to work throughout maternity leaves, in line with the academic habitus and a masculine-driven merit system that requires continuous academic outputs. The work of da Rocha Grangeiro et al. (2024) further reflects that women in senior positions may oppose affirmative policies under neoliberal, postfeminist pressures (Rottenberg 2017; 2014). Their resistance stems from a rejection of gender challenges and support towards meritocracy, excellence, and individual performance as the sole criteria for career progression (Gill, 2017; 2014).

2.4.2 Meso organisational level

Decontextualised gender practices

Previous research advocates for the need to acknowledge local specificities while implementing organisational change policies (Oswick, 2009), including gender policies (Henderson et al., 2022; Utoft, 2020). For instance, an organisation's history and path dependency will highly determine policy effectiveness. Breen et al. (2024) suggest that an organisation's legacy in exclusionary practices is a key obstacle in DEI work, and Mun et al. (2024) conversely stress that established work in gender policies highly facilitates the adoption and implementation of new policies.

Still, organisations frequently adopt best practices without sufficient contextual adaptation, operating under the assumption of policy transferability (Ní Laoire et al., 2021). This reliance on universalist best practices and policy models neglects socio-constructive organisational contexts; therefore, it results in a situation termed as "policy immobility" (ibid, p. 585) and leads to persistent gaps between gender policy and practice. Such decontextualised policies overall exhibit an insufficient responsiveness to local challenges including power structures and privilege, and may even evoke a tacit rejection of equality (Pizarro Milian and Wijesingha, 2023). Additionally, as Holck (2016) notes, such generalised gender agendas cannot genuinely engage organisations in the change process.

Anicha et al. (2017) finally note that stand-alone gender policy practices and misalignments among the contextual sub-systems and sub-cultures of complex organisations, such as universities, can evoke significant implementation gaps. For example, intended practices may overlook the needs and expectations of those individuals belonging to the different sub-systems. In fact, considerable differences exist even among organisations within the same

sector, urging greater attention to each organisation's unique gender context (Bond, Hollywood and Colgan, 2009; Ellison, Barker and Kulasuriya, 2009).

Organisational power dynamics

Organisations are inherently shaped by power relations and structures, often hidden within their operations (Deem et al., 2022; Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998). These dynamics frequently (re)produce inequality, impeding the effective implementation of gender policies (Ovseiko et al., 2017). Occasionally, organisational members overlook power dynamics, a phenomenon explained by organisational gender ideologies (Wynn, 2020). Of the three prominent ideologies - individualistic, societal, and organisational - company executives tend to adopt either the individualistic or societal ideology. This results in a failure to recognise organisational sources of power and inequality, leading to the adoption of mediocre gender policies reinforcing rather than challenging the status quo. Furthermore, routine dynamics are stressed as mechanisms potentially concealing power and privilege. Apart from creating inertia against equality change initiatives (Zhang, 2021), routine dynamics can perpetuate assumptions about what is normal and familiar, thereby normalising inequality and privilege, and reinforcing management practices that maintain existing power structures (Feldman and Pentland, 2022).

Moreover, organisational members often misunderstand how to pursue gender equality, focusing on numerical balance among employees (Johansson et al., 2023). Corresponding policies though are typically insufficient for challenging entrenched power dynamics. This limitation is also evident in respect-based approaches. Despite their contribution to addressing issues such as harassment, overemphasis on respect can mask organisational power. This occurs, for instance, when disrespect is unintentionally portrayed as the source of the problem and not a symptom of systemic issues (Barnacle et al., 2023).

As for support schemes that accompany gender policies, such as mentorship and training, their carefully designed operationalisation can undoubtedly sensitise organisational members towards equality (Deng, Gulseren and Turner, 2022). It can further motivate collective action (Leenders, Bleijenbergh and van den Brink, 2020; De Vries, Webb and Eveline, 2006), also for addressing neoliberal trends (Harris, 2022). Nevertheless, especially training schemes may lack context and adopt fixing-the-women and fixing-the-other approaches (Kalpazidou Schmidt and Cacace, 2019; Kalev et al., 2006; Ely and Meyerson, 2000; Meyerson and Fletcher, 2000); in doing so, they suggest that the deficits of disadvantaged groups are the

sources of inequality (Slootman, 2022) and fail to challenge imbalanced power dynamics (Snickare and Wahl, 2024). In addition, training programs that emphasise individual competences, whether for professional development or comprehension of gender inequality, perpetuate individualistic interpretations of the target issues (cf. Chasserio and Bacha, 2023). In this way, they fail to equip individuals against systemic inequalities (Möller et al., 2024) including organisational privilege and unequally distributed power (Snickare and Wahl, 2024; Brewis, 2019). Even when concepts such as gender reflexivity (Martin, 2006; 2003) are introduced, their potential to drive change is undermined by the simultaneous emphasis on individualistic values such as self-management and self-development (Perriton, 2022).

Proceeding further, senior leaders, including males, can be champions and allies in challenging the gendered status quo (de Vries and van den Brink, 2016; Ng and Sears, 2012; Bailyn, 2003). However, scholars simultaneously stress the insufficiency of top-down approaches (Ng and Sears, 2020; Eriksson-Zetterquist and Renemark 2016), the danger of heroic masculinity (de Vries, 2015), and the susceptibility of powerful individuals to essentialist gender beliefs sabotaging their actions (Anicha, Bilen-Green and Green, 2020; Humbert, Kelan and van den Brink, 2019). The far-fetched reliance on receiving help from privileged individuals with situated interests is also criticised (De Vries, 2015; Poster, 2008). Such individuals can be unwilling to disrupt their privileged status quo (Cortis, Foley and Williamson, 2022; Schmid and Roedder, 2022) and challenge the conditions that helped them succeed (Benschop and van den Brink, 2014).

Biased organisational learning

Organisational learning refers to the process through which knowledge is embedded into everyday organisational routines and practices (Gherardi, 2009). Its importance to fostering equality and diversity within organisations has also been acknowledged (Ely and Meyerson, 2000; Rao and Kelleher, 2000). Gender knowledge especially is seen as vital for ensuring successful gender interventions (Lansu et al., 2019; Zippel and Ferree, 2019). Conversely, the absence of organisational knowledge and learning can undermine gender policy effectiveness. As van den Brink argues (2020), knowledge acquired by organisational members, that is individual learning, only rarely transforms into collective learning. For instance, high staff turnover among diversity officers prevents the retention of knowledge within the organisational memory, leading to organisational forgetting. Consequently, even substantial

organisational experience with gender initiatives cannot be leveraged, depriving gender policies of a robust foundation upon which to build.

Biased knowledge derived from partial experiences can similarly impede policies' effectiveness. Macneil and Liu (2017) argue that soft regulation lacks stringent requirements, such as benchmarking and self-reporting that can encourage a deep analysis of the organisational context. Their absence thus slows down the acquisition of accurate knowledge, limits organisational learning, and results in a partial depiction of progress towards equality unlikely to be beneficially exploited to advance gender policies in a context-specific way. Additionally, knowledge and learning become biased when organisations selectively privilege dominant perspectives (Harris, 2017). These perspectives often stem from group membership, which impacts objective judgement and privileges certain standpoints. By relying on them, organisations define gender issues, such as sexual harassment incidents, based on entrenched power dynamics and established norms including heteronormativity and whiteness. Consequently, there is an uneven recognition of gender challenges, and gender policies do not equally benefit all organisational groups (ibid).

Finally, organisational learning that overemphasises data-driven strategies and indicators can hinder policy effectiveness (Campbell and Helleloid, 2023). The reliance on quantifiable measures discourages employees from speaking out for difficult situations that data cannot capture, thereby failing to address their needs and expectations regarding gender policies. Concurrently, this focus impedes the adoption of more nuanced approaches to gender equality, including intersectionality, which cannot be fully supported by data alone (Zippel and Ferree, 2019).

Ambiguous utilisation of organisational discourse

Organisational discourse often enhances strategies for gender equality change (Mease, 2016; Crawford and Mills, 2011; Kemp, Keenan and Gronow, 2010). For instance, it enables dialogues and negotiations (Backhausen et al., 2021; Kulkarni et al., 2021) and mitigates organisational resistance (Halford and Leonard, 2006). Still, organisational discourse strategies are challenging to escalate and reach large organisational groups (D'Costa, Mascarenhas and Lovell, 2022). Especially when the communication and dissemination of the policies is inadequate, employees are not aware of their existence and are deprived of their potential benefits (O'Brien et al., 2023).

Additional concerns refer to institutional speech acts that function as a smokescreen covering inadequate policy commitment to equality (Campell and Helleloid, 2023; Bhopal, 2022; McVittie, McKinlay and Widdicombe, 2008). Notably, ostensible vocabulary employed in gender policy discourse can lead to superficial actions (Mishra, Mishra and Ostrovska, 2022). Also, the use of gender-neutral vocabulary in policy communication can silence gender concerns within the neoliberal, postfeminist context (Szczepanska, 2023), or more broadly conceal employee gendered experiences (Farhall, Quek and McVey, 2022). Such practices complicate the ability of gender policies to address inequalities, as they exacerbate performative resistance (Stierncreutz and Tienari 2023) and hijack the visibility of gender issues (Smidt, Pétursdóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2021). Finally, reliance on vague language and taken-for-granted notions in strategic documents can lead to outdated policy responses (Townsley and Geist, 2000), or inconsistent and unclear implementation of gender policies (Johansson et al., 2023). Such obscure policies, for instance for reporting harassment, are overall unlikely to be used by organisational members (Knapp et al., 1997).

Dominant organisational masculinity

Adherence to gender asymmetries and masculine symbols entrenches masculinity in a dominant, hegemonic position within organisations (Gherardi and Poggio, 2001), thereby complicating the successful delivery of gender policies (Simon, 2024), even when there is a genuine commitment to equality (Mills, 2005). Knights and Kerfoot (2004) argue that masculine discourses are often rooted in the gender binary. This reinforces divisions between men and women (ibid), and prescribes corresponding organisational masculinities and femininities (Lowe, Mills and Mullen, 2002) overall essentialising gender differences (Calás and Smircich, 2006). Such a binary framework ultimately positions women as the subordinate other, despite ongoing calls to view gender as a fluid concept (Pecis, 2016; Linstead and Brewis, 2004).

Organisational masculinity can also arise from the masculine identity associated with particular occupations and divert attention away from underlying gendered structures within workplaces (Johansson, Andersson and Johansson, 2021). In fact, these organisations or sectors become fields of struggle, where the historically entrenched masculine tradition (habitus) and male-dominated organisational logic resist change (Piggott and Matthews, 2020). This deeply embedded masculinity exacerbates the difficulties gender policies face in

attempting to alter these dynamics (Abrahamsson, 2014). It may even turn policies into window dressing efforts that legitimise existing inequalities (Simon, 2024).

Additionally, organisational masculinities, especially when intertwined with subconscious biases and male-centric narratives, can actively undermine career progression policies. Males, who predominantly hold decision-making positions, may adhere to their own perceptions of leadership traits (Cross and Linehan, 2006) that often align with masculine ideals (Franczak and Margolis, 2022). This discourages women from asserting themselves or aspiring to higher positions (O'Brien et al., 2023), a process indicatively reinforced through informal networks (Diehl and Dzubinski, 2016; Gress and Paek, 2014; Kjeldal, Rindfleish and Sheridan, 2005). In such cases, dominant males form in-groups, marginalising others as out-groups and subjecting them to less favourable, even prejudiced treatment (Abrams, 2010). The influence of informal cultural dynamics thus poses significant barriers to the achievement of gender policy goals (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011), calling for collective transformative action (Pizarro and Gartzia, 2023; Rowlands, Blackmore and Gallant 2020; Parken and Ashworth, 2019).

Finally, scholars emphasise the need to examine neglected masculinities and their impact on organisational environments (Linstead and Maréchal, 2015). For instance, Bleijenbergh (2022) highlights that both female and male change agents strategically mobilise various masculinity forms to drive gender transformation, with unexpectedly positive effects.

Rigid and symbolic gender policy implementation

The rigid implementation of gender policies, particularly those setting quotas, has drawn criticism for its ambivalent effects. Concerns persist that the positive impact of quotas may take considerable time to manifest (Forman-Rabinovici et al., 2023; van't Foort-Diepeveen, 2022). Similarly, such measures can be counterproductive (Skirstad, 2009; Tienari, 1999), due to the forced feminisation of specific positions (Kirsch, 2022; Gould, Kulik and Sardeshmukh, 2018) and the disproportionate consequences for other disadvantaged groups (Davies, 2019).

Ambiguity and vague compliance are also common challenges (Voorspoels and Bleijenbergh, 2019). Institutions rarely provide clear guidance on how to implement quota policies in a context-based way (Johansson et al., 2023), and are merely interested in fostering institutional reputation (Blanco-González et al., 2023) and ensuring minimum disruption to the organisational system (Mun and Jung, 2018). Additionally, quotas frequently fail to meet

their intended goals, particularly redistributing decision-making power equitably (Hughes, Paxton and Krook, 2017). Thus, organisations require not just a critical mass but critical actors who can enhance change (Franczak and Margolis, 2022; Blommaert and van den Brink, 2020; Cook and Glass, 2015; O'Meara, 2015), and manoeuvre with contemporary feminist discourses (Utoft, 2020).

A rigid and symbolic implementation of training activities embedded in gender policies can also have unintended consequences. Training to address biased behaviours may result in backlash (Allison, 1999), reinforce existing biases ((Nelson and Zippel, 2021; Repelaer van Driel, 2015), or provoke defensiveness particularly among white men (Correll, 2017). Additionally, such activities are often applied symbolically or superficially by HR professionals, due to their obligation to protect the corporate image and interests (Campell and Helleloid, 2023).

2.4.3 Micro organisational level

Neglecting organisational members' needs and lived experiences

As Syed and Özbilgin's (2009) relational framework for diversity management highlights, the micro-level of analysis can explore issues of identity and agency, including individual responses to various workplace issues. Firstly, the review findings suggest that organisational groups not targeted by gender policies may exhibit resentment and broadly resist their implementation (Kukula et al., 2024). Furthermore, when gender policies fail to align with organisational members' self-narratives, personal, work, or gender identities, those individuals may become unsupportive (Conzon, 2023; Wang et al., 2023). They may also resist these policies by appealing to service ethics (Worts, Fox and Mcdonough, 2007) and idealising the organisation's past practices (Cutcher, 2009). More generally, resistance to gender policies can create negative implications through denial of the need for change, refusal to accept responsibility for implementing agreed-upon changes, and attempts to dismantle change already initiated (Wiggins-Romesburg and Githens, 2018; Agócs, 1997). However, van Douwen, van den Brink and Benschop (2022) interestingly note that resistance can also be positively leveraged. For instance, it can enable discussions and negotiations that help opposing stakeholders better understand issues of gender (in)equality, potentially transforming them to change agents (ibid; Bleijenbergh, 2018).

Proceeding to WLB policies, these often treat the issue as an objective, homogeneous phenomenon (Grünberg and Matei, 2020; McDonald et al., 2005). This can result in a one-

size fits-all policy design that overlooks employees' evolving needs. For instance, despite a growing trend among working fathers towards more egalitarian caregiving roles (Ellison et al., 2009), these shifts are not reflected in policies for paternal leave, a phenomenon also framed as sexual labour division a few decades ago (Peterson and Albrecht, 1999). More recently, Pizzaro and Gartzia (2023) highlight that working fathers who do take extended paternal leave may face wage penalties, career setbacks, and prejudices - a phenomenon broadly observed in WLB policies addressing multiple employee groups (O'Brien et al., 2023; Petts, Mize and Kaufman 2022; Ter Hoeven et al., 2017; Metz, 2011; Ashcraft, 1999; Jones and Causer, 1995) -, thus revealing a disconnect between contemporary caregiving ideologies and workplace policies. A similar disconnect is evident in how caregiving responsibilities, especially for women, are overlooked in promotion policies and evaluation criteria that highly value physical presence in the office (De Coninck and Verhulst, 2024). Finally, there is a risk for WLB policies to neglect the personal needs of those without traditional family responsibilities, calling for a more nuanced, inclusive approach (Wilkinson, Tomlinson and Gardiner, 2018; Kossek, Thompson and Lautsch, 2015).

As for HR policies addressing LGBTIQ+ employees, Bell et al. (2011) stress the importance of avoiding silencing and proactively incorporating employee voices. Failing to do so risks perpetuating policy approaches that do not address contextual needs (ibid), or lack credibility (Capell et al., 2018).

Misconceptions about gender policies among organisational members

The goals of gender policies are often misunderstood, with most misconceptions relating to affirmative action. While such interventions may be perceived as beneficial, they are also seen as a threat to fair career progression (van den Brink and Stobbe, 2014; van den Brink and Benschop, 2012a). This macro-level, prevailing discourse of meritocracy becomes internalised in organisational actors' sensemaking; thus, at the micro level, women often feel stigmatised for receiving support to advance their careers (Chasserio and Bacha, 2023; Bourabain and Verhaeghe, 2022; Acker, 2000), and consequently masculine norms remain largely unchallenged (van den Brink and Benschop, 2012a). This unintended outcome is also exacerbated when the myth of meritocracy serves as a smokescreen for maintaining privileges that favour men. As Szczepanska (2023) highlights, the skills valued in male-dominated sectors, combined with the numerical dominance of men, facilitate their

identification and recruitment through informal networks, further reproducing gender inequality.

Furthermore, affirmative action is frequently not implemented as intended due to a lack of awareness and understanding of the relevant legislation, often being ambiguous. For instance, affirmative action may be conflated as positive discrimination (O'Brien et al., 2023). As Bhopal (2022) exemplifies, the UK Equality Act in 2010 was designed to promote equality across various protected characteristics; however, it led to the neglect of certain characteristics by consolidating multiple regulations under a single, tick-the-box form of legislation. These issues are further compounded by the need for affirmative action to be integrated into holistic, life-cycle policy frameworks (Davies, 2019). Instead, affirmative action is often implemented through stand-alone practices lacking contextual grounding. For instance, women are frequently appointed to high-authority positions during organisational crises or when failure is likely (Diehl and Dzubinski, 2016), a phenomenon known as the glass cliff, rather than benefiting from affirmative measures throughout the entire career development (Franczak and Margolis, 2022).

Further misconceptions about gender policies emerge when the concepts they encompass are inherently unclear. Salmon (2022) argues that subjective notions such as microaggressions have a "slippery" connotation (p. 1), complicate reporting, and allow perpetrators to deny incidents, ultimately hindering the consistent application of policy measures. Similarly, Munguia Gomez and Levine (2022) highlight the "policy-people gap" (p. 842). In this case, decision-makers support policies favouring disadvantaged groups but, in practice, prioritise non-disadvantaged groups with better qualifications. This discrepancy stems from the complex perceptions of microjustice and macrojustice, which trigger differing standards of fairness and confusion about the proper materialisation of equality policies, even among decision-makers themselves.

2.5 Discussion

The present review consolidates the hitherto fragmented knowledge base on gender policy ambivalent effectiveness and its antecedents. Adopting a CAS perspective, it advances the examination of gender policies as complex interventions within dynamic and adaptive systems. It explores the emergence of gender policy effectiveness from an integrative, multi-level perspective, moving beyond linear, single-level approaches and successfully operationalising complexity as an analytical framework (Kalpazidou Schmidt and Ovseiko,

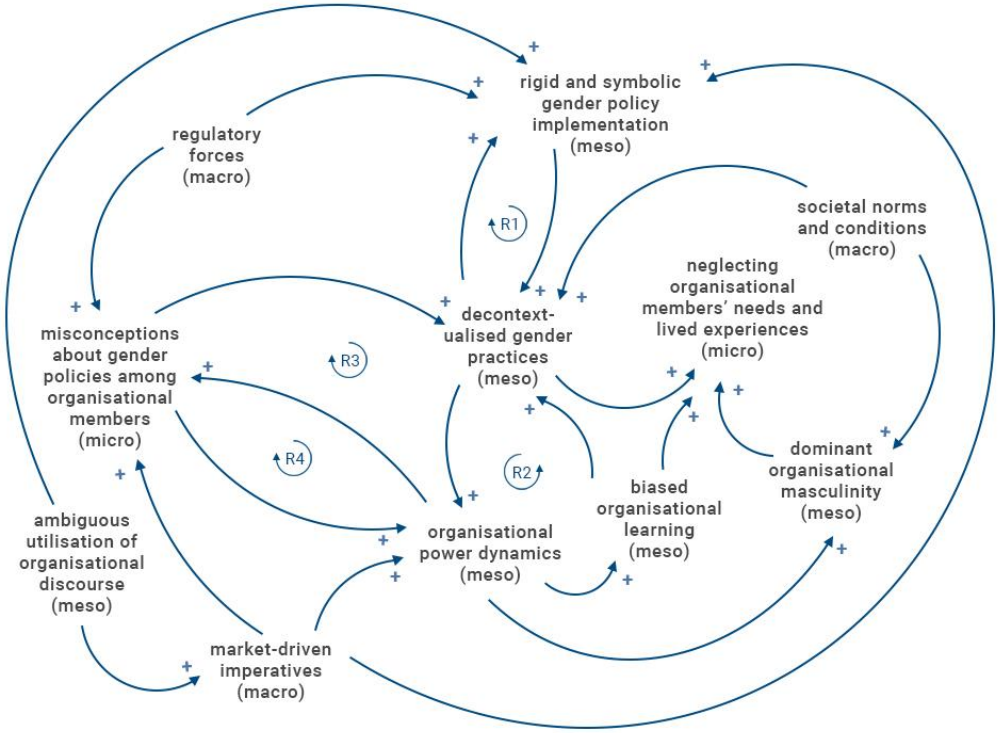
2020; Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2020). The findings provide evidence-based insights to scholars, practitioners, and policy-makers, advocating for an approach to gender policies that leverages the complexity and adaptability inherent in the systems where these policies are implemented.

2.5.1 Gender policy ambivalent effectiveness: a nexus of complex interdependent factors

The thematic analysis identified multiple antecedents of gender policies' ambivalent effectiveness. The second stage of analysis, framed through CAS theory, led to the development of an integrative framework (Patton, 2014), illustrating how these antecedents interact non-linearly, activating reinforcing feedback loops. This dynamic results in unpredictable emergent causality, culminating in policy ambivalent effectiveness, characterised by inertia towards intended change and unintended consequences.

To articulate this, we employ a system archetype of a causal loop diagram. System archetypes aid in “diagnosing vexing long-term problems” and identifying the underlying factors responsible for them (Kim, 1992, p.2). Causal loop diagrams especially capture the evolution of complex phenomena through feedback loops, as they visually represent systemic interactions. Figure 2.4 illustrates the developed framework in the form of a causal loop model. Its empirical basis encompasses the identified antecedents across system levels (macro-, meso-, micro-level themes), as well as their intricate interdependencies and feedback loops (relational patterns identified across themes) that reinforce their negative influence. Interdependencies are represented through arrows with positive (reinforcing) polarity between the antecedents, while feedback loops are indicated as R1, R2, R3, and R4 (Buzogany et al., 2024). Not all antecedents and levels directly interact with one another; for instance, the influence of micro-level antecedents is exacerbated by both macro- and meso-level antecedents, but, in turn, directly reinforces the effects of only meso-level factors. Additionally, several interdependencies are concentrated at the meso-level, yet they also feed into micro-level impacts and reinforce macro-level ones.

Figure 2.4 Framework on gender policy ambivalent effectiveness



First, macro-level antecedents activate various meso-level impacts, but also direct macro-to-micro effects. Regulatory mandates often evoke a highly rigid implementation of gender policies at the meso organisational level (e.g. Skirstad, 2009), for instance with organisations passively replicating legislative provisions (Oelrich et al. 2024), and preventing substantive change. Ambiguous national policies can especially create confusion around how gender policies should be enacted within organisations, leading to misunderstandings among organisational members about how to engage with or benefit from them (e.g. Pizarro and Garcia, 2023). This perpetuates misconceptions about their purpose, causing employees to neglect them (O'Brien et al., 2022), while decision-makers may favour practices lacking context and genuine intent (e.g. Franczak and Margolis, 2022). This detachment from context strengthens the procedural, rigid implementation of various gender policies, especially those building on affirmative action, creating a reinforcing loop that diminishes the transformative potential of gender policies throughout their execution (R1) (Johansson et al., 2023).

Macro-level societal norms significantly influence organisational culture and practices at the meso level, reinforcing conservative gender expectations and masculine norms, for instance in relation to career development issues and WLB interventions (e.g. O'Neil, 2023; Abadi et al., 2022). Policies that fail to consider the broader social conditions that underpin gender (in)equality (Striedinger, 2017; Dougherty and Goldstein Hode, 2016) similarly lack contextual grounding. This also pertains to policies that uncritically imitate societal trends and Western ideals, with the risk of losing context being considerably prevalent in organisations in non-colonial regions (e.g. Özbilgin and Erbil, 2024) .

As for market-driven imperatives, these often prioritise compliance or institutional attractiveness, reducing gender policies to symbolic actions that maintain the organisational status quo and power (Yarrow & Johnston, 2023). Neoliberal ideologies further complicate this by fostering confusion around the purpose of gender policies, leading to both conscious and subconscious resistance, as in the case of maternity leaves (Huppatz et el., 2019). Then, neoliberal postfeminist trends are also reinforced by ambiguous and performative organisational discourse, especially in the corporate context (e.g. Szczepanska, 2023), overall masking inequalities. The vague discursive articulation of gender policies further contributes to their symbolic and decontextualised implementation (e.g. Johansson et al., 2023), failing to address the specific needs of organisations and employees (ibid; Knapp et al., 1997). Ultimately, neglecting employees' lived experiences triggers resistance, further enhancing policy ambivalent effectiveness.

At the meso level, decontextualised gender policies often perpetuate unequal organisational power structures (e.g. Pizarro Milian and Wijesingha, 2023). Organisational power, predominantly held by high-authority males, reinforces masculine ideals and values (O'Brien et al., 2023); these masculine environments in turn tend to favour policies that highly neglect the needs of organisational members, for instance those with caregiving responsibilities (Pizzaro and Gartzia, 2023).. Likewise, unequal power dynamics perpetuate biased organisational learning, shaped by the privileged standpoints of those in socially advantageous positions (Harris, 2017). Such input ultimately leads to policies falling short of addressing employee needs, especially non-privileged ones (ibid). Concurrently, biased organisational learning, which relies on partial experience and incomplete knowledge, functions as a basis for policies lacking context (Campbell and Helleloid, 2023). For instance, this can stem out of a surface-level analysis of organisational progress in gender equality (Macneil and Liu, 2017). Overall, this dynamic ultimately creates a feedback loop that

preserves decontextualised gender policies and reinforces unequal power distribution (e.g. Harris, 2017) in a detrimental way (R2).

Then, organisational power dynamics, deeply embedded in informal practices, often go unnoticed but influence the micro level, shaping misconceptions about gender inequalities and, by extension, gender policies (e.g. Johansson et al., 2023). As previously argued, these misconceptions lead decision-makers to adopt policies lacking contextual grounding (Franczak and Margolis, 2022). This creates a reinforcing loop, where power dynamics are strengthened through the mediating effect of misconceptions and policies that are devoid of context (R3) (e.g. Wynn, 2020).

Finally, employee misconceptions create further obstacles for achieving intended policy goals. For instance, the narrative of meritocracy perpetuates assumptions that gender policies are unfair (e.g. van den Brink & Stobbe, 2014). In this case, misconceptions are often accompanied by concerns for stigmatisation, where women hesitate to engage with affirmative measures on career progression, fearing this may damage their reputation (O'Brien et al., 2023; Bourabain and Verhaeghe, 2022). As a result, individuals may hesitate to engage with these policies, which subsequently fail to redistribute organisational power (e.g. van den Brink and Benschop, 2012a). Concurrently, as aforementioned, well-established perspectives and imbalanced power relations constrain gender policies' proper comprehension (Johansson et al., 2023). A reinforcing feedback loop between micro and meso level is created, where misconceptions about gender policies and organisational power dynamics feed into each other (R4) (Wynn, 2020).

2.5.2 Unintended consequences of organisational gender policies

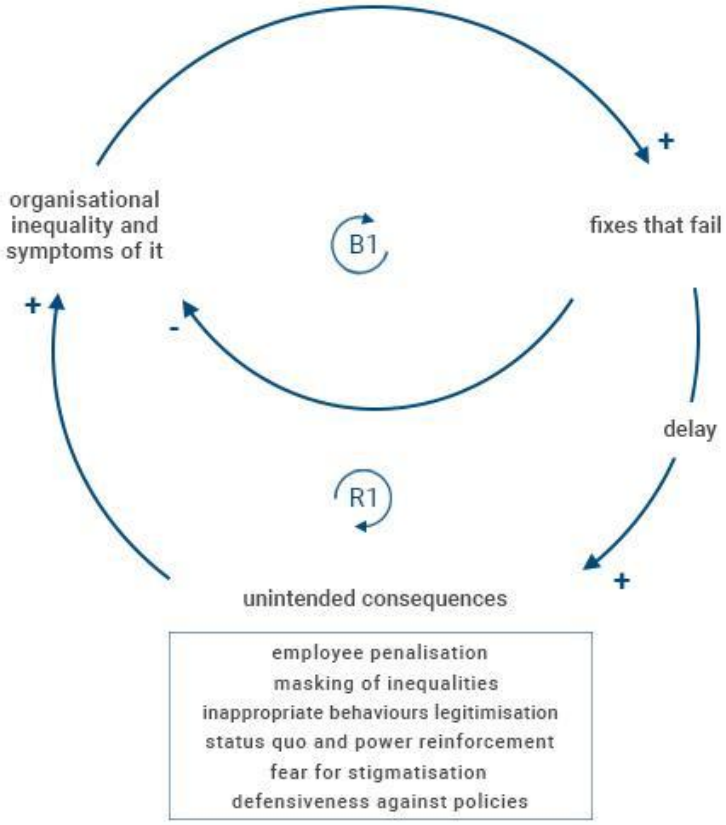
The study's themes and framework further encapsulate important insights into the unintended, adverse consequences of gender policies; these primarily revolve around the reinforcement of existing gender and power dynamics, thus perpetuating the organisational status quo. Despite their best intentions, gender policies shaped by traditional or anti-gender societal norms may inadvertently impact their recipients. For instance, Kronberg and Gerlach (2024) demonstrate how national norms around the motherhood penalty can undermine WLB policies, evoking wage penalties for employees who benefit from them. Additionally, the neoliberal framing of gender policies tends to prioritise business goals over gender equality, masking and legitimising inequalities (Yarrow and Davies, 2022) and reinforcing the status quo, such as through an unequal and gendered distribution of policy work (Yarrow and

Johnston, 2023; Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019). Intersectional implications are evident, with individuals from less privileged backgrounds more likely to experience the policies' adverse effects. Finally, non-context-based gender policies can strengthen existing power structures. Indicatively, routine organisational dynamics may perpetuate false assumptions about what is normal and acceptable, further entrenching imbalanced privilege distribution (Feldman and Pentland, 2022; Zhang, 2021).

Unintended consequences also extend to the emotional responses gender policies elicit among organisational members. Rather than fostering a safe and equitable environment empowering individuals, they can first evoke feelings of stigmatisation, especially in the case of affirmative action. For instance, women may be reluctant to engage with such policies, perceiving them as non-meritocratic and fearing that their use will damage their reputation (e.g. O'Brien et al., 2023; Bourabain and Verhaeghe, 2022). Then, symbolic training activities may elicit negative or defensive reactions among organisational members, rather than turning them into allies (Correll, 2017; Repelaer van Driel, 2015). Finally, employee voices may be silenced than amplified when gender policies adopt biased standpoints, due to the erosion of their trust in those policies (Campbell and Helleloid, 2023; Harris, 2017).

Drawing from the fixes that fail system archetype (Kim, 1992), Figure 2.5 illustrates the unintended consequences identified. This archetype suggests that a quick fix addresses the symptom of a problem rather than its root cause. While this fix may initially seem promising or temporarily alleviate the problem, it eventually results in unintended consequences which exacerbate the original problem. In this context, we illustrate that organisations aiming to address the problem of gender inequality and its various symptoms, such as unequal career progression, introduce gender policies. These, however, often act as fixes that fail due to a range of antecedent factors and in-between interdependencies. Although the policies may seem to mitigate organisational inequality in the short-term (balancing loop, B1), they trigger unintended consequences in the long-term. These consequences unfold over a long period of time and may take considerable time to manifest (system delay), but ultimately perpetuate the manifestation of inequality in various forms (reinforcing loop, R1).

Figure 2.5 Unintended consequences of gender policies



2.5.3 Moving forward with the CAS perspective and gender policies examination

While existing research has explored gender policies and their effectiveness under various perspectives, we extend the discussion by applying the innovative and so-far underutilised CAS approach at the intersection of complexity theory, systems thinking, and gender and organisation studies. We thereby respond to scholarly calls to account for multi-layered context and emergent causality in examining gender interventions (Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2020), successfully operationalising complexity for their rigorous examination (Bührer et al., 2020; Kalpazidou Schmidt and Ovseiko, 2020). Our approach is distinct in providing a nuanced integrative view of how gender policy ambivalent effectiveness emerges as a systemic property, shaped by multiple interdependencies and feedback loops across different levels of the organisational system. By adopting this approach, we move beyond prominent tendencies in management and organisation studies to focus on a single analytical level at a time (Tasic, Tantri and Amir, 2019; Mathieu and Chen, 2011; Syed and Özbilgin, 2009). Hence, the self-organisation and emergent causality within complex organisational systems

prove to be extremely significant and unpredictable in shaping gender policy effectiveness (Chandler et al., 2016). As Greenhalgh and Papoutsi (2018, p.3) argue, “emergent causality and multiple interacting influences account for a particular outcome but none can be said to have a fixed ‘effect size’”, highlighting the need for pragmatic adaptation to changing contexts and conditions. Our findings thus affirm the need for innovative, rather than reductionist, perspectives capable of accounting for the dynamic evolution of local settings (Kalpazidou Schmidt and Cacace, 2017).

In line with this argument, it is suggested that scholarly examination of gender policies should further embrace complexity and the many uncertainties it entails, opting for conjunctive theorising that eliminates the simplification of complex organisational phenomena (Tsoukas, 2017). The CAS perspective offers considerable contributions to comprehending organisational dynamics (Angeli and Montefusco, 2020), particularly explaining how gender policies unfold dynamically and often deviate from their intended outcomes - what Kalpazidou Schmidt and Graversen (2020, p. 1) also call the “black box” of policy interventions. CAS-driven theorising can thus capture the “logic of practice” (Tsoukas, 2017, p, 132) and provide valuable insights into addressing the wicked problem of organisational gender inequality which - as this review suggests - lacks a definitive solution and produces interventions with unpredictable consequences (Head and Alford, 2015; Rittel and Webber, 1973).

We further argue that practitioners and decision-makers aiming to address this wicked problem need to proactively integrate CAS elements into their policies. First, the adoption of emergent strategies can ensure that the importance of “strategic learning" and “unintended order” is acknowledged, to respond to emergent unexpected conditions (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985, p. 270-271), and address the system’s self-organisation (Montefusco and Angeli, 2024). Additionally, Montefusco and Angeli (2024), propose the notion of “dynamic preparedness” (p. 3) to leverage complexity in management practices. Building on their arguments, we suggest that organisations should educate their members, especially gender policy implementers, in CAS reasoning to become “dynamically prepared to re-contextualise knowledge from different experiences and domains” (ibid, p.7). In this way, existing knowledge, including gender knowledge, and a complexity-driven mindset can be harnessed to address unexpected obstacles around gender policies, preventing challenges from escalating into extreme, disruptive events.

Complementarily, we propose that gender policies adopt a dynamic implementation that supports the self-organisation of organisational systems. This would enable the flexible reconsideration of policy goals in response to evolving needs at all system levels; both individual and organisational priorities shift over the policy's lifespan due to various contextual factors, while social needs and imperatives also evolve, for instance refocusing between gender equality and DEI. Therefore, policy goals should serve as guiding principles rather than rigid rules. Additionally, dynamic implementation allows policies to treat system responses, such as feedback loops, as valuable information to refine planned actions and uncover new opportunities for effective implementation (Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2020). Collaboration among various organisational groups can also be valuable for operationalising complexity (Skivington et al., 2021b). We further argue that inclusive decision-making can support gender policies' dynamic implementation by capturing diverse stakeholder needs within the system. This is essential, since complex organisational phenomena, including gender equality (Benschop, 2021), are far from being unidimensional and homogenous (Tsoukas and Hatch, 2001).

Overall, a policy approach that combines emergent strategies, dynamic preparedness, and dynamic implementation acknowledges the importance of complexity and stimulates the "capacity to handle the unknown, the uncertain, the unpredictable and the emergent" (Greenhalgh and Papoutsi, 2018, p.5). Leveraging complex system dynamics in gender policies may support a different rationale than approaches attempting to manage organisational phenomena in supervised and controlled environments, where uncertainty is minimised (Packard and Clark, 2020a; 2020b). Still, it proves to be promising, resisting reductionist simplifications of organisational phenomena, and shifting the focus from reactive fallback plans to strategically leveraging the inevitable flux of the system.

2.5.4 Study limitations

Despite our efforts to conduct a thorough review, the final sample is inherently dependent on inclusion and exclusion criteria, and particularly the keyword selection. While using literature-driven keywords, some relevant papers may have been overlooked due to variations in keyword usage. Additionally, materials outside the selected databases may have been unintentionally excluded. To mitigate this, we employed cross-referencing and handsearching, retrieving additional academic papers. Finally, the CAS-driven examination of gender policies cannot fully eliminate the uncertainties present in complex systems (Moore et al., 2017). System archetypes and causal loop models cannot predict gender policy

effectiveness over the long term either (Osman et al., 2024), as CAS are continuously self-transforming.

2.6 Conclusions and future research directions

We conducted a systematic literature review on gender policy ambivalent effectiveness, analysing 180 papers published between 1995 and 2024. Using a CAS perspective, we developed a novel framework suggesting that policy ambivalent effectiveness results from the confluence of macro-, meso-, and micro-level antecedents, along with interdependencies and reinforcing feedback loops across system levels. Moreover, we identified unintended consequences of gender policies, often exacerbating the very problems they aimed to address.

Given the fragmented nature of research on gender policy effectiveness, characterised by varying disciplinary foci and isolated levels of analysis, our review consolidates existing knowledge to provide an integrative understanding of this phenomenon. Using CAS as an interpretive lens is crucial to avoiding blame and reductionist interpretations, enabling a deeper understanding of the complex, situated, intersectional, and multi-level dynamics underlying gender policy ambivalent effectiveness. Future empirical studies could test our framework and examine the interdependencies among the identified antecedents, with potential for contextualising it within specific societal settings, as our approach highlights macro-national dynamics and their impact on organisational pathways. The concept of policy mobilities by Ní Laoire et al. (2021) could provide valuable insights on this policy-practice interface, particularly on the macro-level enactment of broader policy ideas within meso-level organisational settings, and any deficits in situated adaptation.

Future investigation could similarly explore antecedents whose detrimental effects are perpetuated through reinforcing loops. For instance, decontextualised gender practices emerge as central to several loops. Syed and Özbilgin's (2009) relational and multi-level approach to diversity management could provide a valuable lens for examining gender policies and such persistent obstacles to their effectiveness. Framing policy enactment as a negotiated process between the objective and subjective dimensions of equality, this approach can reveal how interrelated structural, organisational, and agentic factors shape policy outcomes and effectiveness.

Concurrently, we advocate for an increased focus on the concept of doing gender (Martin, 2003; Gherardi, 1994). While existing research has provided valuable insights into gender as a social practice, its application in understanding the dynamics of gender policies, especially

emerging policy regimes, requires further exploration. Future inquiry could benefit from a deeper examination of both the gender we do and the gender we think. An interpretative approach to organisational culture (Strati, 1992) may prove particularly fruitful. It enables an integrative exploration of practices, interactions, values, symbols, and norms, and thus provides a robust framework for exploring especially complex interdependencies concentrated at the meso level. These insights could significantly inform the refinement of existing change strategies, and the introduction of new remedial practices (Gherardi, 1994).

The unintended consequences of gender policies similarly warrant further examination. Longitudinal studies could trace the systemic trajectories leading to such outcomes and explore CAS dynamics not fully addressed in this review, including path dependency and system delays. Acknowledging that unpredictable system dynamics cannot always be positively leveraged, we also propose further research into organisational responses to unintended consequences. Future inquiry could explore strategies for mitigating drifting gender goals that evoke adverse outcomes. Relevant emphasis could be on determining whether corrective actions, though time-consuming, or recalibration of initial goals, potentially at the expense of aspirational targets (Kim, 1992), yield more favourable results.

This study emphasises the importance of considering the multi-levelness, interdependencies, and emergent causality within systems that shape gender policies and their effectiveness. As Post et al. (2021) note, management studies should shift from merely examining inequality effects to interrogating the mechanisms that drive them. This review therefore advocates moving beyond conventional approaches to addressing the complex organisational dynamics associated with gender, in the hope to overcome the current impasse and stimulate significant and lasting systemic change through scholarship, policy and practice.

2.7 References

These are available under the thesis' full reference list.

Chapter 3. When obstacles are complex and systemic: exploring the effectiveness of Gender Equality Plans in Balkan academia

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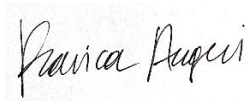
Signature of the co-author	
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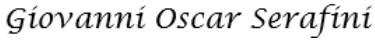
Signature of the co-author	
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Abstract

Persistent gender inequalities within universities have prompted the adoption of various gender equality policies, though their effectiveness and success remain ambivalent. Recent EU-level mandates have introduced Gender Equality Plans (GEPs), prompting further reflection due to their relative under-exploration and growing prominence. This study explores the perceived effectiveness of GEPs, through the specific case of GEPs implemented in Balkan academia. GEPs are conceptualised as complex interventions within gendered organisations, viewed as complex and adaptive systems. This approach enables a qualitative, systems-based process evaluation that examines how GEPs' implementation is experienced and perceived in terms of fidelity, including quality, and stakeholder reach. Data are drawn from semi-structured interviews with 42 employees and the secondary analysis of archival documents from seven universities in the Balkan region, specifically in Greece, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Our results reveal that GEPs' effectiveness to date is considered as rather ambivalent, and highlight complex and systemic barriers rooted in broader socio-political norms and local organisational culture, and the situated practice of gender. In particular, factors related to the socio-cultural environment, including the regulatory landscape, structural challenges, and university stakeholders and their dispositions towards GEPs, are viewed as significantly impeding GEPs' implementation and reach. These hindrances are compounded by non-linear interdependencies and activated feedback loops, which intensify their obstructive effects and overall limit GEPs' transformative potential. Ultimately, we articulate these interdependencies and loops within a refined programme theory specific to GEPs, which further functions as an integrative framework for understanding GEPs' operational logic and any accompanying tensions. Recommendations to enhance GEPs' meaningful progress are similarly provided, centred around addressing the contextual factors influencing their implementation, and accounting for the complex dynamics of universities. Finally, drawing from the strong influence of contextual factors on GEPs, this study suggests the need for a more nuanced view on organisational gender dynamics in non-colonial settings, beyond North-South dichotomies, to accommodate the epistemological value of diverse contexts.

3.1 Introduction

Research on gender dynamics within organisations has long been a focal point for management and organisation scholars. Nevertheless, achieving gender equality remains a challenge, with many policies proving ineffective in meeting their intended goals or, in some cases, producing counterproductive effects (Conzon, 2023). Academia, in particular, struggles with persistent gender disparities and ineffective policies, as universities are distinctly gendered institutions (Yarrow and Johnston, 2023). Progress in achieving gender equality goals is often ambiguous and slow due to meeting resistance (Bleijenbergh, 2022). Prominent critics also address the rise of postfeminist and neoliberal ideologies, which tend to equate female empowerment exclusively with career success. This emphasis on individualism (Knights and Clarke, 2014) diverts attention from structural inequalities and undermines collective efforts to address entrenched power imbalances (Utoft, 2021).

Despite extensive research on university gender equality policies, there are still questions on why some policies succeed and others fail in achieving their intended goals. While existing literature provides well-documented insights, there is a critical need for in depth-examinations of gender policy effectiveness in universities (Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2020). This need is further underscored by widely recognised gaps and inconsistent findings within organisational research (Xiao et al., 2020), alongside a scarcity of gradually emerging studies beyond Western-centric contexts (see, for example, Tzanakou et al., 2024; Rulli, 2022). Emerging calls similarly advocate for the recognition and operationalisation of the intrinsic complexity of university gender interventions (Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2020), which is essential for comprehending both their implementation and frequent deviation from their intended goals - often referred to as the "black-box" of gender interventions (Kalpazidou Schmidt and Graversen, 2020, p. 1)

Addressing this gap, this article aims to explore the factors underpinning the effectiveness of university gender policies, focusing on Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) as a gender policy mandated under the Horizon Europe (HE) scheme for universities in 2021 and in force since 2022. GEPs constitute a set of commitments and actions to promote gender equality within an organisation through an institutional change process (EC, 2021a). GEPs are also gaining increasing popularity across Europe (EU) and thus require further scrutiny regarding their heuristic potential for transformative change in academia(Cannito et al., 2023). We use a novel framework rooted in the theory of Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) and informed by

the theory of gendered organisations. This approach informs the conceptualisation of GEPs as complex interventions operating within gendered institutions, understood as CAS. It enables a qualitative systems-based process evaluation that defines GEPs' effectiveness as the extent to which they achieve their intended actions in real-world organisational settings, beyond binary notions of success and failure (Leslie et al., 2025; Skivington et al., 2021). Based on the study's interpretivist approach, GEPs' effectiveness is particularly approached based on organisational stakeholders' perceptions and lived experiences around these plans, including how those stakeholders make sense of and assign meanings to their implementation. Accordingly, we explore how GEPs' effectiveness is perceived in terms of fidelity (including quality), and reach of implementation. Fidelity of implementation refers to what is delivered by the intervention and how, while implementation reach addresses whether and how the intended stakeholder audience - university academic and non-academic staff, and students - comes into contact with and engages with the intervention (Moore et al., 2015, p.8). Particular attention is on identifying systemic and contextual factors, along with their interdependencies (in-between interactions), that are experienced as hindrances to the implementation process. This work adopts an instrumental case study approach (Stake, 1995), examining GEPs implemented in universities across the Balkan region, specifically in Greece, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). The Balkans offer a compelling case due to the region's under-exploration in organisational gender issues, its nascent progress on gender equality (Bojičić-Dželilović and Hozić, 2020), and its potential to advance our understanding of GEPs in institutional and cultural contexts that differ markedly from those typically examined in gender policy research. The study draws from 42 interviews with university employees and archival documents analysis from seven universities across these countries.

This study reveals that institutional structures, entrenched power dynamics, limited support mechanisms, and conservative societal norms within Balkan universities, alongside restrictive regulatory frameworks, can compromise the fidelity and quality of GEP implementation. Regarding implementation reach, findings highlight the negative effect of outdated communication practices, low awareness of gender issues, and stakeholder reluctance to engage actively. We further analyse the interdependencies among these hindering factors, which activate reinforcing feedback loops that exacerbate their restrictive effects. This integrative analysis allows for the development of a causal loop model that updates GEPs' programme theory, referring to how and why the intervention is expected to unfold and work

(Skivington et al., 2021b). Accordingly, this refined programme theory can function as a nuanced, integrative framework for further understanding the operational logics and inner workings of GEPs and the key role of the system's emergent causality and self-organisation.

Our analysis overall aims to provide valuable insights into potential obstacles and tensions inherent to GEPs, prioritising lived experiences around them. It moves beyond linear, reductionist approaches, engaging with the complexity of both GEPs and the systems in which they are embedded. In this way, we identify root causes that can underpin GEPs' ambivalent effectiveness (Amis et al., 2021) in an integrated, conjunctive manner, and ultimately refine existing assumptions concerning how GEPs can function. Concurrently, the study's conjunctive theorising provides a theoretical and methodological blueprint for advancing efforts to understand the value and transformative potential of interventions addressing gender inequality in academia more broadly. Finally, the focus on the under-explored Balkan academia contributes to illustrating additional, contextual peculiarities pertaining to these policies, thus maximising our learning on their progression pathways and perceived effectiveness. By examining major equality and inclusion challenges in this region, this study also suggests the value of expanding emerging knowledge beyond Western-centric frameworks (Banerjee, 2021; Hamann et al., 2020) and typical North-South dichotomies.

3.2 Problematising university gender policies and GEPs

Over the past two decades, universities have introduced various policies to foster gender equality (Clavero and Galligan, 2021), defined as the equal access to or enjoyment of rights and opportunities in organisational settings (EIGE, 2016a). In this section we highlight key policy interventions, notably including Athena SWAN as a precursor to GEPs (Cannito et al., 2023). We further examine GEPs across Europe, focusing on their reported ability to achieve the target goals and perceived effectiveness, and challenges encountered so far. Insights are finally provided into GEPs in Balkan academia, complemented by a broader overview of gender dynamics specifically in Greece, Serbia, and BiH.

3.2.1 Key university gender policies

Prominent interventions within university settings addressing organisational inequalities firstly include Diversity, Equity, Inclusion (DEI) policies, which target a range of inequality dimensions including gender (Pizarro Milian and Wijesingha, 2023; Thatcher et al., 2023; Yadam and Lenka, 2020). Other interventions also focus on specific gender-related challenges faced by organisational members, especially women, such as work-life balance

(Huppatz et al., 2019), unequal career progression (Forman-Rabinovici et al., 2023; Bourabain and Verhaeghe, 2021; Voorspoels and Bleijenbergh, 2019; Kossek et al., 2017; van den Brink and Benschop, 2012b), and sexual harassment (Harris, 2017).

The UK-based Athena SWAN has further attracted scholarly attention alongside critical scrutiny. While being the most comprehensive gender scheme in European universities (Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2020), it has been critiqued for lacking a proactive intersectional design (Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019; Ovseiko et al., 2017), and demonstrating limited impact even in increasing female representation and showcasing quantitative improvements (O'Connor, 2019). Scholars argue that the scheme tends to promote moderate feminist practices that may favour compliance and superficial documentation rather than stimulating meaningful feminist dialogue and substantial organisational change (Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019). Situated at the intersection of postfeminism and neoliberalism, Athena SWAN has been further criticised as a form of "institutional peacocking", whereby gender measures serve performative rather than transformative purposes (Yarrow and Johnston, 2023, p. 757). Finally, Athena SWAN has been observed to perpetuate a gendered division of labour. In such cases, women and minority groups bear the bulk of bureaucratic responsibilities without adequate recognition (Yarrow and Johnston, 2023; Drew, 2022; Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019; Ovseiko et al., 2017), while male colleagues often receive more public acknowledgement as champions of gender equality initiatives (Nash et al., 2020).

3.2.2 The case of Gender Equality Plans

Europe has recently implemented its own gender policies within universities, often drawing upon advancements made in the UK and the US (Pereira, 2017). Following numerous concerns about neoliberal influences on universities, and after years of prioritising gender equality within the European Research Area through strategies and national-level reforms, the EU launched GEPs as an institutionalised gender policy in 2021 (Cannito et al., 2023). In 2015, the European Institute for Gender Equality introduced the GEAR (Gender Equality in Academia and Research) tool to support academic and research institutions in achieving institutional change through GEPs (EIGE, 2016b). Subsequently, the Horizon 2020 funding programme (2014-2020) issued calls for proposals aimed at the development of GEPs. Horizon Europe (HE) (2021-2027) later established an eligibility criterion requiring universities and research organisations to have a GEP in place to qualify for HE funding (EC, 2021a).

GEPs remain a relatively under-examined policy, especially since their adoption as an eligibility criterion for HE participation (Cannito et al., 2023). The limited studies addressing GEPs stress concerns about their neoliberal framing and their financially-driven adoption, and further note that the plans themselves are heavily influenced by institutional power interests (Clavero and Galligan, 2021). Another concern is the absence of gender experts in GEPs' development, particularly in institutions that are only now adopting such policies (Thomson et al., 2022); as Lombardo and Bustelo (2022) argue, the lack of gender expertise can compromise the clarity and relevance of the measures included in the plans. This issue is especially evident in regions where gender studies are less established, such as Eastern Europe (Krzaklewska et al., 2023). Without robust gender expertise, GEPs may struggle to mobilise institutional support (Anagnostou, 2023), and, where such experts exist - though few in number - they may face scepticism from organisational members, who perceive them as "self-made specialists" (Tăriceanu, 2022, p. 131).

Furthermore, GEPs often build on best practices, which raise questions about their transferability. Scholars argue that such practices may lack contextual adaptation, resulting in a decoupling between policy and practice (Ní Laoire et al., 2021). It is thus recommended that GEPs consider contextual specificities, including the specific gender cultures and organisational histories that shape understandings of gender inequality and desired change (ibid). Additionally, national and local contexts appear to exert a strong influence (Brancato, Gianturco and Nocenzi, 2025; Zabaniotou et al., 2021). National culture in particular is highly influential in determining GEP effectiveness, especially in settings with strong conservative norms (Rosa and Clavero, 2020; Latti, 2017). For instance, Cannito et al. (2023) emphasise the prominent influence of state politics and religion, such as the Catholic Church in Italy, where traditional norms can lead to a limited conceptualisation of gender, and prevent GEPs from incorporating intersectional goals (Picardi et al., 2023). Additionally, neoliberal narratives in Turkey challenge GEPs' sustainability (Göker and Polatdemir, 2022), while anti-gender discourses narrow down the inclusive character of GEPs (ibid); as O'Neil (2023) exemplifies, anti-gender rhetoric legitimises stereotypical fixing-the-women approaches, assuming they should work harder to advance their careers. A disproportionate focus on awareness-raising rather than structural measures may further perpetuate assumptions that gender inequality mostly stems from a lack of awareness, thereby unintentionally devalue other sources of inequality (O'Neil, 2023), such as power relations

within academia and epistemic injustice in the construction of scientific excellence (Clavero and Galligan, 2021).

Lombardo and Bustelo (2022) provide additional insights into implementing a protocol against sexual harassment embedded within the GEP of a Spanish university. Collaboration with university equality units proves valuable, particularly for alliance-building. However, coordinating responses to sexual harassment at decentralised levels (e.g., faculty level) is challenging due to the unit's primary focus on gender mainstreaming at the central level. Additional obstacles include a lack of understanding or bias within the academic community regarding sexual harassment. Such biased perspectives normalise these harmful practices, leading to hesitation to use the GEP's reporting protocol in everyday academic life. Tildesley et al. (2022) provide similar insights on reluctance encountered during GEP implementation in the Spanish context, stemming from biases against feminist perspectives and concerns that affirmative measures may compromise meritocracy. They further report that a lack of resources and dedicated units for GEP implementation causes delays in the planned timeline, observed both in Spanish and Italian academia (ibid; Chamochumbi Diaz et al., 2024). As Krzaklewska et al. (2023) observe, inadequate resource allocation can overall create a sense that GEPs are not a priority for the organisation, thereby undermining their legitimacy.

Finally, given the disproportionate focus of GEPs on soft measures (O'Neil, 2023), and their frequent tendency to meet only the minimum requirements for HE eligibility (Karydou, 2024), scholars highlight the imperative for GEP implementation to advance beyond measures such as awareness-raising and capitalise on inclusive governance and participatory processes to maximise progress towards change (Brescianini et al., 2023). In addition to structural measures, GEPs' monitoring and evaluation are also frequently neglected, as shown by evidence from the broader Mediterranean region (Zabaniotou et al., 2021). Concerns about inadequate GEP assessment existed even before their introduction as an HE eligibility criterion (ibid). In fact, as Karydou (2024) notes, the absence of concrete procedures and mechanisms for monitoring implementation against specific indicators is common, even after the HE mandate. There remains a pressing need for systematic and well-founded monitoring and evaluation of GEPs (Thomson et al., 2022; Palmen and Kalpazidou Scmidt, 2019), taking into account local dynamics and developments (Kalpazidou Scmidt and Cacace, 2019; 2017).

3.2.3 The case of Balkans: gender dynamics and GEPs

Progress in gender mainstreaming in the Balkans, including at organisational level, is rather slow (Anagnostou, 2023; Bojičić-Dželilović and Hozić, 2020). In Greece, the 2007-2008 global economic crisis exacerbated inequalities (Daskalaki, Fotaki and Simosi, 2021); austerity measures entrenched poor employment conditions, marked by low wages, job insecurity, and increased workloads (Giorgi, Shoss and Leon-Perez, 2015) particularly among younger and older women employees (Anastasiou, Filippidis and Stergiou, 2015). Male dominance in the workplace was further reinforced, largely due to enduring patriarchal norms (Karamessini, 2016). Currently, despite progressive regulatory frameworks like the National Action Plan for Gender Equality (2021–2025) and laws promoting gender mainstreaming, implementation gaps remain and inequalities persist, also in the higher education sector. Notably, universities still perpetuate unequal career progression and exclude women from high-authority positions (Anagnostou, 2023), while legislative support is perceived as rather technocratic, maximising gender inequalities (Lalou, 2020).

Regarding Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), belonging to the broader Western Balkan region, they underwent a post-Yugoslav war transition crisis around the 2000s. In Serbia, this led to reductions in employee earnings, precarious work contracts, and diminished trade union representation (Vujošević, Zeković and Maričić, 2012). Nonetheless, Psychogios et al. (2019) also observe modest improvements in Serbian workplaces, with efforts to balance working relationships in response to the country's prolonged economic challenges. Regarding current national-level legislation, it addresses gender equality in the labour market including in the higher education sector. For instance, the Law on Higher Education mandates balanced gender representation in decision-making bodies and supports caregiving responsibilities, while the National Strategy for the Promotion of Gender Equality (2016-2020) aims to advance gender-sensitive education. However, scholars report superficial efforts to address gender discrimination in Serbian universities, often neglecting issues such as gender-inclusive language and incorporation of gender-related provisions within broader university policies, reflecting their de-prioritisation (Delibasic, Drasko and Fickett, 2018). As Ćeriman and Vučković Juroš (2024) further note, Serbia's traditional family model continues to bolster anti-gender movements that endorse heteronormativity and conservative views against gender and sexuality rights, overall hindering progress in this area.

In BiH, proactive attempts to establish gender equality legislation prior to EU pressures encountered limited domestic support (Janichen, 2011). Additionally, national gender policies were often perceived as superficial instances of Europeanisation under the "shadow of EU membership conditionality" - as in the entire Western Balkan area (Jenichen, 2011, p.155) - and were compounded by persistent gender stereotypes, discrimination, and patriarchal norms (UN Women, 2017). This resulted in a "problematic" implementation (Janichen, 2011, p. 156), encouraging limited female representation in leadership positions and systematic discrimination in the workplace. The latest gender equality barometer for BiH notes, though, the profound and positive transformation of the country. This has been fostered through formal and informal education and recent reforms (Spahić Šiljak and Đipa, 2024), such as the Law on Gender Equality that mandates gender mechanisms in educational institutions and encourages gender dimension integration into curricula. Still, there is a notable feminisation of positions and disciplines in Bosnian educational institutions (ibid).

Proceeding to GEPs within Balkan universities, the insights available are rather limited. Regarding Greek universities, Karydou (2024) argues that patriarchal norms obstruct efforts to raise awareness on gender issues, hindering the creation of a supportive organisational culture vital for GEP implementation. Additionally, a lack of gender expertise and the workload of those involved in GEPs contribute to delays in implementing planned actions. GEP measures further tend to focus primarily on women as the main target group, overlooking intersecting inequalities and other university populations. These measures are also seen as stand-alone initiatives lacking national support (Anagnostou, 2023), aimed primarily at EU compliance, with a need for additional state support often highlighted (Karydou, 2024). Analysis of GEP strategic documents further reveals a predominance of tokenistic measures that may fail to challenge the status quo (Sant-Geronikolou, 2023). This issue is further compounded by the frequent absence of coherent evaluation mechanisms (Karydou, 2024) and an over-reliance on quantitative indicators (Sant-Geronikolou, 2023).

Then, Caprile et al. (2022) identify several challenges throughout GEPs' lifecycle in Serbian academia. The non-systematic collection of gender-disaggregated data, combined with a broader absence of concrete measures to support gender equality interventions (Petrušić and Vujadinović, 2018), has led to significant data gaps complicating the development of context-specific GEP measures. Furthermore, resource constraints prevent the creation of dedicated positions for GEP implementation. The authors emphasise that support from top university

management is essential to ensure the success of GEPs, although frequent changes in leadership hinder long-term commitment to plans' implementation (Caprile et al., 2022).

As for GEPs in Bosnian academia, there are limited insights available in existing literature. Nevertheless, a study conducted by Spahić Šiljak, Kovačević and Husanović (2022) identifies several obstacles to the broader gender mainstreaming efforts in Bosnian universities. Most students and staff are not aware whether there are concrete policy mechanisms in place addressing GBV, thus reflecting that universities lack an inclusive culture to enable awareness and dialogue on these issues (ibid).

3.3 Theoretical framework of the study

As gradually stressed by relevant literature, GEPs across Europe and in Balkan countries encounter significant obstacles potentially undermining their goal to promote gender equality in university settings. To explore in depth how GEPs effectiveness is perceived and experienced and especially delineate the factors that can shape and affect their implementation, we employ an innovative framework grounded in gendered organisations theory, CAS theory, and complex interventions' analytical foundations. As outlined next, this has enabled us to adopt a holistic but also fine-grained approach accounting for the intricate dynamics of the systems where these policies operate.

3.3.1 Universities as gendered organisations

Systematically framed as gendered organisations, universities are reported to (re)produce inequalities at multiple levels (Laursen and De Welde, 2019). They often uphold masculine norms and sexism manifestations (Yarrow and Davies, 2024), and marginalise intersectional identities (Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019). Gendered power distributions are also evident, with micro-politics and networks exacerbating organisational inequalities (Yarrow, 2021; Van Den Brink and Benschop, 2012b). These patterns are often compounded by academic leaders' limited action on gender equality issues, also due to their limited understanding of the organisational sources of gender inequality (Cuthbert et al., 2023). Therefore, to understand in depth how university dynamics influence GEPs' unfolding and implementation in practice (Poggio, 2006; Martin, 2003), Acker's theory of gendered organisations (1990) has served as a critical lens.

This perspective acknowledges the multiplicity of elements and the complexity of organisational culture hindering equality. It enables the consideration of gender as practice

(Gherardi, 1994), building on the influential work of West and Zimmerman (1987), who conceptualise gender as a socially constructed phenomenon. This view holds a prominent role in feminist theory and is complemented by Butler's (1990) argument that gender is performative and materialised through social actions, everyday acts, and the reiteration of cultural and gender norms. In the organisational context, as organisations constitute cultural artefacts (Gherardi and Strati, 1990), they embody both the "gender we do" (e.g., interactional and institutional behaviours) and the "gender we think" (e.g., values, symbols, ideologies), which reinforce or mitigate inequalities in gendered organisational environments (Gherardi, 1994, p. 593). This holistic approach thus allows for an analysis beyond specific, isolated organisational variables. Instead, it focuses on the situated enactment of gender practices (Gherardi and Poggio, 2001) within university systems, and ultimately allows us to focus on the interdependencies and influence of various formal and informal elements on GEPs.

3.3.2 Complex adaptive systems and complex interventions

In relation to gender equality-related interventions, scholars increasingly stress the imperative for a paradigm shift away from linear thinking (Kalpazisou Schmidt and Ovseiko, 2020) to more fully capture and operationalise the interventions' inherent complexity (Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2020). This is in alignment with the overall need to acknowledge the inherent complexity of organisational life (Tsoukas, 2017; Tsoukas and Dooley, 2011), and the intricate nature of organisations themselves (Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2020; Allen, Maguire and McKelvey, 2011). As Tsoukas (2017) argues, moving beyond disjunctive and reductionist theorising is vital to avoid oversimplification of organisational phenomena. Accordingly, the present study conceptualises GEPs as complex interventions occurring within gendered universities, which themselves function as complex and adaptive systems (CAS). This approach enables a qualitative systems-based process evaluation. This foregrounds organisational policy discourses and especially organisational stakeholders' multifaceted views, experiences, and interpretations of policy interventions; in doing so, it examines how the system and its emergent interdependencies influence the intervention (Patton, 2014), and ultimately shape its perceived effectiveness (Skivington et al., 2021b). While there is widespread acknowledgement that CAS provide a suitable framework for social sciences research (Stacey, 2007), complex interventions have predominantly been applied to examine public health interventions and socio-economic policies (McGill et al., 2020). Only recently this approach has been extended to encompass gender equality interventions, such as Athena

SWAN, and even then, it has been largely limited to medical settings (Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2020).

3.3.3 Complex interventions as events in CAS

Complex interventions are distinguished by their inherent complexity, stemming from both their characteristics and the dynamics of the system within which they are implemented. As Skivington et al. (2021b, p. xxi) note:

> An intervention is conceived to be complex either (1) because of the characteristics of the intervention itself, for example multiple components, and/or (2) because how the intervention generates outcomes is dependent on exogenous factors, including the characteristics of recipients, and/or the context or system within which it is implemented.

In the present study, we acknowledge that both parameters shape the complexity of GEPs but prioritise "the dynamic properties of the context into which the intervention is introduced" (Hawe et al., 2009, p. 267). In doing so, we recognise that GEPs possess several features typical of complex interventions, such as multiple components, but we predominantly conceptualise them as events within systems rather than as an aggregation of decontextualised, isolated components (Hawe et al., 2009). This systemic framing of GEPs allows for a more nuanced focus on the organisational and broader surrounding context.

Furthermore, we conceptualise the universities where GEPs are implemented as CAS. Derived from General Systems theory (Simon, 1996), the CAS perspective transcends reductionist approaches, positing that systems are open, co-evolving, and continuously adapting to their wider environment (McGill et al., 2020). CAS and their multiple constituent elements are therefore dynamic and self-organising. Notably, this continuous process of self-organisation and adaptation does not conform to conventional transformation rules (Tsoukas, 2017). Thus, interventions introduced into such systems, such as GEPs, evoke complex and often unpredictable responses (Chandler et al., 2016).

The elements of a CAS further exhibit complex and nonlinear interdependencies. These can be partial; not all elements necessarily interact with one another, and input-output exchanges can occur locally among specific elements (Miller and Page, 2008). Such interactions contribute to the system's emergent causality, which gives rise to system-level properties and outcomes (Finegood et al., 2014; Walton, 2014). Notably, these emergent properties and

outcomes are highly unpredictable, as they do not simply represent the sum of the system's parts (Hawe et al., 2009). As Greenhalgh and Papoutsi (2018) note, "emergent causality and multiple interacting influences account for a particular outcome but none can be said to have a fixed 'effect size'", thereby necessitating "a pragmatic adaptation to changing contexts and emerging circumstances" (p. 3). It is finally noted that input-output exchanges within the system are either reinforced or balanced by certain mechanisms known as feedback loops (Anderson, 1999). Reinforcing (positive) loops, amplify changes in one direction, resulting in either exponential growth or rapid decline. Conversely, balancing (negative) loops counteract change in one direction with an opposite influence (Cavana and Mares, 2004), thus working to maintain a desired equilibrium within the system. As Kim (1992) notes, the effect of feedback loops may occasionally take time to manifest, causing system delays.

It is important to note that CAS also encompass foundational concepts such as tipping points and path dependency. However, we have selectively focused on the concepts of self-organisation, emergent causality, interdependencies, feedback loops, and system delays for pragmatic reasons. As Petticrew et al. (2019) argue, it is essential to set system boundaries, since attempting to examine the system in its entirety is not feasible.

3.3.4 Qualitative systems-based process evaluation

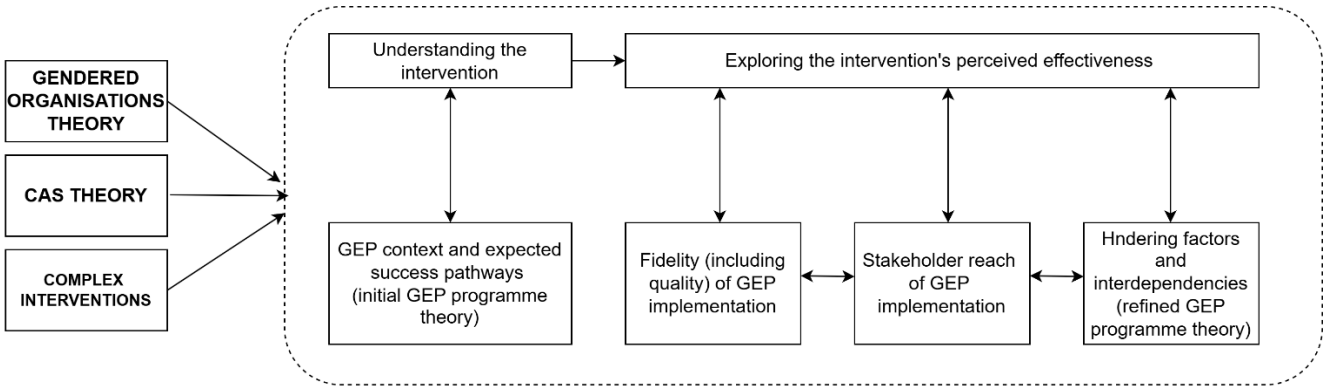
Addressing GEPs as complex interventions within CAS, we conduct a qualitative systems-based process evaluation. Process evaluation "(...) can answer questions around the fidelity and quality of the implementation (what is implemented and how?), mechanisms of change (how does the delivered intervention produce change?), and context (how does context affect implementation?)" (Skivington et al., 2021a, p.11). Notably, the guidance on process evaluation of complex interventions (Moore et al., 2015) stresses that implementation fidelity inherently encompasses quality, as there is an increasing need to understand both what is delivered and how it is delivered in context - hence we adopt the term implementation fidelity hereafter. Additionally, the process evaluation of implementation often encompasses the interventions' stakeholder reach, defined as "the extent to which the intended audience comes into contact with the intervention" (Moore et al., 2015, p. 8). Unlike other forms of evaluation, such as summative and outcome evaluation, process evaluation provides a detailed examination of the factors shaping an intervention and thus contributing to its effectiveness or ineffectiveness, rather than focusing exclusively on the impacts achieved (McGill et al., 2020; Tsiachristas and Rutten-van Mölken, 2017). Importantly, it further allows the prioritisation of qualitative data, acknowledging their unique value to shedding

light to the inner, intimate workings of interventions (Skivington et al., 2021b; McGill et al., 2020). Qualitative process evaluations can overall reveal varying, multifaceted stakeholder experiences with the intervention (Moore et al., 2015), and thus capture intimate dynamics that otherwise might remain unexplored (Gear, Eppel and Koziol-Mclain, 2018). As for systems-based process evaluation, it constitutes a distinct research perspective that integrates CAS principles throughout. This approach focuses on complex pathways when investigating mechanisms of change (Moore et al., 2015), including system's interdependencies, feedback loops and resulting influences on the intervention (Bicket et al., 2020).

Therefore, we explore how GEPs' effectiveness is experienced and perceived by qualitatively examining their implementation, encompassing fidelity and stakeholder reach (Moore et al., 2015). Based on rich qualitative insights around institutional policy discourses, and university members' realities and views around the GEPs, we specifically examine the dynamic interactions that exist within the university systems; we identify and explore contextual system elements, interdependencies, and feedback loops that shape emergent causality around gender as practice and ultimately influence the GEPs (Patton, 2014) and their potential to meet the desired pathways (Skivington et al., 2021b).

Finally, considering that before analysing in depth a complex intervention, it is essential to gain an in-depth understanding of its context and expected progression pathways, we developed an initial programme theory for the GEPs (Moore et al., 2015). Context encompasses the conditions under which interventions are formulated, implemented, and assessed, including the immediate organisational and broader environment potentially influencing them (Craig et al., 2018; Moore et al., 2015). Accordingly, we examined and outlined in this programme theory GEPs' formulation process, predefined implementation framework and multiple implementation components, monitoring and evaluation provisions, key stakeholders, and overarching goals. The GEPs' expected pathways – revealed to be largely linear - was later refined based on the study's qualitative findings on perspectives and experiences with the GEPs, and resulted in an updated programme theory presented in the form of a causal loop model. The model additionally captures specific contextual factors, interdependencies among them, and feedback loops that can negatively influence the intervention in a non-linear way, occasionally with a delay. Such a refined programme theory overall offers scholars and decision-makers a deeper understanding of the intervention (Skivington et al., 2021b). Figure 3.1 summarises the study's theoretical approach and the nested components of the systems-based analysis.

Figure 3.1 The theoretical approach of the study



Note: The two-way arrows indicate the nested components of GEPs' examination, where the one iteratively informs the other to gain the final insights.

3.4 Methodology

An instrumental case study was conducted, building on the collection of data from semi-structured interviews and archival documents, afterwards analysed through thematic analysis. Details on the data sources, collection methods, participant sampling techniques and the employed thematic analysis approach are outlined below.

3.4.1 Instrumental case study approach

To examine GEPs in depth and especially gain intimate insights on perceptions and lived experiences around them, we conducted an instrumental case study, guided by Stake's (1995) interpretivist approach. Our case study focused on gaining a better understanding of those plans perceived effectiveness through the specific case of newly introduced GEPs within Balkan academia. The Balkan academia has been selected as an underexplored, thus rather unusual case, contrasting with the typical, predominant Western-centric studies on organisational gender policies. As Stake (1995) highlights "sometimes, a typical case works well, but often an unusual case helps illustrate matters we overlook in typical cases" (p. 4). Thus, we have considered that the Balkan region, including its institutions, provide a considerable opportunity to enrich our understanding of GEPs through novel insights, given both their emerging and now mandated progress in gender equality, and their differentiated ties with Europe.

Proceeding further, we set boundaries to the case study (Stake, 1995) by selecting specific Balkan countries and universities for data collection. Data were collected from three countries - Greece, Serbia, and BiH - chosen to maximise understanding through balance and variety (ibid); while all these countries are located in the Balkan region, they have divergent

relationships with the EU, reflecting different socio-economic and political landscapes. Greece is the first Balkan country to acquire full EU membership. Serbia is a leading candidate in EU accession negotiations, and BiH was a potential EU candidate at the time of the study.

The selection of these countries over others with the same EU status, as well as the specific universities included in the study, was guided both by practical considerations (institutional and participant anonymity) and analytical value (potential to acquire rich data). Serbia was chosen over Montenegro to preserve the anonymity of participating universities; the limited number of universities in Montenegro could make participants more readily identifiable. Greece was then selected over other Balkan EU Member States, such as Bulgaria or Romania, due to its notably low ranking on the EIGE Equality Index at the time of case selection. According to this Index, Greece had the lowest equality index among EU Member States in 2022, making it a particularly compelling case for examination. Finally, BiH was selected instead of Kosovo (this designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999); Bosnian public universities have a larger size, thereby facilitating data collection and ensuring greater participant anonymity. This selection further aligns with the criteria used to determine which specific universities would provide the study's data. Apart from selecting public universities that necessarily adopted GEPs due to their involvement in HE funding programs, university size was the additional criterion, acting as an indicator of systemic diversity (Lepori, Bornmann and de Moya Anegón, 2023). Larger universities were prioritised due to their reported active engagement with societal issues (Nejati et al., 2011), capacity to provide comprehensive data, and ability to enhance participant anonymity. Among the largest universities in each country, those identified as more active on gender issues, based on a detailed screening of their institutional websites and public materials, were selected to ensure analytical depth. Ultimately, data were collected by seven universities: three universities in Greece, two in Serbia, and two in BiH. The study and all its procedures received ethical approval by the authors' institutional ethics committee.

3.4.2 Data collection

We collected publicly available archival data from each university to capture institutional policy discourses, such as GEP policy documents, separate reports on GEPs' formulation and audit procedures, records on the institutional functions of Gender Equality Bodies, organisational reports on gender progress, and institutional statements on equality commitments. Nine reports were in the institutions' local language (eight in Greek and one in

Serbian); these were translated forwards and backwards using a translation tool (Google translate), with the Greek documents further reviewed manually by the first author. In total, 25 organisational documents were examined. Additionally, between May 2023 and February 2024, the first author conducted 42 semi-structured interviews with university members across all institutions to capture their detailed perceptions and rich experiences. The interview questions invited participants to reflect upon and discuss their involvement in the GEP, their views on its formulation and implementation, and their perceptions of the GEP measures. Questions were deliberately broad and open-ended to minimise bias, and encourage participants to express their thoughts openly. This approach especially allowed participants to elaborate on their personal sensemaking and interpretations of their university GEP. In this way, the open-ended format of the questions aligns with the interpretivist, qualitative framework of this study, which emphasises participants' experiences and the meanings they attribute to them (Patton, 2014) while further preserving the case's situated context (Denzin, 2010).

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit interviewees from the following groups: top management representatives, gender policy implementers, and gender policy recipients (including research and teaching staff, administrative staff, and PhD students employed as teaching assistants). This sampling yielded a varied participant distribution across the three countries, with slightly more Greek participants, as the researcher's Greek background enhanced willingness to contribute (see Table 3.1 for a detailed presentation of data sources and participants' distribution). Interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom, with durations ranging from 25 to 68 minutes. Thirty interviews were conducted in English, and twelve in Greek allowing some participants greater comfort in expressing themselves, especially those not being fluent in English. Reflections and observations were documented after each interview, adding further input to the data analysis. Recordings were transcribed using MS Word dictate and transcription functions, and manually checked. To ensure accuracy and equivalence in meaning, Greek transcripts underwent forward and backward translation using the translation option in MS Word.

Table 3.1 Data sources distribution

Country	Participants distribution	Documents distribution
Greece	Top management representatives: 4 Policy implementers: 11 Policy recipients: 7 *Total: 22 participants* *(16 women, 6 men)*	13 documents
Serbia	Top management representatives: 1 Policy implementers: 4 Policy recipients: 7 *Total: 12 participants* *(11 women, 1 man)*	7 documents
BiH	Top management representatives: 2 Policy implementers: 4 Policy recipients: 2 *Total: 8 participants* *(7 women, 1 man)*	5 documents

Note: Participants did not explicitly self-identify themselves as cis/trans woman and man. The categories "woman" and "man" thus reflect participants' gender based on self-reference and/or observable expression during interviews.

3.4.3 Data analysis

Data analysis took place concurrently with data collection. Data were coded in NVivo and analysed through reflexive thematic analysis (TA) (Braun and Clarke, 2019). TA is "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Reflexive TA is a distinct TA approach that highly values qualitative data, enhancing researcher reflexivity and subjectivity as integral to the analytic process rather than as biases to be minimised (Braun and Clarke, 2021; 2019). The researcher followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Archival documents and

interview transcripts were reviewed multiple times by the researcher to ensure a thorough familiarisation with the data before coding.

Data from all countries and institutions were coded together to focus on the single case while further interpreting and preserving nuanced and contextual happenings, and the multiple realities of the actors participating in the study. A predominantly inductive and latent coding approach was applied. This prioritises meanings derived directly from the data and the respondents, while also identifying underlying assumptions within the data. Initial codes were reviewed iteratively, occasionally merged with one another, to form the final themes. It is also noted that three groups of themes were developed. The first group encompassed logistics themes, capturing mostly descriptive details and specificities about the GEPs' goals, their formulation, their content, planned implementation (including stakeholders involved), and foreseen monitoring and evaluation. In this way, they collectively provided input for understanding the GEPs as interventions and articulating their initial programme theory. The archival documents and relevant institutional policy narratives provided the main information about these themes, complemented by some additional details provided by the interviewees. Then, the second group of themes addressed GEPs' fidelity of implementation under a more "interpretative level of analysis" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 93) and focused on the hindering factors encountered. Similarly, the third group of themes focused on GEPs' reach and associated obstacles. The second and third group of themes predominantly drew from the interview data and thus organisational actors' experiences and perspectives around GEPs' implementation; some information and insights on organisational contexts and long-lasting, persistent obstacles to gender equality efforts were also provided by the archival documents, thus adding further contextual grounding to the analysis.

Furthermore, the final themes on GEPs' implementation fidelity and reach underwent a second stage of analysis. This entailed the further interpretation of the themes, codes, and meanings they encapsulated so as to identify links between them and thus interdependencies between the hindering factors identified (Thomas, 2006), to be included in the causal loop model. Therefore, the researcher (first author) revisited the data coded under each theme to examine and interpret how participants articulated relations between different hindering factors. Particular focus was also placed on discourse markers potentially signalling links and associations between information pertaining to those factors (Lansu et al., 2019), such as conjunctions (e.g. "and") and subordinations (e.g. "since", "which"). These patterns ultimately informed the identification of relations between the themes; these relations were

turned into directional arrows in the causal loop model, with positive polarity (“+”). As for the feedback loops, these were included in the model in cases where interviewees’ accounts suggested reinforcing, circular dynamics between hindering factors. It is noted that occasionally participants explicitly articulated such dynamics centred around GEPs. However, in most cases and given the frequently unstructured nature of oral communication, these were identified through the in-depth interpretation of the interview data beyond surface-level meanings and additional triangulation among several interviewee accounts (Sterman, 2000).

Overall, this interpretative process concluded the thematic analysis, providing both data-driven and theoretically-informed insights. Being primarily inductive but also driven by the CAS lens and the foundational concepts of non-linear interdependencies and feedback loops, it enabled the development of a refined programme theory for GEPs in the form of a causal loop model, functioning as an integrative framework for further understanding GEPs’ and their operational logic .

3.5 GEP context and expected progression pathways: initial programme theory

The narrative synthesis of the first group of themes (logistics themes) articulates GEPs’ context and expected progression pathways. To begin with, the examined GEPs marked the first adoption of institutionalised gender equality policies for most universities. In five of the examined universities, the GEPs listed 2022 as their start date. One university initiated its GEP in 2023, following the implementation of a preparatory plan adopted for 2022. Another university was in the process of developing its second GEP while still implementing the first, which had been in effect since 2018, prior to the HE mandate. Aligned with the HE recommendations, the examined GEPs aim to promote gender equality and transform the institutions by addressing both organisational processes and cultures, as well as organisational members’ values and assumptions about gender (EC, 2021a).

The GEPs were formulated after comprehensive audits, often being universities’ first major effort to collect extensive gender-related data. Historical data were compiled (e.g., gender representation per academic rank) and, in some instances, additional data were gathered through surveys, interviews, and focus groups. Based on each institution’s needs and challenges identified, the HE requirements were then adapted to suit each university’s

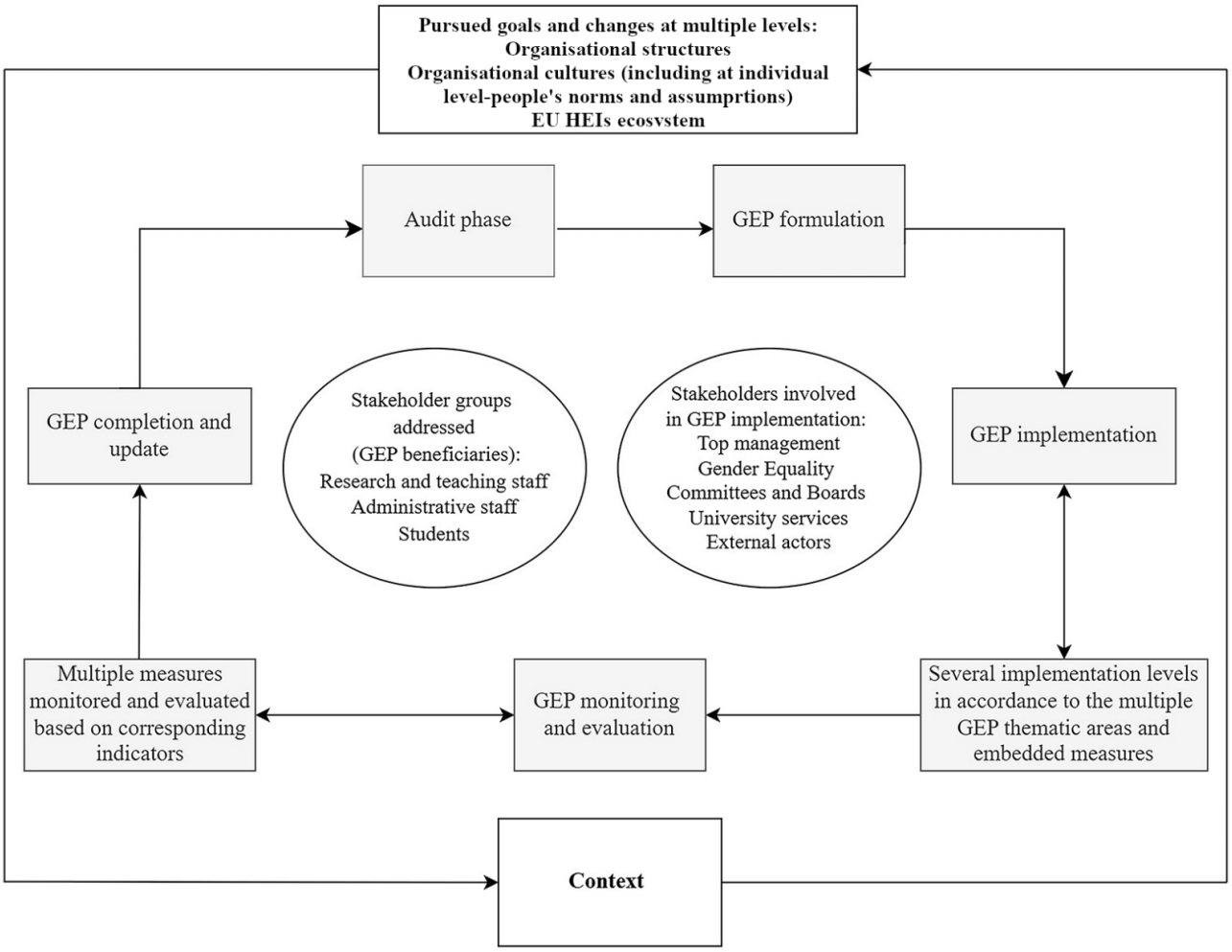
organisational context. Gender Equality Committees and Boards oversaw the GEPs' formulation procedure.

GEPs are composed of thematic areas. These primarily address work-life balance and organisational culture, gender balance in leadership and decision-making, gender equality in recruitment and career progression, and GBV including sexual harassment. Each thematic area includes specific objectives, which are pursued through numerous measures. The implementation of these measures is typically structured within defined timeframes. Gender Equality Committees and Boards typically lead implementation. Nevertheless, GEP strategic documents stress the necessity of collaboration across diverse university stakeholders, with responsibilities assigned based on expertise and authority. Key stakeholders involved in supporting GEP implementation indicatively include Rectorate authorities, Vice-Rectors, departments' heads, and HR, legal, and IT services, as well as research fund management units. Support from external stakeholders is occasionally mentioned as well.

GEPs emphasise awareness-raising and capacity-building measures, for instance pertaining to issues of discrimination and harassment. Measures aimed at structural reforms are less common, for instance addressing the establishment of childcare facilities. Structural measures are often vaguely defined as well, entailing the formulation of proposals for future reforms or mentioning the promotion of structural changes (e.g., gender dimension integration in university courses). Regarding GEP beneficiaries, these include research and teaching staff, administrative personnel, and students.

Each GEP measure is further accompanied by monitoring indicators to track the completion of planned actions. However, evaluation and impact indicators are rare. When included in the GEPs, they mostly use vague or purely quantitative metrics, and are often limited to stakeholder outreach (e.g., the percentage of stakeholders using the delivered gender tool or attending the planned events), and beneficiary proportions (e.g., the percentage increase in employees taking leave for caregiving responsibilities), with little focus on perceptions of the GEP. Provisions for data collection methods are generally sparse. Many GEPs address this by proposing the establishment of new digital mechanisms, recognising that the longstanding lack of such systems hampers immediate gender data collection. Monitoring and evaluation inputs are intended to inform future GEP versions, once the current plans reach the end of their predefined lifespan. Figure 3.2 presents the initial GEP programme theory in the form of a logic model, reflecting predominant assumptions about their linear progression.

Figure 3.2 Initial GEP programme theory



Notes: The grey boxes represent the different phases in the GEP pathways and their assumed linear progression. Two-way arrows between two boxes indicate that one phase extends and builds upon the other. Context surrounds the entire progression pathways of the GEPs as it encompasses any feature of the circumstances in which the GEPs are formulated, implemented and evaluated, potentially shaping whether and how intended outcomes and goals will be achieved. Similarly, contextual system responses and mechanisms affecting the GEPs highly depend to the type of intervention introduced and corresponding goals it pursues.

3.6 Findings

Drawing from the second and third group of themes, we first provide insights into participants' views and experiences pertaining to the fidelity, including quality, of GEP implementation, focusing on the systemic factors impeding them. These are organised under the following themes: (1) Constraining institutional structure; (2) Regulatory frameworks as limiting rather than empowering; (3) Conservative societal and institutional norms; (4) Lack of institutional support; (5) Power and hierarchy issues blocking action. Afterwards, we present acquired insights on the implementation reach and negatively influencing factors, namely: (6) Inadequate GEP communication and dissemination; (7) No awareness and comprehension of gender issues; (8) Fear to be engaged and reached.

3.6.1 Fidelity of GEP implementation

The findings suggest that organisational stakeholders perceive the fidelity of GEPs' implementation as, overall, questionable. In all contexts examined, several planned GEP actions had not been implemented at the time of examination. Participants also raised doubts about the feasibility of full implementation, considering the ambitious goals set during GEP formulation and the tight timeframe for completion. Others further expressed scepticism about the practical realisation of GEP measures, with some asserting that *"absolutely nothing has been done"* (P23, top management representative, Greece). Even those directly involved in implementation conceded that progress was limited, describing this first GEP as *"testing the waters"* (P30, policy implementer, Greece), admitting that they *"have not gone very far"* (P10, policy implementer, Greece), and suggesting they *"have more to do"* (P3, policy implementer, BiH). Others indicated a lack of clarity, stating they were still *"trying to understand what it is about"* (P5, top management representative, Greece). As interviewees further noted:

> It's a very ambitious plan and when I wrote the report for last year, we did not achieve all the goals projected for 2022. So, this institutional change proved to be most difficult, but the easiest aspect was organising education activities, workshops, and so on. (P20, policy implementer, Serbia)

> The measures are theoretically good, they are what they should be. The issue is that they need to be implemented. That's it. Because we can say a lot of theoretical stuff, but we need to see how these will actually be implemented. (P25, policy implementer, Greece)

Several actions are also implemented in a symbolic manner, described as hindering genuine progress in fostering gender equality. Furthermore, some interviewees suggest that GEP implementation frequently falls short in addressing the broader institutional climate. For instance, it fails to challenge well-rooted norms around the ideal of disembodied workers shaping career trajectories and to widen the scope of gender discussions beyond the gender binary and mainstream topics. The following themes critically explore the factors considered to be hindrances to GEP's implementation fidelity, including quality.

Constraining institutional structure

The structure and organising of the Balkan academia can impose constraints on GEP implementation. Bureaucratic processes, common in public institutions, cause significant

delays in the planned GEP timeline. Reinforced by national legislation and an organisational culture discouraging radical measures, this has led participants to feel that GEP implementation is *"non-operational"* (P5, top management representative, Greece) and *"takes forever"* (P29, policy recipient, Greece). Additionally, the large size of these universities reduces flexibility in approving and implementing GEP actions at the centralised level, given the numerous stakeholders involved. As a result, implementation is often perceived as more feasible at the decentralised school or faculty level. The large size of these universities also creates a fragmented structure, particularly in Serbian and Bosnian universities, where individual schools and faculties operate - or used to operate until a few years ago - with significant autonomy. Although this fragmentation occasionally facilitates progress on gender initiatives within specific units, it also generates *"disharmony"* (P17, policy implementer, Serbia) across the institution, calling for a more systematic and collective approach. It further makes policy implementers feel constrained, since they are often excluded from core university networks, and this limits their *"capacities to influence things, as a lot of these happen informally and through, you know, who knows whom, who can influence whom, who is in good communication with whom"* (P21, policy implementer, Serbia).

Participants consistently noted that resource scarcity poses additional challenges. Small, predominantly female teams have been managing GEP formulation and implementation, yet national legislation limits the ability to create new, dedicated positions. GEP implementers argue that budget allocations are mostly ad hoc, and support structures such as Equality Committees operate with unpaid roles, meaning the absence of financial incentives can dampen enthusiasm and effort in GEP implementation. Similarly, university units involved in both GEP formulation and implementation face increased workloads on top of their existing responsibilities; this often results in *"playing ping-pong up and down the hierarchy"* (P42, top management representative, BiH), shifting tasks and responsibilities back and forth.

Several participants, however, argue that the core issue lies less in resource scarcity than in institutional priority-setting. As one remarked, *"but our university has for all males, stupid things, nationalist, patriarchal things, identity symbols, they do have resources...for all those things, they find resources"* (P8, policy recipient, BiH). In all contexts, gender issues are rarely prioritised relative to other institutional challenges, such as declining PhD student numbers due to competitive industry sectors. Consequently, gender equality is often perceived as *"quaint"* (P12, policy implementer, Greece) or a *"luxury"* (P15, policy

implementer, Greece). This perception is especially pronounced in Serbian academia, where wider societal challenges further overshadow organisational inequalities, diminishing the perceived significance of GEPs as being detached from gender equality barriers that permeate society. As P36 (policy recipient, Serbia) elaborated:

> So, on one hand in Serbia, we are speaking about GEPs. We are speaking about awareness, improving measures, blah, blah. While at the same time in rural parts of Serbia, it's a shame if a daughter does not give her heritage to her brother because he is a man. So it is, in my opinion, it is much more important to work on that kind of, making women aware, then putting quotas in GEPs [...] some other hot topic in Serbia now, is violence. Very rude procedures against women on childbirth.

Additionally, Balkan universities, including their policies like GEPs, are revealed be highly vulnerable to disruptive events. For instance, election and structural reform periods have delayed GEP implementation due to changes in leadership and tasks allocation; given the typical three-year lifespan of a GEP, this further compresses an already tight timeline. Notably, in a couple of instances, delays were experienced in the formation of new Equality Committees, as relevant expressions of interests were not published on time before the mandate of previous Rectorate Authorities expired. Thus, new bodies to oversee implementation could not be formally established until new authorities took over. Moreover, GEP continuity depends heavily on the priorities set by new authorities and their willingness to collaborate with GEP teams, creating uncertainty or even discouragement among implementers. As P28 (policy implementer, Greece) noted, this uncertainty can lead to demotivation:

> […] those of us who are involved will eventually reach a point where we might give up. Because nothing will be progressing. There won't be any development. We won't find anyone to talk to. The positions of decision-makers will change due to political decisions. So, it won't make sense for us to start over again.

Finally, GEP implementers' accounts suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has further disrupted the intended GEP implementation, particularly GEP foreseen timelines. Some plans began during the pandemic, which prevented in-person activities and events. Face-to-face meetings among members of Equality Committees and Boards could not take place either, for instance during both the GEPs' formulation and implementation phase. Sometimes this

hindered collaboration between members with differing perspectives and caused delays or inconsistencies in follow-up actions.

Regulatory frameworks as limiting rather than empowering

Both national and EU regulations are viewed as strongly affecting GEP implementation. Some Serbian and Bosnian interviewees firstly noted that national laws, particularly mid-cycle amendments to them, can be strategically leveraged to make it *"easier to make some rules stand at the schools' level, and the university level"* (P40, policy implementer, Serbia). Greek interviewees similarly acknowledge the valuable contribution of national laws mandating the establishment of Gender Equality Committees in public HEIs. Still, some participants argue that these committees were formed through a top-down approach, *"based on an administrative decision without something behind it to support at some level [...] there wasn't, for better or for worse, a demand from the community"* (P31, top management representative, Greece). This top-down formation may affect the motivation of some committees to engage with GEPs and limit their positive reception by the academic community. Additionally, beyond this mandate on Gender Equality Committees, Greek legislation is perceived as restrictive. National gender equality laws are frequently not enforced, and many university stakeholders remain unaware of their existence. Therefore, they cannot leverage them to support policy implementation at the organisational level. One participant reflected on this disillusionment:

> It was a surprise. I was happily surprised at first. And then I had this bitter feeling, and I'm sorry if I'm using too many emotional terms. But I was really, there was a bitter feeling because if all those laws exist, then we shouldn't be going through the things we're going through in the university. And then I realised something [....] This is that we do have a lot of laws, but very often these laws are not implemented. (P15, policy implementer, Greece)

Then, in all contexts examined, more structural GEP measures such as quotas in high-authority positions and evaluation committees, require approval by the national government. As P1 (policy implementer, Greece) argued, *"many times to perform radical changes is not easy, because there is a law behind it that cannot allow radical changes"*. This causes delays or even blocks the implementation of such measures. Furthermore, participants repeatedly noted the absence of state provisions to support GEP measures about caregiving responsibilities, and female career progression after maternity or caregiving breaks, the so-

called motherhood penalty phenomenon. As P34 (policy implementer, Greece) described, such breaks and flexible working arrangements remain a *"taboo topic"*. P14 especially argued that *"the way the university is structured today, does not allow you to come back with a competitive resume and claim positions that will be claimed by colleagues who maybe did not have to take this break"* (P14, top management representative, Greece). Such conditions not only hinder career progression but induce psychological distress, including feelings of disappointment and isolation:

> I have three children and, I mean, the only thing on which I can rely is informality. So, it is whether somebody is willing in my family to help me, but I do not have any support that could come from some external, from the state for example. (P37, top management representative, Serbia)

> It's disappointing, frustrating. It's not just about counting in absolute, technical terms. It is the psychology of returning to an environment that because you have already been away for a year and a half, it has expelled you, it advances on its own and you already consider yourself to be disadvantaged. (P14, top management representative, Greece)

The HE GEP eligibility criterion further elicits mixed reactions. It is undoubtedly acknowledged as a catalyst against Greek universities' inertia on gender issues and entrenched patriarchal norms in Serbia and BiH (*"It's good that we have it at least now"*, P27, policy recipient, Serbia). Still, participants unanimously attribute GEPs' adoption to this mandate, deemed necessary to secure universities' competitiveness within the EU. This raises concerns about purely financial motivations, with P1 (policy implementer, Greece) noting, *"I do believe if there was not the push from Horizon Europe, that if you do not have GEP you will not have money, maybe still we wouldn't have a signed GEP by the Senate"*. This interpretation is similarly reinforced by the *"radio silence that existed for quite some time"* (P15, policy implementer, Greece) on gender equality issues prior to the eligibility requirement. Especially in the Greek context, several organisational members consider that financial motivation combined with a lack of genuine commitment from top management, exacerbates symbolic GEP actions. University leaders show interest in GEP measures only from the *"seeming"* (P11, policy implementer, Greece), implementing them *"for sake's appearances, because there was an EU obligation to have such a plan"* (P23, top management representative, Greece). This is suggested as resulting in implementing GEP activities in a way that does not meaningfully address organisational inequalities, thereby

legitimising stagnation in this area. Then, participants from all countries also questioned whether substantive support for the GEPs is actually ensured through the HE mandate. They even reported that implementation often does not occur, as *"there is no will to do it"* (P38, policy recipient, BiH). Serbian interviewees further noted that institutions often find ways to bypass such EU policies *"if they don't want to deal with these"* (P21, policy implementer, Serbia), just appearing compliant also for EU membership and harmonisation purposes. P37 (top management representative, Serbia) further described this situation:

> Top-down approaches are always something that can have good and bad sides. I mean, even if you force people to have [GEPs], people can make it and not implement it. But I don't think that the Balkans are the best space to explore this. We are so well trained in making efforts to be in compliance with the European Union requirements. We are mastering in the harmonisation with the regulations and also mastering in its non-implementation. So, we're very keen to say that we did everything that the European Union wanted from us.

The inadequacy of the HE mandate to stimulate transformative GEP actions is also compounded by the absence of helpful and concrete guidelines. EU discourse is criticised as *"technocratic"* (P23, top management representative, Greece) or *"non-realistic on what can be achieved in the Balkans"* (P21, policy implementer, Serbia), and is seen as offering little assistance in setting benchmarks for a successful GEP implementation. Although GEP strategic documents include indicators, interviewees lack confidence in evaluating the plans and fear that, without proper evaluation these plans will be *"forgotten, like many other things"* (P2, policy recipient, Greece). More practical guidelines are needed, since the absence of monitoring and evaluation fails to create the necessary pressure to implement the GEPs, especially when compounded by a *"lack of responsibility"* (P38, policy recipient, BiH) and accountability throughout several university operations. As further elaborated by P34 (policy implementer, Greece):

> I think that since they made us get involved in all this process and doing all this, they should also provide us with ways for monitoring this. They should provide us with policies and ways for evaluating and monitoring projects. Not just "develop a plan for me". Because most people can have a plan and keep it in the drawer.

Conservative societal and institutional norms

Conservative societal norms pervasive in the Balkans are transmitted and internalised within university environments, embedding themselves as institutional norms. All countries addressed are largely described as patriarchal societies, with Greek patriarchal norms being comparatively covert *("I'll use a quote from "Barbie" the movie, where Ken asks this executive guy "So now, you don't have any patriarchy?" and the guy replied, "well yes, we do, but we hide it better""*, P15, policy implementer, Greece). By contrast, patriarchal norms are far more overt in Serbia and BiH, where even women are frequently reported to uphold these ideals and resist change. This context calls for GEPs to adopt a holistic emancipation approach to dismantle systemic barriers *("We need to make people aware of them. We need to go beyond the plans to tell people what this is really about, and to emancipate both men and women"*, P24, policy recipient, Serbia). However, their implementation is often perceived as selectively prioritising the issues and target groups deemed most important; for instance, a disproportionate focus is often on raising student awareness on sexual harassment. In this way, other critical and challenging areas are potentially neglected, especially related to organisational sources of inequality, fostering misleading assumptions that *"this is the only thing, we should avoid violence and full stop"* (P42, top management representative, BiH).

In all contexts, entrenched norms are further reinforced by stereotypes. Stereotypical assumptions about societal roles, and by extension institutional ones, limit stakeholders' support for the GEPs. For instance, interviewees' experiences reveal little interest in organising foreseen events and activities that celebrate the achievements of women academics, with few exceptions encountered in Bosnian universities. These stereotypes are especially prevalent among the older generation, who hold much of the decision-making power in Balkan universities, and often resist change and subtly obstruct GEP progress *("And I see it in a lot of people, even in people of my generation, they are becoming more conservative, instead of becoming more progressive. They don't change"*, P33, policy recipient, Greece). Participants overall contend that meaningful change will only occur when younger generations, being *"more open and better in that direction"* (P18, policy recipient, Serbia), assume leadership roles.

Conservative socio-cultural norms have also been described as hindering GEPs from moving beyond the gender binary and actively engaging with additional minority groups. For instance, under the pressure of these norms, some GEP formulators refrained from including

in the plans measures addressing LGBTIQ+ groups. Also, even in cases where such measures are included, they risk remaining unfulfilled. As participants explain, these norms are often linked to the *"church, right-wing ideals"* (P20, policy implementer, Serbia) and the religious regimes of those countries *("because we are traditional, there is a lot about the orthodox church and things like that"*, P16, policy implementer, Greece). Especially in Serbia and BiH, they have triggered anti-gender movements and violence against LGBTIQ+ population, making progress on these issues nearly impossible *(*"*the dominant culture is very anti-LBGT"*, P8, policy recipient, BiH). Nevertheless, some Bosnian implementers are not discouraged and maintain this item in their agenda with plans for future awareness raising on these issues. Some Greek participants, though, often question the feasibility of meaningful GEP actions for such groups in a traditional university setting:

> Would it be enough to remove the signs from the toilets? Would we consider this enough to be an action? I'm not so sure. Then others say, "let's form teams". That this can acquire great power if students begin to organise themselves in such groups. How can this be done? This presupposes a coming out. Which I am not very sure...how this can take place and if there is a favouring environment. (P34, policy implementer, Greece)

Lack of institutional support

Participants' accounts consistently point to insufficient institutional support for GEP implementation. In Greek academia, this frequently stems from a lack of support and indifference among senior leaders. Delays in approving and implementing GEP actions are common, leading to frustration: *"we are told "yes, yes, fine" but in the end nothing happens"* (P12, policy implementer, Greece). This lack of accountability and coordinated approach means that no one is legitimising or driving GEP implementation forward. P23 (top management representative, Greece) further explained that this also reflects a broader reluctance to pursue radical change, often accompanied by a tendency to push forward only minimal measures and sideline more challenging GEP issues, such as establishing harassment reporting mechanisms, in case *"hell breaks loose"*:

> [...] they're afraid I think that's it. If, for example, the issue of sexual harassment is very widespread, they do not want to open Pandora's box and start reporting as well, find people who are established as we said before and find themselves, have to deal with

complaints, etc. And they prefer to keep this issue aside and do as little as possible. In other words, the least possible is to do only what they are obliged to do.

In contrast, Serbian and Bosnian interviewees often commend support from key stakeholders in high-authority positions (*"And we've got support from the management. And for us it was huge"*, P26, policy implementer, BiH). Those individuals actively lobby for certain GEP measures and drive their implementation forward. This is complemented by support from external actors, such as local NGOs and international bodies (e.g. UN Women) working on gender equality, especially in the absence of local feminist movements (*"we lack feminist or female groups at universities"*, P8, policy recipient, BiH). Still, GEP implementers contemplate that this support could be more systematic, as gender issues are not consistently prioritised by leadership, and some GEP measures remain unimplemented or are executed with minimal resources.

All universities also lack robust institutional structures and mechanisms to support the GEPs. Critical infrastructures, such as Gender Equality Offices and Services, were largely missing at the point of examination - although certain Serbian universities created new positions to assist Gender Equality Committees and Boards. Still, gender experts are few, and their engagement is not always ensured. GEP monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are also underdeveloped. Besides interviewees' reflections, the analysis of archival documents similarly suggested this weak foundation of institutionalised gender initiatives for GEPs to build upon. This is prominent especially in Greek academia where, as participants further argued, past initiatives relied on voluntary action and often faced inertia. On the contrary, some Serbian and Bosnian universities had already institutionalised a few gender initiatives prior to the GEPs' adoption, for instance regarding harassment and gender-responsive teaching content, thereby facilitating some GEP' measures implementation. Nonetheless, the long-standing absence of support structures for gender issues has created challenging conditions in all contexts for implementing numerous GEP actions in a short period of time without significant groundwork at institutional level.

Power and hierarchy issues blocking action

Power dynamics, strongly intertwined with the lack of institutional support and conservative norms, can pose significant obstacles. A recurring narrative among interviewees was that rigid and hierarchical systems limit flexibility and undermine the translation of GEPs into meaningful practice. In these male-dominated academic environments, power tends to be

concentrated among a few high-authority individuals, who are *"impactful"* (P17, policy implementer, Serbia) and highly influence GEP implementation. GEP implementers thus feel restricted in their decision-making and sense the need to have *"a strategy for survival within academia"* and *"cooperate with gatekeepers"* (P17, policy implementer, Serbia). Such feelings are especially pronounced among the younger generation, who perceive academia as *"similar to the military, very tough hierarchy, very much...not always a pleasant place to work because of the hierarchy, clear roles and everybody needs to know their place and stuff like that"* (P35, policy recipient, Serbia).

Furthermore, there was a pervasive sense among participants, especially GEP implementers, that university stakeholders in positions of authority often struggle to see the value in initiatives like GEPs. This difficulty is compounded by age-related gaps in perspective, as conservative views are most frequently held by the older generation. However, most interviewees' experiences reflect that such stakeholders mostly refuse to *"lose power"* (P11, policy implementer, Greece) in response to GEPs aiming to alter the status quo and disrupt the *"natural order of things"* (P12, policy implementer, Greece). Thus, GEP actions entailing minimum change in existing organisational structures and processes are often implemented, as *"no one gives their privileges voluntarily"* (P24, policy recipient, Serbia). Similarly, if supporting such actions does not contribute to an increase in their power or influence, individuals are unlikely to advocate for them:

> "Why should I? It would, I would not be voted again for the position and why, what's the point?". So I will have a paper because it's needed or it's fancy. (P38, policy recipient, BiH)

Interviewees also recalled occasions where power dynamics have evoked conflicts among organisational members, leading to delays in GEP initiatives or affecting the scope of implemented measures on the basis of personal interests. For instance, those in authority often compete over who will gain credit for initiatives like GEPs:

> [...] senior executives who think they're in a stage of their lives where they need to do their part now, their career, and that's it. To be, they need to have a leadership even in this, to put it on their agenda, in their portfolio, and in 20-15 years when they will retire and be super-rich because they will have made too much money, to be able to say that they have achieved this too... Or for self-publicity, to come out and say, "I did this at university". (P28, policy implementer, Greece)

Finally, power dynamics associated with university politics generate disagreements even among policy implementers. From the earliest stages of GEP formulation, there were several conflicts over the content of the document and the policy, often driven by political interests. Ideological tensions between policy implementers and recipients are described as further complicating collaboration, as some individuals *"believe that gender equality, feminism, the #MeToo movement, anarchists, perhaps even leftists, leftist approaches, revolutionary approaches, they think it is one thing"* (P15, policy implementer, Greece). This conflation of political views, often amplified by *"the rise of the right populism and antagonistic forces that counteract gender equality narratives in the whole Europe"* (P41, policy implementer, BiH) is overall framed as impeding efforts to secure consensus and allies and proceed with the GEP implementation.

Overall, participants consistently noted that *"political structures actually influence all decisions also within academia"* (P17, policy implementer, Serbia), including power distribution and priority-setting. Major decisions are *"dependent on greater political decisions, which on the altar of interests and political positions, all this [the GEP] is minor to them and they do not consider it a priority that has to be implemented"* (P28, policy implementer, Greece). Consequently, small groups of people eager to drive GEP implementation are blocked due to a lack of support from stakeholders with power and authority, ultimately preventing them from becoming agents of change and *"local heroes"* (P28, policy implementer, Greece).

3.6.2 Reach of GEP implementation

University members' accounts illustrate that the GEPs and corresponding activities have not effectively reached all intended stakeholder groups in the Balkan universities, with concerns regarding the plans' visibility frequently raised. Many intended beneficiaries, including both staff members and students, remain unaware of the existence of these plans (*"they do not know it exists...to be quite honest"*, P38, policy recipient, BiH) or possess only limited knowledge about them. Others are described as indifferent, making little effort to seek further information or engage with the GEP affairs. As for some stakeholders involved in GEPs' affairs, participants consider that they often lack genuine involvement and are not inclined to take on responsibility. The following themes illuminate the contextual dynamics impeding GEP reach among the intended beneficiary groups, including academic and non-academic staff, as well as student communities.

Inadequate GEP communication and dissemination

Participants unanimously consider that the communication and dissemination of their university GEPs is insufficient, describing it as *"not so broad and not with the right channels"* (P19, policy recipient, Greece), which results in low awareness and engagement. Centralised support structures, such as Gender Equality Committees and Boards, similarly highlight the difficulties posed by the large size of the universities. They struggle to reach and engage wide audiences, especially across different schools with varying mindsets. Other interviewees note that most of their awareness of the GEP comes from informal channels: *"I mean I know, officially speaking, I know little about it. Unofficially speaking, I heard about it from my colleagues"* (P8, policy recipient, BiH). These communication challenges are largely attributed to an over-reliance on standard email notifications for GEP updates. While interviewees assume they have probably received such emails, the volume of messages makes it difficult for them to give GEP-related information their full attention. Participants call for a more *"pronounced"* (P13, policy recipient, Greece) awareness-raising approach to prevent the GEP from being disregarded by the university community *("I feel it's not enough to just share by mail and then nobody will see it"*, P32, policy recipient, Serbia). This strategy is particularly critical for engaging younger members of the community, who are already hard to reach due to generational gaps and differing interests and perspectives:

> [..] the university has a very outdated way of communicating among its members. I don't think it has fully developed or utilised digital tools to their maximum potential [...] just receiving an email from the authorities saying, "For your information, we also have this structure," I don't think that's appealing to 18- and 20-year-olds at the university [...] even if you want to do something good for the students, they have disregarded so much the methods and ways the structure uses to approach them that, in the end, even if something is relevant to them, they don't hear it. (P28, policy implementer, Greece)

Greek interviewees further observe that GEP promotion relies heavily on lengthy scientific documents *"with philosophical touches"*, discouraging people from reading them and *"having a more informed opinion"* (P2, policy recipient, Greece). Communication efforts focused on events and workshops also seem outdated, with policy implementers themselves characterising GEP communication and dissemination as *"dull"* (P25, policy implementer, Greece) and overly formal, lacking appeal for wider audiences. This approach is perceived to

be a recurring issue, as academic institutions often rely on scientific symposia and unapproachable experts to raise awareness on critical issues:

> We're a bit dull. We've got a lot, we've made this issue look like a very scientific one. This is not close to most people. I mean they must believe, they must read these things, and everyone must think that we are a group of feminist witches who do all sorts of things. I think we have this issue in Greece. And.... perhaps a distance is created. We haven't made this issue a bit 'lighter', it's a bit heavy… (P25, policy implementer, Greece)

Then, participants' accounts reveal that, occasionally, communication pitfalls have unintentionally excluded certain stakeholder groups right from the GEP formulation stage. For instance, audit phases and related surveys were not communicated to student groups. In some cases, a highly restricted process was also followed for formulating the plans, leaving university stakeholders getting *"their red light because they didn't include their opinion actually in development of that gender equality plan"* (P17, policy implementer, Serbia).

Still, a few communication and dissemination practices perceived as useful and appealing include distributing concise brochures to the university community, which display GEP measures in a simplified format. Suggested improvements by GEP implementers and recipients further refer to introducing GEPs during student and staff induction days, while tailoring the given communication strategies to each target group. This latter point is perceived as essential, since otherwise communication risks becoming *"inappropriate and misleading"* (P19, policy recipient, Greece), potentially leading to confusion and disengagement among organisational members.

No awareness and comprehension of gender issues

A recurring narrative among participants was that many university stakeholders exhibit a lack of awareness and comprehension of gender issues, even believing that *"there are no gender problems"* (P1, policy implementer, Greece). This limited awareness, and resulting lack of engagement with GEP initiatives, can be firstly attributed to a lack of empathy. Individuals who have not personally experienced or witnessed inappropriate behaviours or gender-based discrimination in their professional or personal lives find it *"probably easier to not be so active in this area"* (P13, policy recipient, Greece). One participant further explained this situation:

> [...] since I don't have a problem in my surroundings, I really wasn't following. Why do you need to make such a fuss when everything is fine? Then I met other people, other departments and then I saw that, yeah, there is in general a problem, but from my point of view and the place I am, it wasn't visible. (P27, policy recipient, Serbia)

Then, power dynamics and traditional norms further complicate the comprehension of gender issues and are perceived to ultimately distance stakeholders from the GEPs. Participants' accounts suggest that those in positions of authority often fail to acknowledge gender problems and even the need to promote diversity, thus stifling relevant awareness-raising efforts. As P37 (top management representative, Serbia) observes, the *"highly patriarchal, corporate culture"* that prevails in academia makes it *"very hard for the voices about gender equality to be heard"*. Additionally, individuals with outdated or narrow-minded perspectives, particularly older stakeholders, often approach discussions around gender and GEPs with irony and remain in denial about the importance of such initiatives. Gender issues are even perceived as taboo, with the assumption that *"we are scientists, we are upper-level, and that these things do not happen in general"* (P34, policy implementer, Greece). Participants' experiences further shed light in this situation:

> For example, some many would say there is no need to talk about that, everything is okay, you do not have reason to complain, for example. Why should we talk about it anyway? Everything is okay. (P18, policy recipient, Serbia)

> But in general I see…a difficulty in accepting, in admitting first of all that there is an issue, that there is a problem. As if they are in denial, that is, most people say that we are just a quaint group of women and we think there is a problem when there is not. (P12, policy implementer, Greece)

The limited understanding of gender issues (*"it's not yet under our skin"*, P30, policy implementer, Greece) is further reflected in stakeholders' tendency to oversimplify them. Many stakeholders perceive gender equality and human rights as a *"buffet, taking bits and pieces"* (P41, policy implementer, BiH). Moreover, they focus solely on representation issues or pay gaps, often disregarding GEP initiatives addressing other critical areas, such as the integration of the gender dimension in research. Certain groups, such as academics in STEM fields, often show indifference due to their narrow view that gender-related issues are *"for the guys from the humanities"* (P20, policy implementer, Serbia). Moreover, root causes of some inequalities are often minimised. For example, the higher female representation in

administrative rather than research roles is often attributed to women *"not applying enough"* and being *"more prone to office working with clear working hours from 9-5, having responsibilities outside and the Balkan family at home"* (P36, policy recipient, Serbia).

Limited awareness and a lack of interest in GEPs are also driven by postfeminist attitudes. Many within the university community, especially in technical faculties, believe that gender equality has already been achieved, seeing the GEP as redundant and assuming that women can attain success and empowerment through hard work alone. This perspective is at times strengthened by the perception that women's challenges are minimal compared to those faced by LGBTIQ+ groups.

> This devaluation does not come only from male colleagues [...] it also comes from women, either in the rationale that "okay now, why are we discussing these things, I did it, if you work, work, and so on you make it and be a successful woman". (P31, top management representative, Greece)

> [..] it's opposite of a tradition, you know how questionable or hard it is for our LGBTIQ community here. So, there's this huge pressure from them, from the society, from different churches, religions. So, it seems like everybody is against them. So, when it comes to females it's like "huh, whatever you are offered, why don't you go through the higher positions?" "whatever, you are paid the same as the guys". "What's their problem? There's no problem". (P38, policy recipient, BiH)

Finally, in contrast to organisational stakeholders lacking awareness, some individuals fully acknowledge the gender equality challenges that exist in academia. However, there remains a risk of perceiving the value of gender equality and GEPs as self-evident, which is described as evoking a diminished sense of urgency for deeper engagement. This complacency is further compounded by assumptions that those involved in GEP implementation are undoubtedly doing a good work. As P31 (top management representative, Greece) notes, though, taking these issues for granted is *"deeply problematic"*, as it reduces the motivation for active participation in GEP initiatives.

Fear to be engaged and reached

In further contrast to those who deny the presence of gender problems, some stakeholders do acknowledge existing inequalities and the need for GEPs but also hesitate to engage fully. For instance, P1 (policy implementer, Greece) observed that stakeholders especially hesitated to

share personal experiences about inequalities experienced in GEP-related audit surveys: *"I think that maybe people were afraid to join, although the survey was anonymous and we followed all GDPR processes"*. This reluctance has been especially notable in areas related to GBV and harassment, which remain stigmatised topics. Even individuals tasked with addressing and reporting such issues are often *"afraid to work on this area"* (P17, policy implementer, Serbia). Many concerns focus on maintaining anonymity and confidentiality, as well as on how sensitive incidents, such as sexual harassment, will be managed without opening the Pandora's box. As P30 (policy implementer, Greece) noted:

> [...] there is always a pervasive concern. That if we start opening Pandora's box.... So if we really start listening, that is, let's say make a database of reporting sexist behaviour, I have the feeling that in general it is something they fear. That is, they tell you that "you will open Pandora's box. If we start doing that, there will be no end to this".

Similarly, interviewees, especially from Serbia and BiH, express hesitation about openly advocating for equality and initiatives such as GEPs. Closely tied to power dynamics in academia, these individuals report a pervasive fear that supporting such initiatives could create conflicts with peers and especially high-authority individuals. As P7 (policy implementer, BiH) described, *"When I asked my colleague, "Can I use one of our classrooms to organise this to help this event?", she told me, "okay, maybe it would be better to ask someone from the other structure, someone from the faculty of philosophy, because they're more open-minded""*. Similarly, provision of support is perceived as potentially jeopardising their promotion prospects. As a result, they rather avoid *"rocking the boat too much"* and opt for *"keeping a low profile"* (P20, policy implementer, Serbia). This caution is particularly evident among staff members with precarious, non-permanent contracts; they worry about potential conflicts or non-renewal of contracts, as these decisions often rest with supervisors who may hold opposing views:

> If I wanted to stand out and talk about it, I don't think I would be welcome. I don't think I would feel comfortable talking about it. And I don't think it will be well received. I don't know how to explain that. But I would never decide to initiate something like that because I still don't have a full-time position. I'm not a full-time professor. So maybe when I get to the full-time professor position, I would be able to speak more freely. But at this moment I would never dare initiate some promotion of that kind. (P18, policy recipient, Serbia)

To alleviate such concerns and uncertainties blocking beneficiaries' engagement, participants argued that institutional support for gender issues must be clearly defined and reinforced through concrete, practical measures. Subsequently, stakeholders in key positions should be willing to take responsibility for their roles in GEP implementation rather than evading them. As P20 (policy implementer, Serbia) explained, this requires genuine motivation and commitment on their behalf rather than disclaimers:

> They should volunteer people who are willing to dedicate time and effort to something. So not to be there just because it looks nice in your CV [...] "things like "we are not police, we are not attorneys. That is something that is not ours to do. We don't have the right to do that".

3.7 Discussion

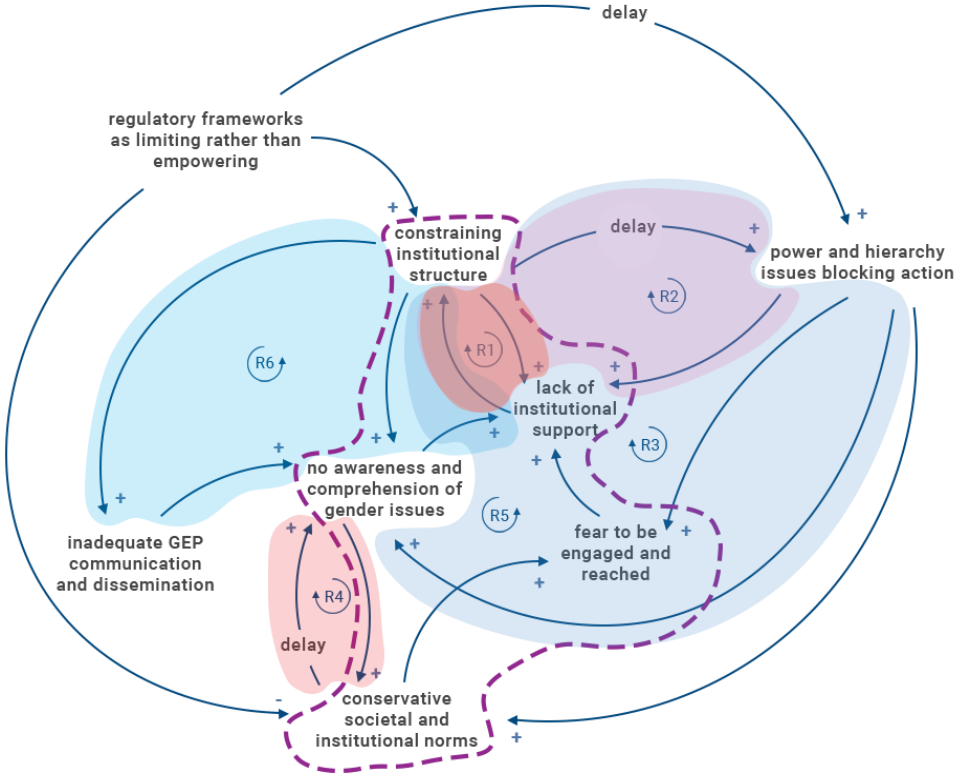
3.7.1 Ambivalent GEP effectiveness on the interplay of intricate, interdependent factors

The present paper explores the perceived effectiveness of GEPs through an instrumental case study of GEPs implemented in Balkan academia. Conceptualising GEPs as complex interventions within gendered, complex, and adaptive systems, a qualitative systems-based process evaluation particularly foregrounded organisational actors' views and lived experiences around these policies. Subsequently, it delved deeper into their implementation, addressing how it perceived in terms of fidelity, including quality, and stakeholder reach. This approach has revealed multiple systemic factors that can hinder GEPs' ability to achieve intended actions. These factors are centred around national-level norms, local organisational culture and the situated practice of gender. They relate to broader socio-cultural and regulatory norms, structural and organisational issues within universities, and university stakeholders' dispositions towards the GEPs. Employing a causal loop system archetype (Kim, 1992), we further delve into the self-organisation and emergent causality of university systems. The resulting programme theory, illustrated as a causal loop model (Figure 3.3), reflects the empirically grounded interdependencies that exist between the identified barriers. As outlined in Section 3.4.3, the relationships and reinforcing patterns identified between the themes and their encapsulated meanings during the second stage of the qualitative analysis have been translated into the components of the causal loop model. Its arrows stand for the directional links between the identified hindering factors, and positive polarity reflects the reinforcing influence that one factors has over the other. Activated feedback loops

(reinforcing loops, indicated as R1-R6) further represent the pathways under which the barriers' adverse effects are exacerbated, ultimately hinder GEPs . Notably and based on organisational actors' accounts, not all factors interact; some interdependencies are localised among specific factors. Additionally, factors that appear to primarily hinder GEP implementation can interact with those that impede its reach, triggering further ripple effects and vice versa.

Through this integrative analysis, we contribute empirically to scholarly literature on GEPs (e.g. Cannito et al., 2023; O'Neil, 2023; Clavero and Galligan, 2021; Ní Laoire et al., 2021) and more broadly university gender policies and interventions (e.g. Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2020; Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019). Our findings, prioritising intimate, lived experiences around the emerging policy regime of GEPs, suggest that there are several contextual struggles to ensure high fidelity, including quality, in those policies' implementation. Similarly, the plans may not reach the target stakeholders and beneficiaries as intended. The GEP strategic frameworks, aligned to the HE mandate, envision mostly linear progression pathways and posit a broad stakeholder reach. However, the refined GEP programme theory provides an enriched understanding of GEPs, and highlights that the practice-based nature of gender within the universities (Gherardi and Poggio, 2001; Gherardi, 1994), the CAS characteristics of these institutions, and the complex intervention features of GEPs are critical in shaping the dynamic implementation and perceived ambivalent effectiveness of these policies. Ultimately, our resulting programme theory problematises initial expectations on how GEPs' will unfold. It further functions as an integrative framework to comprehend how GEPs work and any tensions pertaining to their transformative potential more broadly, highlighting the need for a paradigm shift in GEPs, and consequently gender interventions' logic of practice. Together, these similarly verify the imperative to move beyond linear and reductionist approaches to their examination (Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2020). In the following paragraphs, we describe the key elements and relations of the causal loop model, supported by indicative data extracts from the second stage of analysis, and further situate our findings in the broader literature on GEPs.

Figure 3.3 Refined GEP programme theory



The restrictive institutional structure of Balkan universities considerably limits the support available for the GEPs, as already reported in other contexts, such as the Mediterranean one (Chamochumbi Diaz et al., 2024; Tildesley et al., 2022). National legislation constraints and especially the absence or inadequate allocation of resources (Krzaklewska et al., 2023; Caprile et al., 2022) are revealed to discourage the establishment of dedicated positions to systematically manage GEP implementation ("*Our positions are structured by our ministry. It's not possible to do it like that, a new position. So, we have a lack of manpower to assist with implementation, human resources*", P26, policy implementer, BiH). Also, those currently involved in GEP implementation are not compensated, which often reduces their motivation for meaningful engagement. Leadership support is similarly pointed out as inconsistent due to structural reforms and frequent turnovers (Caprile et al., 2022), an aspect that disrupts GEP continuity and weakens sustained commitment to gender issues. This inadequate institutional support is viewed as both perpetuating and exacerbating existing structural constraints on GEPs. For instance, low prioritisation of gender issues by top management leads to minimal resource allocation for GEPs, reinforcing the longstanding absence of institutional support

mechanisms in Balkan universities (Karydou, 2024; Zabaniotou et al., 2021). This dynamic activates a reinforcing feedback loop (R1), amplifying the restrictive effect of the universities' institutional structure, as reflected by the data analysis:

> It seems that solutions can be found in terms of resources […[so I think that it's, the additional problem is that yet the relevant, responsible parts of the university first maybe do not have the full will, thus we end up not having enough people to undertake the GEP activities, and we are also stuck to the first situation I mentioned… that is, university structures that are, how to say it, non-functional. (P1, policy implementer, Greece) .

The fragmented structure of some universities further limits GEP implementers' access to core networks, restricting their influence on GEP decision-making. In this way, GEP progress is not actively advanced and, in the long-term, existing male-centred power distributions are further strengthened as authority over GEP initiatives remains concentrated *("[…] it's still not the same, and not as much if we were more included in the university…and that's why certain areas remain more and more, I don't want to say covered by the power of men, but sometimes that's the case*", P21, policy implementer, Serbia). Furthermore, those with well-established authority are often described as seeking to maintain the status quo, potentially becoming unsupportive of the GEPs. Personal ambitions to enhance status and build a 'posthumous reputation' may similarly drive their symbolic involvement in GEPs. Consequently, the ambiguous prioritisation of gender issues within Balkan universities is framed as being reinforced by power and hierarchy (Caprile et al., 2022; Clavero and Galligan, 2021), through the mediating effect of inadequate institutional support on behalf of university upper echelons (R2) ("*We constantly face a situation that gets trickier, where we have to apologise for a situation not in our own hands, does not depend on us and has to do with greater political decisions, which on the altar of interests and political positions, all this becomes, is minor to them*", P28, policy implementer, Greece).

Furthermore, a recurring pattern refers to high-authority stakeholders in Balkan academia mostly belonging to the older generation and often holding conservative views of gender issues. This may limit their depth of understanding on such matters, reduce their support for the GEPs or even encourage the adoption of a defensive stance. Given the substantial influence these stakeholders yield, these views risk becoming further legitimised at the institutional level ("*Let's say many people are not so open-minded […] want to exclude these*

events from the universities [..] and that's really bad because sometimes those people that do that have very important positions and influence many people", P19, policy recipient, Greece). Lower-ranking university stakeholders - even when assigned with roles related to GEP implementation - may consequently hesitate to openly support opposite views and gender initiatives, fearing repercussions from those in authority. As a result, engagement in GEP efforts is perceived to be minimal. This limited engagement is also compounded by resource scarcity; in such cases, GEP efforts often rely on small, predominantly female groups who face excessive workload. This constraining institutional structure thus may even reinforce gendered and inequitable workloads among engaged stakeholders, as already evidenced in both Athena SWAN and GEPs (Karydou, 2024; Yarrow and Johnston, 2023; Drew, 2022; Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019), and in the long-term can sustain the existing status quo and power dynamics (R3) ("*It pains me to say that I'm again mostly a one-woman show in reality, you know it's an unpaid position […] there are few same people who are enthusiastic and who I can count on. Other than that, not many*", P20, policy implementer, Serbia).

The reported, limited engagement of the wider university community may similarly stem from low awareness and comprehension of gender issues (Lombardo and Bustelo, 2022; Tildesley et al., 2022) ("*Some old minded or narrow-minded, might address, the GEP and the gender equality discussion with irony […] don't believe there is a problem. And this is often reflected in their activities or to put it differently, lack of activities*", P5, top management representative, Greece). Notably, organisational inequalities are sometimes further overshadowed by broader challenges within the Balkan society and academia; hence, university members may overlook or oversimplify gender-related challenges in their settings. The postfeminist trends of neoliberal academia are also present in the Balkan region. Organisational stakeholders' accounts suggest that these trends further perpetuate misleading assumptions about the achievement of gender equality (Yarrow and Johnston, 2023; Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019), and diminishing stakeholders' willingness to delve into these issues.

Then, opportunities for stakeholders to become informed about and sensitised to gender issues are similarly obstructed by the region's prevalent traditional norms. Similar dynamics - where entrenched norms significantly influence GEPs' implementation - are stressed in additional contexts, such as Turkey and Italy (e.g. O'Neil, 2023; Picardi et al., 2023; Göker and Polatdemir, 2022). Based on the present study, such norms marginalise awareness-raising

efforts (Karydou, 2024), relegating them to a peripheral status (Ćeriman and Vučković Juroš, 2024) and limiting their reach. Consequently, most stakeholders are perceived to lack a solid understanding of gender inequalities and to potentially have their conservative views strengthened, particularly when GEP messages are neither broadly communicated nor adapted to the local context. As the study's participants illustrated, when these individual views become widely shared, they can solidify in the long-term into collective beliefs embedded within institutional culture. This activates a feedback loop that perpetuates conservative norms and maintains low awareness and comprehension of gender issues in Balkan universities (R4). The experiences of participant 37 (top management representative, Serbia) indicatively illustrate how conservative societal and institutional norms reinforce limited awareness and comprehension of gender issues, and eventually exacerbate these dominant norms:

> I think that I work in a highly patriarchal, corporative culture and that it is very hard for the voices about gender equality to be heard. In the last years, I'm the only female member of all the management teams […] and I don't think that anybody is concerned about it. I think that this situation, really my faculty consequently nurture a very patriarchal culture … and which is telling women what is best for them. And it is very paternalistic because it is saying, "we know what is the best for you and it is best for you not to engage in these kinds [of things]".

Additionally, such norms are repeatedly framed as fostering a reluctance among stakeholders to engage actively with initiatives like GEPs, often out of fear of conflict with or penalisation by high-authority figures holding traditional views. This reluctance deprives institutions of potential change agents and has contributed to a reported, longstanding absence of institutionalised efforts to educate and raise awareness on gender issues, already evidenced in GEP-implementing organisations in the Balkan region and beyond (Karydou, 2024; Krzaklewska et al., 2023; Tildesley et al., 2022; Delibasic et al., 2018). The persistent absence of sensitisation and knowledge-sharing about gender inequalities is revealed to intensify the hold of traditional norms, making it nearly impossible for Balkan universities to implement numerous actions in their first GEP without foundational progress towards a more inclusive organisational culture (R5) ("*We analysed curriculum and no mention of gender dimension […] certainly due to lack of knowledge, but it's not that simple. An important issue is how power works through institutions. And if you have someone whose authority you will*

not question…so, in this way, there is still some kind of resistance or tradition in the community", P7, policy implementer, BiH).

Moreover, inadequate communication and dissemination of GEPs may inadvertently worsen stakeholders' lack of awareness and comprehension of gender issues. Universities' often rigid and outdated communication practices, exacerbated by their large size and occasionally fragmented structure, are suggested to considerably limit the reach of GEP initiatives. Hence, stakeholders may remain uninformed about the GEPs' existence (Spahić Šiljak et al., 2022), their objectives, and the broader concepts surrounding gender equality. This knowledge gap can foster indifference, reducing stakeholder engagement and ultimately weakening institutional support for GEPs. As the study's participants recalled, this weakened support often reinforces a reliance on conventional, unengaging communication means rather than investing in more appealing approaches (R6). The views of Participant 19 (policy recipient, Greece) further elucidate this pathways, as follows: "*Many times the communication is not appropriate. So, many people are misled […] like people do not show so much trust in these new initiatives, and then no…no further effort or time is, are put on spreading the word further, we just have emails, announcements etc*."

National regulatory frameworks in Balkan academia also play a restrictive role, often discouraging radical action and limiting institutions' flexibility to introduce novel, context-based measures. As a result, they fail to provide robust support for certain GEP initiatives (Anagnostou, 2023), notably those addressing caring responsibilities. Support provisions for the career provision of working mothers, including those returning from maternity leaves, are consistently viewed as minimal, and traditional assumptions about the ideal disembodied worker persist (Acker, 1990). In the long-term, these regulatory barriers can severely limit female career advancement and access to high-authority positions, ultimately reinforcing existing male-dominated power structures. The discussion taken place with Participant 8 (policy recipient, BiH) notably reflects how national legislation can strengthen these existing power dynamics:

> When women stay away for a full year, they somehow lose track of what's going on and they somehow, you know unintentionally, I'm not sure, they become more neglected, less included, and less supported eventually by colleagues to go on with their career. And they do not have any special mechanism to be boosted once they get back. And

> then in all of the highest management organs you will continuously have more men...we have never had a rector woman.

Proceeding to the HE mandate, it often incentivises symbolic exercises aiming to ensure compliance with the HE minimum requirements (Karydou, 2024), and secure funding and EU competitiveness (Clavero and Galligan, 2021). The experiences of the study's interviewees reflect that this compliance-oriented approach can create inertia and foster an infertile institutional environment impeding GEP progress ("*It is a bit for sake's appearances […] and they prefer to keep this issue aside and do as little as possible. In other words, the least possible is to do only what they are obliged to do*", P23, top management representative, Greece). Instances of gender-washing further entrench a type of performative resistance, masking the absence of genuine efforts towards gender equality and maintaining the organisational status quo.

Finally, we note that many of the identified challenges to Balkan GEPs reflect that those gender policies' application is less mature than in other settings, such as Anglo-American or Northern European ones, which have long been investigated by scholars and practitioners (Brancato et al., 2025). Also, while regional nuances, such as broader socio-political norms and gender discourses, prove to strongly hinder GEPs' implementation, some common obstacles manifest in other EU regions as reflected earlier in the analysis, and parts of the Global North. Regarding the latter, these include competitiveness-based approaches and symbolic practices (Yarrow and Johnston, 2023) under widespread neoliberal regimes (Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019). They also encompass insufficient action by academic leaders but mostly associated with limited understanding of organisational gender inequality and skills to address it (Cuthbert et al., 2023).

3.7.2 How to move forward with GEPs in the Balkan academia and beyond

Drawing from the above empirical insights, we suggest that universities address the situated factors influencing GEPs, and the CAS dynamics within institutions to achieve meaningful progress. First, recognising that policy measures cannot simply be imposed - especially when their objectives conflict with local norms and traditions - contextual approaches are essential. As Mintzberg and Waters (1985) assert, even externally imposed strategies rarely pre-empt all available options for subsequent implementation. Thus, EU regulatory mandates driving GEPs' adoption require careful follow-up interpretation to ensure contextual adaptation and enactment of suitable policy measures (Tzanakou et al., 2025; Tildesley et al., 2023). Such

interpretation can similarly mitigate the procedural effect of neoliberal, competitiveness-based policy incentives - potentially viewed as part of broader EU agendas as well, such as EU accession efforts in non-EU Member States. Small-wins approaches (Weick, 1984; Correll, 2017) can also offer further value in contexts perceived to be overtly or covertly traditional, such as the Balkans based on participants' accounts. They can enable institutions to gradually challenge traditional beliefs and structures in modest, concrete ways that minimise stakeholders' reactions and reluctance, and avoid exacerbating complex problems. This can similarly help GEPs transcend the binary gender system and address inequalities faced by other excluded or marginalised groups. For example, such small-wins approaches can start from normalising institutional discourse about groups experiencing intersecting inequalities (e.g. based on gender, ethnicity, or sexuality), so as to enable people to openly talk about these issues and subsequently promote concrete support interventions.

The hierarchical structure of Balkan academia further suggests that strategic attention to power dynamics is crucial to GEPs' success. In cases where high-authority stakeholders significantly determine GEP progress or even undermine it, it is essential to broaden collective action and counteract epistemic hierarchies. Such action can enable an organisational change that is emergent and considers multiple actor narratives (Ní Laoire et al., 2021). Concurrently, including change agents from key university positions in such alliances, for example by promoting to them both the universal and local imperative of gender equality, can further legitimise GEP implementation within rigid hierarchical systems. Similarly, the genuine commitment of such individuals can encourage a broader stakeholder engagement in GEP affairs, by mitigating their fear and hesitation. Equally important is addressing the role of gendered organisational culture; notably, both the symbolic enactment of gender and relevant situated actions influence systems' responses to GEPs. Universities should thus sustain efforts to foster a gender-responsive organisational culture, by building on the current GEP focus on awareness-raising but also extending it to additional structural measures. Such combined action can introduce a new way of doing gender and doing GEPs beyond minimal EC requirements (O'Neil, 2023), overall establishing remedial practices against gender inequalities in academia (Gherardi, 1994).

Moreover, we propose that GEP strategic frameworks move beyond linear progression agendas and integrate CAS-driven elements. This approach better accounts for the unpredictable ways university systems respond to interventions like GEPs, and their interdependencies (Chandler et al., 2016). Emergent strategy approaches (Mintzberg and

Waters, 1985) can prove especially valuable. They can enable adaptability to the system's self-organisation, and foster strategic learning by enabling organisational actors to examine situations not initially intended to occur. For GEPs, this approach entails reflection on emergent barriers and their reinforcing effects to adjust initial plans. It further encourages the acquisition of gender knowledge that is crucial for effective interventions (Lansu et al., 2019). This is of paramount importance especially in regions and institutions that lack a robust foundation of existing initiatives to build upon in order to make substantial gender progress within tight policy timespans. As Kalpazidou Schmidt et al. (2020) overall suggest, treating system responses as information points supports the dynamic, context-sensitive implementation of university gender interventions within complex systems.

3.7.3 Theoretical and methodological implications for rethinking gender policies and interventions

The present study advances theoretical understandings of university and organisational gender interventions and their perceived effectiveness, at the intersection of complexity, systems thinking, and gender. Moving beyond traditional linear analytical approaches, the study's approach operationalises the complexity of both gender interventions and systems in which they are embedded (Kalpazidou Schmidt and Ovseiko, 2020; Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2020) through an in-depth, qualitative systems-based process evaluation. In doing so, it reveals the plurality and varying nature of experiences around gender equality interventions. It further underscores the determining role of self-organisation and emergent causality in organisational systems, thus suggesting the need to extend beyond reductionist assumptions about how gender interventions operate. Additionally, the theoretical framework employed, by enabling a nuanced integrative view on how these policies operate, can be used as a robust, theoretical foundation to further explore and comprehend gender equality-related interventions in organisational settings more broadly. The use of system archetypes and causal loop models for articulating and graphically presenting qualitative insights on factors underlying gender interventions' perceived effectiveness further constitutes a methodological contribution. Ultimately, the extension of this theoretical and methodological framework in additional contexts can explore and theorise in a conjunctive way such interventions' unfolding in practice, including their heuristic potential for non-linear institutional transformation in organisations. It can also aid in mitigating the oversimplification of complex organisational phenomena (Tsoukas, 2017), including multifaceted organisational inequalities (Benschop, 2021).

Furthermore, our study highlights the value of gendered organisations theory and gender as practice, especially in shedding light to the socio-constitutive importance of context (Tzanakou et al., 2025; Ní Laoire et al., 2021) regarding gender policies. These allow us to zoom in on organisational systems and contexts, and reveal how the systemic practice of gender is intertwined with gender policies and shapes how they function and are ultimately viewed upon by relevant organisational actors. Coupling gendered organisations theory with CAS theory further presents a nuanced lens to articulate the intricate dependencies between the gender we think and the gender we do, and thus between gender-related values and assumptions, and concrete institutional actions. In this way, we extend current work on systemic gender knowledge (Lansu et al., 2019), necessary for pursuing effective interventions.

Finally, drawing from the setting of Balkan academia and relevant context, the study emphasises factors often overlooked in Global North contexts, such as traditional norms and EU accession dynamics, thus contributing to scholarly knowledge challenging Western-Centric expectations (Banerjee, 2021). The distinctive features of the Balkan setting additionally suggest that current decolonial perspectives could benefit from greater nuance (Hamann et al., 2020). As Banerjee (2021) notes, new intellectual spaces can support decolonial research agendas, for instance by including marginalised voices in knowledge production. In the present case, moving beyond predominant East-West and North-South dichotomies while examining organisational gender interventions can capture the epistemological value of regions that are outside the Anglo-Saxon context and also diverge from typical colonised systems - thus extending efforts to reject universalism in colonial gender theories and embrace contextual specificity (Lugones, 2010).

3.7.4 Study limitations

Several limitations are acknowledged. Most GEPs had not completed their first implementation cycle at the point of examination, thus examining GEPs over additional years of implementation may yield enriched insights. Similarly, exploring GEPs' implementation and how it experienced at decentralised university levels, for instance at schools and faculties, can enrich our knowledge on GEPs' perceived value. The same applies to extending the participant sample to university students, who represent a critical beneficiary group for these plans. Finally, we note that the predominantly gender binary frameworks of most GEPs have offered limited insights into intersectionality practices. Accordingly, this stresses the

need for further research on how GEPs address intersecting inequalities and additional minority or often-excluded groups beyond women.

The findings also cannot be generalised across EU or Balkan academia as a whole; the aim has been to enhance the in-depth understanding of GEPs, drawing from the experiences of Greek, Serbian, and Bosnian universities. Future research should thus examine additional countries and academic settings to further broaden our understanding, and accordingly detangle the effect of regional, geopolitical nuances and more universal obstacles. Finally, system archetypes and causal loop models cannot predict long-term intervention pathways and effectiveness due to the systems' continuous self-transformation and adaptation to surrounding environments (Osman et al., 2024; Moore et al., 2017). Future CAS-driven inquiry could investigate evolving GEP pathways further, also employing additional CAS concepts, such as path dependency.

3.8 Conclusions

Building on the examination of GEPs implemented in Balkan academia, this study explores how GEPs effectiveness is experienced and perceived, specifically against the fidelity, quality, and stakeholder reach of implementation. It identifies complex and systemic barriers evolving around socio-political norms operating at national level, local organisational dynamics, and the overall situated practice of gender. The novel approach employed at the intersection of complexity, systems thinking, and gender, and the corresponding systems-based analysis further reveal how the CAS-driven dynamics of institutions can exacerbate the barriers' adverse effects. The non-linear and mutually reinforcing interdependencies that exist between them collectively give rise to the university systems' emergent causality and shape what is considered to be an ambivalent effectiveness for GEPs to date. The refined GEP programme theory and the resulting integrative framework for further comprehending GEPs problematise existing assumptions about how such interventions unfold and work. Accordingly, they underscore the value of transcending reductionist and mainstream perspectives on gender policies and interventions in organisational settings, to ensure alignment with the diverse and uncertain contexts they aim to transform. Ultimately, this study enhances the understanding of a recently introduced but increasingly widespread gender policy in universities, and provides valuable thorough insights to scholars, practitioners, and decision-makers.

3.9 References

These are available under the thesis' full reference list.

Chapter 4. The dark side of Gender Equality Plans: exploring their unintended consequences

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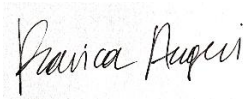
Signature of the co-author	
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Abstract

Gender equality interventions have been consistently implemented by universities, with Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) emerging as a key policy intervention increasingly adopted by European institutions following the Horizon Europe (HE) eligibility criterion. In this context, GEPs' capacity to achieve the envisaged changes warrants further examination. This need is also exacerbated by growing concerns that GEPs encounter systemic challenges and may even produce undesirable outcomes. The present study critically explores GEPs' perceived impact, focusing on their unintended, adverse consequences. An instrumental case study examines GEPs implemented in Balkan academia, with interview and archival data collected from seven universities across Greece, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Employing a theoretical framework integrating gendered organisations theory and Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) theory, we conceptualise GEPs as complex interventions operating in gendered, and CAS-informed institutions. Accordingly, we conduct a qualitative systems-based process evaluation that particularly foregrounds university actors' experiences and perceptions around their organisation's GEPs. These reveal GEPs' unintended consequences, which encompass overt and covert resistance as back-firing effects, and performative compliance to the HE mandate as a negative spillover effect. Additionally, the findings articulate the contextual mechanisms and non-linear pathways that are considered to trigger GEPs' consequences. These dynamics are shaped by interdependent elements and gender practices across the societal, organisational, and individual system level, thereby challenging prevalent assumptions about GEPs' unfolding. Overall, we contribute to scholarly work on GEPs and gender equality interventions in academic settings, and to empirical investigations and theorisations of such interventions' unintended consequences. Moreover, our study's theoretical framework introduces a novel, conjunctive approach to explore gender interventions' impact, potentially extended to additional interventions and settings. Finally, contextual insights into the black-box of GEPs serve as a foundation for actionable recommendations for policy practitioners and decision-makers.

4.1 Introduction

In recent years, universities worldwide have increasingly implemented Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) interventions to address gender inequalities in academia. Notably, the introduction of the Horizon Europe (HE) eligibility criterion has catalysed the widespread adoption of Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) across Europe. GEPs constitute policy interventions and are composed of a set of actions that aim to "promote gender equality through the sustainable transformation of organisational processes, cultures and structures that produce and sustain gender imbalances and inequalities" (EC, 2021a, p. 11). Scholars have noted some positive effects stemming from GEPs (Karydou, 2024), including their potential to enable participatory governance approaches (Brescianini et al., 2023), and address power-driven inequalities (Clavero and Galligan, 2021). Still, as GEPs are relatively new and have been rapidly adopted under tight EC-driven timelines, their capacity to effect substantive institutional change remains uncertain and warrants further scrutiny (Cannito et al., 2023). This need is also compounded by the absence of robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in GEP-implementing universities, preventing the examination of their progress in a meaningful and systematic way (Zabaniotou et al., 2021; Kalpazidou Scmidt and Cacace, 2019). Additionally, scholars already express concerns that GEPs encounter persistent obstacles, and may produce outcomes opposite to the ones envisaged, for instance related to the exacerbation of existing inequalities (O'Neil, 2023), and to the prioritisation of administrative compliance over transformative progress (Cannito et al., 2023).

Aiming to deepen the study on GEPs, this paper critically explores their impact and specifically focuses on their potential to generate unintended consequences. Unintended consequences as defined here include the undesirable outcomes that are adverse compared to the desired and planned ones ("back-firing effects"), or the outcomes that are generally unanticipated and evoke undesirable effects in areas other than the planned ones ("negative spillover effects") (Leslie, 2019, p. 544). Applying a theoretical framework grounded in Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) theory and gendered organisations theory (Acker, 1990), GEPs are conceptualised as complex interventions within gendered institutions functioning as CAS. This perspective enables a qualitative systems-based process evaluation, which delineates contextual pathways and impact mechanisms leading to such consequences (Skivington et al., 2021b; Moore et al., 2015). Impact mechanisms are defined as the relational links that exist between the intervention (including its implemented activities) and the system (including its context and stakeholders) (Moore et al., 2015). An instrumental case

study (Stake, 1995) specifically examines GEPs within academic institutions in the Balkans, targeting universities in Greece, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). This region provides a unique context to examine GEPs, owing to its underrepresentation in organisational gender scholarship, its nascent progress in gender equality (Bojičić-Dželilović and Hozić, 2020), and its heterogeneous affiliations with the EU. Data were collected through 42 employee interviews and secondary archival analysis across seven universities, and were afterwards analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2021; 2019).

The study findings, building on institutional policy discourses and especially university stakeholders' experiences and sensemaking around the GEPs, reveal that those plans' unintended consequences encompass overt resistance, covert resistance, and performative compliance to the HE mandate. Stakeholders' experiences and perceptions particularly reveal how these consequences are evoked due to interdependent societal, organisational, and individual elements and gender practices that shape impact mechanisms. For instance, these elements include traditional norms and fear for westernisation, top-down policy initiation and consequent box-ticking exercises, and broader reluctance towards change. The activated impact mechanisms and non-linear pathways are further articulated using system archetypes. We introduce the idea of dark causal loop models, which illustrate the emergence of complex interventions' unintended consequences (Bonell et al., 2015), specifically under a systems-based perspective. Finally, the above analysis provides input for a refined programme theory (Skivington et al., 2021b) tailored to GEPs. This challenges prevailing linear assumptions about GEPs' impact mechanisms and expected pathways, at a time when there is limited scholarly reflection on those plans (Cannito et al., 2023).

Overall, we contribute to the growing body of scholarly work on gender interventions in academic settings (e.g. Tzanakou et al., 2025; O'Brien et al., 2023; Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2020) and GEPs (Ní Laoire et al., 2021; Clavero and Galligan, 2021), with a focus on their potential to produce unintended, adverse consequences. In this way, we also highlight how the situated practice of gender within university systems strongly shapes intervention outcomes (Gherardi, 1994), especially in highly gendered contexts like Balkan academia. Furthermore, we enrich and contextualise existing typologies on DEI interventions' unintended consequences (Leslie, 2019) by theorising GEPs' consequences through an innovative, conjunctive lens driven by CAS theory. As for integrating gendered organisations theory with CAS theory in our framework, we provide a useful heuristic for unpacking the interconnectedness of elements and practices hindering equality in gendered and complex

organisations, and extend relevant research (e.g. Lansu et al., 2019). In doing so, this study finally provides a theoretical and methodological foundation for addressing similar gender-related policies in academic and research organisations and beyond, advancing both scholarly inquiry and practitioner approaches to gender equality interventions' examination (Zabaniotou et al., 2021; Kalpazidou and Schmidt Cacace, 2017).

The paper is structured as follows: we firstly provide an account of gender policy interventions in university settings, especially the ones functioning as a precursor to GEPs, and focus on their perceived success in achieving their intended outcomes. Afterwards, we set the scene around the emergence of GEPs at EU level, and engage with the limited insights available about their impact and ability to stimulate the envisaged changes. The study's theoretical framework is afterwards presented, followed by the presentation of the methodology. We then focus on the study's findings and themes; these firstly report GEPs' intended outcomes, and afterwards describe in depth the unintended consequences they eventually evoke and associated factors. The final sections of the paper discuss the findings and articulate the study's theoretical and practical implications.

4.2 Gender policy interventions in academia: tensions and ambivalent outcomes

4.2.1 Problematising gender interventions preceding GEPs

Universities have increasingly adopted various gender policy interventions approximately in the last two decades (Clavero and Galligan, 2021), with the achievement of their foreseen outcomes remaining rather ambivalent. For instance, such interventions often address WLB issues but may fail to genuinely address employees' evolving caregiving needs (McDonald et al., 2005) or reinforce stereotypical gendered assumptions about the caring responsibilities of working mothers as opposed to the ideal male worker (Hobson, 2018). Affirmative action measures including quotas also raise concerns about fostering female representation in a procedural way, leaving organisational power dynamics intact (Voorspoels and Bleijenbergh, 2019). Strong scepticism similarly exists for interventions addressing GBV and harassment (Harris, 2017; Townsley and Geist, 2000), and for women-only development programs (Snickare and Wahl, 2024), among others.

Among the various gender equality interventions, the accreditation scheme of Athena SWAN for Anglo-Saxon universities, often referred to a precursor to GEPs (Cannito et al., 2023), marked a considerable turning point by introducing the most comprehensive, strategic gender

scheme in Europe (Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2020). Athena SWAN has systematically attracted scholarly attention. While fostering reflection on gender inequalities in academia, progress in meeting planned outcomes remains rather slow, for instance in terms of strengthening female representation in leadership positions (O'Connor, 2020) and decreasing gender pay gaps (Ovseiko et al., 2017). Scholars further stress the risk of unintended consequences in the light of the scheme's susceptibility to neoliberal trends, whereby moderate feminist practices are promoted, favouring compliance and performance goals instead of genuine change (Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019). Similarly, the implementation of the scheme can take the form of "institutional peacocking" (Yarrow and Johnston, 2023, p. 757). In such cases, institutions celebrate the acquisition of equality credentials on the basis of performative equality work, and thus prioritise the projection of an attractive institutional image for boosting competitiveness and reputational gain (ibid).

4.2.2 GEPs' emergence and reflections on their success

Following a similar rationale to Athena SWAN, GEPs were formally introduced by the EC in 2021 as an eligibility criterion for the participation of universities and research organisations in the HE framework programme. This criterion became active from 2022 onwards. Notably, the implementation of GEPs in academic and research organisations was encouraged long before this mandate, throughout framework programme 6 (2002-2006), framework programme 7 (2007-2013) and Horizon2020 (2014-2020). The European Institute of Gender Equality (EIGE) further supported GEPs' implementation by releasing the GEAR (Gender Equality in Academia and Research) tool, and providing assistance on setting up GEPs (EIGE, 2016b). Currently, HE frames GEPs as key policy interventions to foster gender equality and change in the European Research Area and counteract the slow gender progress reported in the latest She Figures reports (EC, 2025; 2021b; 2019). Based on the HE guidelines, GEPs are defined as follows (EC, 2021a, p.11):

> A GEP is a set of commitments and actions that aim to promote gender equality through the sustainable transformation of organisational processes, cultures and structures that produce and sustain gender imbalances and inequalities. GEPs should address not only an organisation's visible structure and practices (such as policies and procedures), but also consider how to evolve espoused values (what people say they believe) and underlying assumptions (unconscious beliefs, thoughts, and feelings), including in the production of knowledge and its applications.

Accordingly, the EC (2021a) recommends specific intervention areas for GEPs, which include WLB and organisational culture, gender balance in leadership and decision-making, gender equality in recruitment and career progression, and GBV including sexual harassment. A set of mandatory requirements further relate to publishing a formal GEP document on the institutional website, allocating resources for its implementation, collecting data on sex and gender and submitting annual progress reports, and conducting training activities for the entire organisation.

Still, despite this detailed guidance, GEPs often face persistent challenges that limit their transformative potential. Ní Laoire et al. (2021) argue about universities' tendency to pursue policy transferability and rely on the best-practices paradigm instead of developing GEPs that correspond to the local and cultural context. O'Neil's (2023) and Göker and Polatdemir's (2022) investigation of GEPs in Turkish universities further suggests the strong hindering effect of conservative norms. For instance, anti-gender national discourse limits the inclusive scope of GEPs, and prevailing gender binary assumptions adversely promote stereotypical WLB interventions on the basis of heterosexuality. Concurrently, there is limited recognition of the systemic roots of inequalities in academia, which can result in the adoption of fixing-the-women approaches within training and leadership programs (O'Neil, 2023).

Then, Clavero and Galligan (2021), while stressing the importance and utility of GEPs to challenging epistemic injustice and power relations in academia, also recognise the market-driven and technocratic motivations that may underpin their adoption (Afiouni et al., 2025). Their observation is complemented by the arguments of Karydou (2024), regarding the tendency of universities and research organisations in Greece to comply with the minimum HE requirements without actively pushing their implementation forward. Rosa and Clavero (2022) and O'Connor (2020) express similar concerns, stressing the ambiguous effectiveness of such actions, and suggesting that their mere existence does not guarantee profound progress in addressing inequalities.

Furthermore, emerging research on GEPs stresses their potential to trigger adverse effects, firstly regarding resistance. Both individual and institutionalised resistances (Tildesley et al., 2022) are systematically encountered in response to gender equality interventions within the academic and research sector (Palmén and Kalpazidou Schmidt, 2019; Verloo, 2018; Fogelberg et al., 1999). These are often rooted in the desire of those in authority to sustain their status quo and existing hierarchies (Lombardo and Mergaert, 2013). This tendency,

termed as power over by Afiouni et al. (2025) appears to trigger resistance towards GEPs in Greece as well. With further reference to GEPs, scholars highlight that conservative and anti-feminist norms may also trigger resistances, while postfeminist narratives may strengthen assumptions that equality has been achieved, overall diminishing the perceived necessity of GEPs and support for them (Krzaklewska et al., 2023). In addition, similarly to Athena SWAN, GEPs are associated with an unequal and gendered division of labour for those involved in GEPs' execution (Karydou, 2024; Tzanakou, 2019). This is often linked to inadequate resource allocation (Chamochumbi Diaz et al., 2024; Caprile et al., 2022), and to the lack of managerial engagement in organising and prioritising institutional efforts for GEPs' implementation (Krzaklewska et al., 2023; Caprile et al., 2022).

All the above tensions are also exacerbated in light of monitoring and evaluation deficits. GEPs' monitoring and evaluation by practitioners is consistently insufficient (Zabaniotou et al., 2021), despite systematic recognition of the need for dedicated organisational units to track GEPs' progress, and scholarly calls for evaluation frameworks (Thomson et al., 2022) that consider local dynamics and changes (Kalpazidou Scmidt and Cacace, 2019; 2017), Even after the release of the HE guidance, GEPs' evaluation remains, at best, ambiguous and incomplete (Karydou, 2024), an "open question" (Cannito et al., 2023, p. XVI) requiring deeper investigation.

4.3 Examining GEPs as complex interventions in gendered, and complex and adaptive systems

As prior research consistently highlights, gender equality interventions, and now GEPs, encounter numerous and systemic obstacles within universities (Afiouni et al., 2025; Yarrow and Davies, 2023; Clavero and Galligan, 2021). Emerging insights on GEPs similarly suggest their potential to produce undesirable outcomes, due to various, including situated, factors (O'Neil, 2023). Therefore, a holistic yet fine-grained approach is needed, to account for the underlying system dynamics of the settings where GEPs unfold and explore in depth why and how these may give rise to GEPs' unintended consequences. Accordingly, we adopt a comprehensive framework building on gendered organisations theory and CAS theory, presented in the following subsections.

4.3.1 Gendered organisations and systemic gender practices

Acker's (1990) theory on gendered organisations functions as a foundational heuristic (Benschop and Dooreward, 2012) to zoom in on universities, acknowledging the multiplicity

and interconnectedness of systemic elements that impede equality. In her work, these are suggested to relate to culture, structure, identity, interactions, and organisational logic, and to operate across multiple levels, including the societal, organisational, and individual level, while being interconnected (Lansu et al., 2019; Acker, 2006). This view further enhances a focus on gender as practice (Gherardi, 1994), and as a socially-constructed and dynamic phenomenon (West and Zimmerman, 1987). It enables an interpretative approach to understanding how organisations, through both the "gender we think" (non-material elements, such as beliefs) and the "gender we do" (more concrete elements, such as organisational behaviours and interactions), shape organisational inequalities and also determine the success of corresponding remedial practices (Gherardi, 1994, p. 595). This holistic perspective thus moves beyond simplistic analyses and instead allows prioritising the situated analysis of gender practices within university systems, and their influence on intervention outcomes.

Still, while gendered organisations theory provides a valuable framework for examining systemic elements and practices, and their impact on gender interventions, the expected analytical lens for capturing their in-between interactions and mutually reinforcing effects remains somewhat vague (Lansu et al., 2019). Therefore, in the present study we further draw from CAS theory and the analytical foundations of complex interventions; GEPs are conceptualised as complex interventions operating within gendered institutions that function as CAS. A qualitative systems-based process evaluation of GEPs is enabled accordingly, shedding light to their emergent pathways especially through university members' relevant perceptions and interpretations. This approach allows us to investigate in depth and in rich detail non-linear interdependencies between systemic elements and practices, including how they trigger GEPs' unintended consequences.

4.3.2 GEPs as complex interventions in CAS

The concept of complex interventions has been consistently applied to examine health and care interventions (Skivington et al., 2021a). In contrast, research on organisational gender interventions has only recently and slowly begun to frame them as complex interventions (Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2020). As scholars gradually stress, there is a need to acknowledge those interventions' inherent complexity and transcend linear and simplistic analytical approaches to understand in depth their impact (Kalpazidou Schmidt and Vigsø Pedersen, 2025; Kalpazidou Schmidt and Ovseiko, 2020).

An intervention can be considered as complex because of its properties, such as multiple components and stakeholders involved, as well as because it heavily interacts with the system within which it is situated and its context (Skivington et al., 2021b). In the present study, we strongly acknowledge this systemic embeddedness and view complex interventions as events in systems (Hawe et al., 2009); these interventions are not merely a "package of decontextualised components" (p. 267) but constitute intrinsic attributes of the system and are heavily affected by it.

Moreover, the system where complex interventions operate is a complex and adaptive system (CAS). As an open system, it exhibits a high-level of self-organisation, as it continuously co-evolves along with its wider environment and adapts to it (Chandler et al., 2016). Also, multiple constituent elements interact in a dynamic, non-linear way within a CAS, creating interdependencies that do not apply to usual transformation rules (Tsoukas, 2017). These interdependencies are further strengthened by reinforcing feedback loops (Anderson, 1999); such loops, also called positive loops, amplify change towards one direction and evoke rapid change, often causing instability in the system. Overall, these interdependencies and the exchange of feedback (input and output) shape the system's emergent causality, where "multiple interacting influences account for a particular outcome, but none can be said to have a fixed effect size" (Greenhalgh and Papoutsi, 2018, p.3). This evokes various emergent outcomes at the system level, including unintended consequences, which are inherently unpredictable (Chandler et al., 2016) as they do not represent the sum of the system's parts (Hawe et al., 2009).

4.3.3 Qualitative systems-based process evaluation

Overall, by acknowledging the interventions' and their systems' complexity, a focus is placed on systemic context and its emergent, causal effects. Exploring the impact of an intervention in such a system, requires an approach that accounts for these unpredictable system dynamics and the way they shape the intervention's impact itself. To this end, we apply a qualitative, systems-based process evaluation. Process evaluation aims to understand how an intervention functions (Skivington et al., 2021a). It specifically examines why an intervention works and succeeds, but also why it fails or produces unintended consequences (ibid). As Bonell et al. (2015) stress, complex interventions have great potential to generate such consequences as they introduce disruptions to intricate social systems. To explore complex interventions' unintended consequences, the following aspects are addressed through process evaluation: mechanisms of impact, and context (Moore et al., 2015). Mechanisms of impact refer to the

relational links that exist between the intervention (including its implemented activities) and the system (including its context and stakeholders), and collectively give rise to intended or unintended outcomes and consequences (Moore et al., 2015). Context then refers to any factor within the system that "influences and shapes the mechanisms of impact and consequent outcomes", (Moore et al., 2015, p. 8), thus including situated gender practices as well.

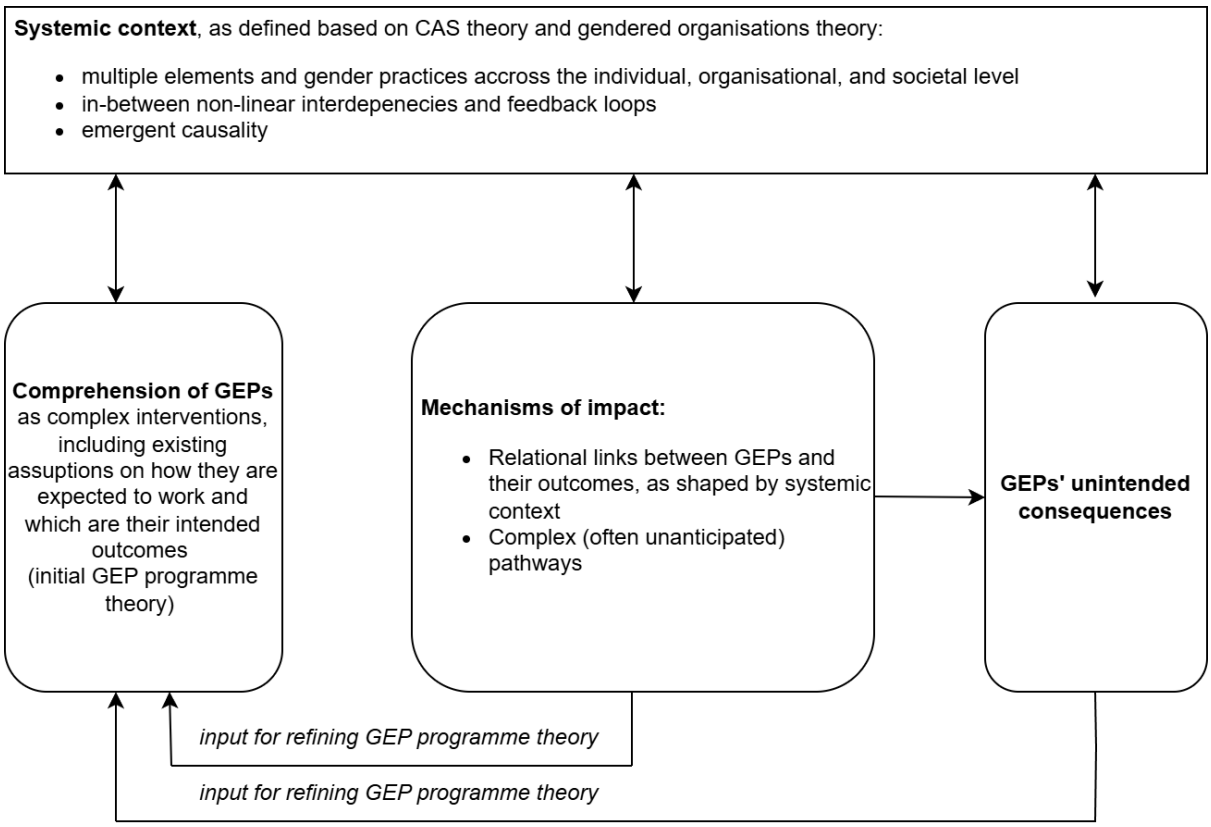
Regarding systems-based process evaluation, it incorporates CAS principles throughout (Skivington et al., 2021b). This enables the adoption of a fine-grained analytical perspective on the system's context, allowing for the articulation of complex, often unanticipated, causal pathways leading to unintended consequences (Moore et al., 2015). Namely, we focus on the dynamic, non-linear interdependencies and activated feedback loops that define the system's context, which in turn shape the intervention's impact mechanisms and unintended consequences. Notably, the goal has not been to examine in a rigid way measurable effects stemming out of the intervention, but instead qualitatively explore organisational actors' perceptions and interpretations of how interventions may lead to unintended consequences within the system where they are implemented (McGill et al., 2016).

Therefore, the qualitative systems-based analysis of GEPs achieves the following: it identifies which are their perceived unintended consequences and articulates the underlying impact mechanisms that evoke them. In terms of impact mechanisms, we explore the way they are shaped by the interdependencies, reinforcing feedback loops, and overall emergent causality that exists within the gendered, CAS-driven institutions. Owing to the lens of gendered organisations' theory, we further unpack how these mechanisms are shaped by contextual elements and gender practices encountered across the societal, organisational, and individual level of the complex system. To define these levels, we build on Lansu et al. (2019) and their work on systemic gender processes, and Bozzon et al. (2018) and their multi-analytical perspective to examine gender equality issues in academia. Accordingly, the societal level encompasses broader gender regimes and discourses and socio-cultural norms, such as those operating at national and transnational levels. The organisational level encompasses organisational culture, defined as both the gender we think and the gender we do, following Gherardi's (1994) work. Finally, the individual level includes subjective and experiential dimensions, including individual behaviours and attitudes of organisational members. Notably, the societal and individual level are not seen as exogenous to the organisational level; instead, they are seen as interconnected with it, collectively shaping the unfolding of

organisational gender policies like GEPs (Lansu et al., 2019). Concurrently, it should be acknowledged that positioning certain elements at a single level during a systems-based analysis is not always straightforward; for instance, individual attitudes may be reproduced collectively shaping organisational culture. Such mutual constitutions are exactly what characterises multi-level complex systems, and they are reflected accordingly in the findings.

Finally, we note that, before delving into GEPs' unintended consequences, we sought to understand existing assumptions on how they are expected to work and achieve their intended outcomes (Skivington et al., 2021b). As Leslie (2019) similarly argues, before comprehending and theorising the unintended consequences of gender equality-related interventions, it is vital to first define their intended consequences. Accordingly, we developed an initial programme theory (Skivington et al., 2021b; Moore et al., 2015) for the GEPs examined, based on the corresponding institutions' policy discourses and narratives; this outlines planned GEP activities, implementation pathways and intended outcomes. This initial and largely linear version was subsequently updated based on the findings reflecting stakeholders' views and sensemaking. Proceeding a step further, we introduce the idea of dark causal loop models, departing from Bonnell et al.'s (2015) notion of dark logic models, where "diagrammatic logic models and descriptive theories of change" (p. 97) are developed to illustrate the unintended harms of interventions and the underlying mechanisms that trigger them. Considering the need for models to capture emergent instead of linear outcomes (Rogers, 2008), the introduced dark causal loop models incorporate our CAS-based approach. Thus, they articulate the systems-based, dynamic, and non-linear emergence of GEPs' unintended consequences, ultimately providing input for a refined GEP programme theory. Figure 4.1 summarises the core components of the study's approach.

Figure 4.1 Overview of the study's approach



Source: Adapted based on Moore et al.'s (2015) guidance on complex interventions.

4.4 Methodology

4.4.1 Instrumental case study approach

To explore GEPs' perceived impact and advance understanding of their unintended consequences, we conducted an instrumental case study examining GEPs implemented in universities in the Balkan region. An instrumental case study aims to provide a rich understanding of a broader phenomenon through the insights provided by a specific case (Stake, 1995). We selected Balkan academia as an unusual case that can illustrate issues potentially overlooked in typical cases of gender policy research (Stake, 1995). The Balkans remain largely underexplored in organisational gender scholarship, and exhibit nascent progress in gender equality within traditional, socio-cultural contexts (Spahić Šiljak et al., 2022). Although national-level legislative frameworks that promote gender equality are in place, their translation into practice remains limited (Ćeriman and Vučković Juroš, 2024; Anagnostou, 2023). Still, public universities across the region now face the imperative to

implement concrete gender policies in line with the HE mandate. This confluence renders the region particularly promising for generating enriched insights into GEPs.

To delineate the boundaries of both our case study (Stake, 1995) and the complex system under investigation (Petticrew et al., 2019), we addressed three specific Balkan countries: Greece, Serbia, and BiH. These counties, although all located within the broader Balkan region, have divergent relationships with the EU. Greece constitutes an EU Member State, Serbia is engaged in accession negotiations, and BiH was a potential candidate at the time of designing the study. Beyond their formal EU status, this also reflects each country's socio-economic, political, and legal landscape. EU membership is granted based on a country's adherence to the accession criteria that encompass, among others, democratic governance, human rights, and the rule of law. Thus, this ensures that the selected counties and corresponding case study balance commonalities with diversity (Stake, 1995), enabling a nuanced examination of the target phenomenon.

It is further noted that these three countries were selected over other Balkan countries with the same EU membership status for several reasons. Serbia was chosen over Montenegro to preserve the anonymity of participating universities; the limited number of universities in Montenegro could make participants more readily identifiable. Greece was then selected over other Balkan EU Member States, due to its notably low ranking on the EIGE Equality Index at the time of case selection; it exhibited the lowest index among EU Member States in 2022, making it particularly compelling for examination. Finally, BiH was selected instead of Kosovo because its public universities have a larger size, thereby facilitating data collection and ensuring greater participant anonymity. This selection further aligns with the criteria used to determine which specific universities would provide the study's data, as described next.

In more detail, specific universities from the above three countries were selected for examination. These institutions are not identified throughout the study, but information on the employed selection criteria is provided. Apart from selecting public universities that necessarily have a GEP due to their involvement in HE funding, we opted for large universities employing university size as an indicator of systemic diversity (Lepori et al., 2023). Larger universities were prioritised for their capacity to provide comprehensive data, for instance on stakeholders' multifaceted experiences, their ability to enhance participant anonymity, and the tendency of large and prominent universities to engage actively with social responsibility issues (Nejati et al., 2011). Among the largest universities in each

country, those presenting themselves as more active on gender issues, based on a detailed screening of their institutional websites and public materials, were selected to enhance analytical depth. Data were ultimately retrieved from seven universities, three in Greece, two in Serbia, and two in BiH. All data were collected after receiving ethical approval for the study and all associated procedures by the institutional ethics committee.

4.4.2 Data collection

Data retrieved from these universities first encompass archival data. We collected the formal GEP policy documents (and any accompanying reports) across all universities, totalling nine organisational documents. For these documents to be included in our data pool it was necessary to be publicly accessible, and published on the institutions' official websites, as the authority of data sources is of critical importance. Overall, these documents reveal universities' policy discourses around GEPs and thus provided the primary information for identifying GEPs' progression pathways, and most importantly, their planned and intended outcomes.

Furthermore, between May 2023 and February 2024, the first author conducted 42 semi-structured interviews to understand in depth participants' experiences and perceptions around the GEPs, and the meanings they assign to them. As McGill at al. (2020) and Moore at al. (2015) stress, qualitative data are essential to delve deeper into how stakeholders make sense of interventions in varying and intricate ways, and thus unpack and comprehend pathways by which complex interventions can produce outcomes, including unintended consequences. A purposive sampling technique was employed to recruit employees across all universities and from the following positions: top management representatives and academic leaders, GEP policy implementers, and GEP policy recipients. An email invitation with a participant information sheet was sent to prospective participants, explaining the study's aim and inviting them to participate in an online interview with the researcher. 42 interviews were ultimately conducted. The sampling strategy overall resulted in a rather varied participant distribution across institutions and countries, with few more participants from Greek institutions, as the researcher's Greek background enhanced willingness to contribute. Table 4.1 outlines participant and document distribution across the three counties.

Table 4.1 Data sources distribution across countries

Country	Interviewees	Documents
Greece	Top management representatives: 4 (3 women, 1 man) Policy implementers: 11 (11 women) Policy recipients: 7 (2 women, 5 men) *Total: 22 participants* *(16 women, 6 men)*	4 documents
Serbia	Top management representatives: 1 (1 woman) Policy implementers: 4 (4 women) Policy recipients: 7 (6 women, 1 man) *Total: 12 participants* *(11 women, 1 man)*	2 documents
BiH	Top management representatives: 2 (1 woman, 1 man) Policy implementers: 4 (4 women) Policy recipients: 2 (2 women) *Total: 8 participants* *(7 women, 1 man)*	3 documents

The interviews were conducted via Zoom, ranging from 25 up to 68 minutes. 30 interviews were held in English and 12 in Greek, allowing those participants greater comfort in expressing themselves, especially when not being fluent in English. Reflections and observations were documented by the researcher after each interview, adding further input to the data analysis. All interviews were recorded upon participants' consent, transcribed, and afterwards manually checked. The Greek transcripts underwent both forward and backward

translation using the translation option in MS Word, to ensure maximum accuracy and equivalence in meaning.

In alignment with our interpretivist approach and the format of semi-structured interviews, open-ended questions were employed. These allow to prioritise participants' lived experiences and overall preserve the contextual richness of the case study (Denzin, 2010). Interviewees were invited to reflect on their engagement with the GEPs, their interpretations of the GEPs' unfolding in their organisation and, most importantly, their perceptions about their outcomes and any perceived changes at the individual or organisational level. Questions directly asking whether participants had perceived any negative outcomes and impact out of the GEPs were avoided so as to not lead them. On the contrary, the open-ended inquiry into the diverse outcomes and impacts of GEPs allowed the researcher to interpret information on unintended consequences through interviewees' own narratives. Notably, such follow-up questions on adverse, unintended consequences were posed only when relevant observations were mentioned by the participants during the conversation. Ultimately, the interview data enhanced the contextual, in-depth understanding (Skivington et al., 2021a) of the GEPs, and provided detailed insights on how their consequences are shaped by universities' systemic elements and practices (Gherardi, 1994).

4.4.3 Data analysis

Data were analysed employing reflexive thematic analysis (TA). TA "identifies, analyses and reports patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Reflexive TA, in particular, highly values qualitative data and embraces researcher subjectivity and reflexivity as a valuable source of knowledge during the analytical and interpretative process (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach (2006), the first author repeatedly read both the organisational documents and interview transcripts, to ensure the target familiarisation with the data. Afterwards, using the NVivo software, data was coded all together to preserve the focus on the case study as a whole.

A first round of coding and theme development focused on GEPs' intended outcomes. Guided by the definitions of EIGE (2016b) and EC (2021a) about GEPs, we coded data on their intended consequences based on the predefined codes of structural change outcomes, and cultural change outcomes. Information from the documents was coded in these categories, while the researcher also remained flexible during the analytical process to identify potentially new categories not fitting under the pre-established codes. Eventually, this top-

down coding procedure enabled the development of the final themes on GEPs' intended consequences. These comprise gender-responsive organisational structures, and inclusive organisational culture. As the examined GEPs strongly abided by the EC guidance to formulate their goals and define their outcomes, a strong homogeneity existed among them, and no necessity to establish new themes came up.

Afterwards, we proceeded to the second round of coding and theme development, shifting towards a more "interpretative level" of analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 93). We employed predominantly inductive and latent coding. As Howell (2012) argues, there is a continuum between deductive and inductive analysis. In the present case, we prioritised participant-based and data-driven meanings without attempting to fit a predefined coding framework; still, we also took into account existing scholarly literature to refine the generation of our themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Line-by-line coding of the interview transcripts led to the development of the first codes capturing the essence of participants' accounts. These codes were then either expanded further or collated to form the final themes. This second group of themes reflect GEPs' unintended, adverse consequences. Each theme is centred around one major unintended consequence identified, namely: overt resistance (back-firing effect); covert resistance (back-firing effect); and performative compliance (negative spillover effect).

Concurrently, incorporating the perspective of gendered organisations theory and CAS theory, the themes unpack how each consequence manifests throughout the universities, and how it is perceived to be produced due to societal, organisational, and individual practices, and in-between interdependencies. The researcher identified these interdependencies by revisiting the interview data coded under each theme to trace relational and reinforcing patterns between core elements and gender practices, with the latter being positioned across the societal, organisational, and individual levels of the university system. These relational patterns were then documented separately, so as to ultimately be integrated in the corresponding themes' description. Also, the resulting, empirically grounded links informed the content of the dark causal loop models, which unpack how contextual practices and elements interact to generate each unintended consequence. Overall, our analysis combines both data-driven and theory-informed insights, providing rich evidence to the study's research questions. Table 4.2 and 4.3 outline the final themes, sub-themes, and codes (first group and second group accordingly).

Table 4.2 List of themes and codes (first group on GEPs' intended outcomes)

Final themes	Sub-themes	Codes
Gender-responsive organisational structures	Structural change outcomes	• New reporting mechanisms • New monitoring mechanisms • New gender-responsive facilities • Gender mainstreaming in existing university operations
Inclusive organisational culture	Cultural change outcomes	• Raise awareness • Education and training • Address stereotypes, sexism, and bias • Gender-sensitive and supportive environment • Zero tolerance and anti-discrimination

Table 4.3 List of themes and codes (second group on GEPs' unintended consequences)

Final themes	Sub-themes	Codes
Overt resistance	Power-driven opposition	• Not to lose power and status • Long-established hierarchical university structures
	Resistance to protect local culture and ideals	• Older stakeholders with more traditional and conservative perspectives • Traditional universities • Patriarchal culture • Repulsiveness to gender-inclusive language • Concerns for promoting LGBTIQ+ rights • Gender equality coming from the Western world • Micro-aggressions against GEP implementers • Conflicts with policy implementers
	Opposition to GEPs' top-down initiation	• GEPs are enforced by the EU • GEPs are a Western and foreign thing • Praising local movements
Covert resistance	Passive attitude towards gender issues and interventions	• Institutional inertia on gender issues for years • Difficulty in understanding gender challenges • Broader patriarchal culture and stereotypes • Women overwhelmed by undertaking both traditional roles and trying to be empowered
	Individual and organisational resistance to change	• No comprehension of gender challenges • Fear of the unknown • Stakeholders need further awareness-raising

	Devaluation of gender interventions	• Equality has been achieved • Gender issues are quaint • If women work hard, they can make it
Performative compliance	EC-driven and neoliberal competitiveness	• If universities don't have a GEP, they lose money • Forced to do it to remain competitive for the EU
	Prioritisation of simple or minimum GEP requirements for box-ticking	• Just scratching the surface • Do as little as possible • Good measures but how do they turn out in practice? • GEPs are a nice paper
	Impression management to appear inclusive and compliant	• Appear aligned with gender equality-related expectations and requirements • Leaders in favour of seeming
	A need to push beyond performative approaches	• Monitoring and evaluation are essential • Accountability is necessary • University environments to be safe and inclusive

4.5 GEPs in Balkan academia: expected outcomes

Throughout this section, we focus on the results of the first round of data analysis. Specifically, we present GEPs' intended outcomes, including the expected pathways to achieve them. In this way, we articulate GEPs' initial programme theory.

As already argued, GEPs encompass the implementation of practices aimed at addressing inequalities and promoting gender equality in universities (EC, 2021a; EIGE, 2016b). Examined GEPs mostly address inequalities experienced by women and occasionally attempt to adopt an intersectional lens to account for the disadvantages experienced by additional minority groups (e.g. LGBTIQ+ groups). Moreover, these plans strive to initiate a holistic transformation process that engages the entire organisation, and ensures successful outcomes along two dimensions: gender-responsive organisational structures, and inclusive organisational culture.

Under the first dimension, they opt to address the formal, institutional procedures and operations that shape inequality. For instance, universities have procedures in place that tend to disadvantage women (e.g. rigid progression criteria not considering career breaks) or on

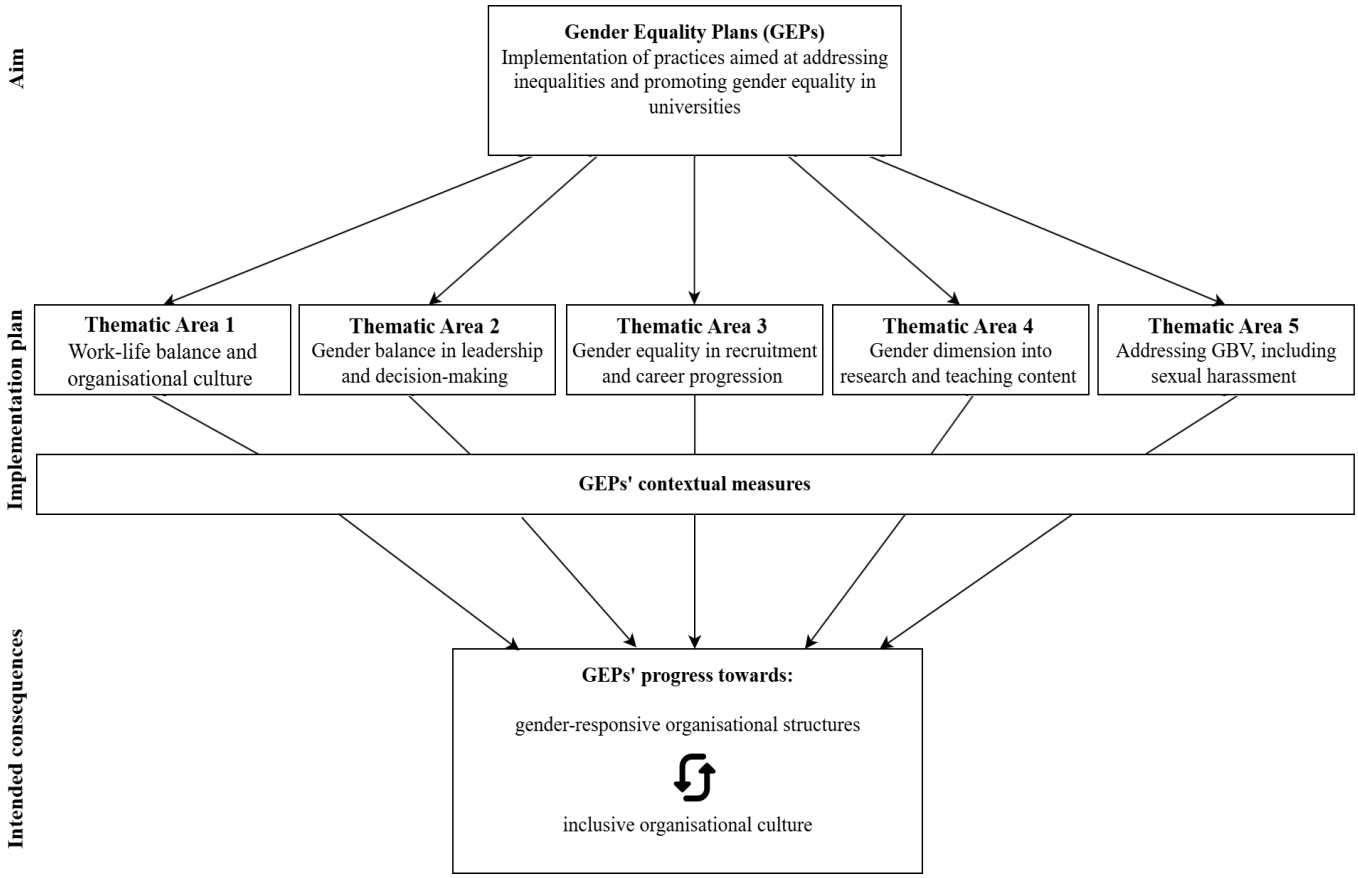
the contrary lack concrete mechanisms to foster gender equality (e.g. reporting mechanisms for GBV and harassment, monitoring mechanisms for gender equality progress). Under the second dimension of inclusive organisational culture, GEPs aim to address the informal, often underlying and invisible, cultural norms that (re)produce gendered dynamics. According to Benschop and Doorewaard (1998), the gender subtext of organisations can perpetuate gendered, power-driven, and stereotypical norms, ideals, behaviours, and symbols (Lund, 2012).

Notable examples of intended outcomes under the first axis encompass introducing institutional mechanisms for the systematic collection of gender-disaggregated data, or investigating the institutional capacity to establish infrastructure in support of employees' caregiving responsibilities, such as childcare facilities. A broader gender mainstreaming process, for instance to research and teaching operations, is also foreseen under somewhat vague terms in most universities. Under the second axis, intended consequences predominantly refer to addressing stereotypes, sexism (including sexist language), and discriminatory treatment, often through extensive awareness-raising and training. Importantly, these two dimensions and corresponding intended outcomes are not framed as mutually exclusive. On the contrary, all examined GEPs recognised the need to pursue progress in both dimensions, verifying that they are highly complementary (Cannito et al., 2023) and corroborating scholarly arguments on the importance of gender interventions to opt for both formal, structural reforms, and informal cultural shifts (Clavero and Galligan, 2021; Fook et al., 2019; Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019; Sallee, 2012).

Furthermore, while the examined GEPs share common intended outcomes, the implementation plans to achieve them often vary. Following the HE guidance, all GEPs are structured around relatively common thematic areas addressing key inequalities. Each thematic area further includes a set of measures. These outline specific actions for meeting the GEP intended outcomes and are accompanied by indicators tracking progress. Also, they are assigned to specific stakeholder groups within the institutions based on authority and expertise. The most considerable divergences are encountered in the measures adopted. This largely stems from the audit procedures universities performed during the GEPs' formulation stage; they collected institutional and gender-disaggregated data and ultimately identified contextual gender challenges and gaps to be addressed under each thematic area.

Finally, the way institutions frame the relationships between the structural and cultural outcomes also differs. Occasionally, measures for fostering an inclusive organisational culture and corresponding outcomes in this area are framed as a means to achieve structural outcomes. For example, raising awareness on unequal career progression, or challenging stereotypes within the universities is framed as a means to achieve a greater female representation in leadership and decision-making positions. Conversely, structural reforms, such as establishing new institutional infrastructure for handling GBV and harassment reporting, is often seen as foundational to cultivating a culture of zero tolerance. Figure 4.2 illustrates the GEPs' initial programme theory, particularly focusing on their intended outcomes.

Figure 4.2 GEPs' pathways towards intended outcomes (initial programme theory)



4.6 The unintended consequences of GEPs

This section articulates the findings on GEPs' unintended adverse consequences, acquired through rich interview discussions with university stakeholders and their interpretative analysis. These findings reveal nuanced, intricate realities and lived experiences around GEPs, further pointing out to their unintended consequences through the following themes:

overt resistance, covert resistance, and performative compliance. Each theme describes the unintended consequence identified as a back-firing or negative spillover effect. It focuses on the way the unintended consequences manifest within the institutions, and on the mechanisms that trigger them. Using system archetypes (Kim, 1992) and specifically the CAS-driven, dark causal loop models (Figures 4.3 – 4.5, one for each theme), we illustrate how these mechanisms are shaped through non-linear interdependencies and reinforcing feedback loops (R1, R2, R3, R4, R5) between system elements and practices across the societal, organisational, or individual level. The arrows in each model represent the directional relations identified between the core elements and gender practices encapsulated under each theme and, likewise, the feedback loops stand for the reinforcing patterns identified (section 4.4.3). Participant quotations from the interviews further illustrate and add context to these relations. Finally, we report some concerns shared by participants regarding the potential manifestation of negative consequences in the future.

4.6.1 Overt resistance

Rather than fostering an inclusive organisational culture, the GEPs trigger overt resistance as a back-firing effect in several universities. Participants' accounts revealed that organisational power dynamics are considerably evident, often stemming from broader, including societal, rigid perceptions about hierarchical relations ("*These systems who are highly hierarchical, also due to main societal roles....usually these indicate what women and men should do. I think this is transferred to the organisation, not on a conscious level, I think on a subconscious level more*", P35, policy recipient, Serbia). Therefore, in Greek academia, opposition to disrupting hierarchical relations through the GEPs, was notably observed even from the initial GEP stages, among Senate members that had to grant their formal approval of the plan. Additionally, such power dynamics feed into and are also strengthened by stakeholders' desire to safeguard vested interests and avoid disruptions to their own status quo (Figure 4.3, R1) (**"***Now is the time for them to make money, to dominate others, essentially maintaining the same situation themselves experienced, and secure high-ranking positions, and to end their academic careers with some self-promotion*", P28, policy implementer, Greece). This often triggers resistance, since high-authority stakeholders, especially those of an older age, are described as not *"being ready to step out of their comfort zones"* believing that *"is the time to focus on their careers, make their career and they are not willing to step back"* (P28, policy implementer, Greece). Then, as P23 (top management

representative, Greece) further elaborated, such motives and obstructive behaviours have been prominent in the university throughout the years towards similar reforms:

> It is a regime that does not change, it is like concrete, you cannot move it [...] Because there are vested interests and sometimes it's not vested interest in the sense that someone will gain specific... What I was saying before, the establishment within the university has learned to function in a way.

Interviewees further perceive a broader *"institutionalised resistance"* (P15, policy implementer, Greece) towards GEP measures, such as measures addressing gender-inclusive language. This is mainly attributed to entrenched conservative norms and *"to a dominant ideology in relation to gender issues and gender relations, as well as the dominant ideology in the wider society"* (P12, policy implementer, Greece). For instance, such norms lead university stakeholders to believe that GEP implementers *"abuse the Greek language"* (P12, policy implementer, Greece). P31 (top management representative, Greece) further contemplated on the issue of generation gaps, arguing that the Greek academic community is an *"ageing"* one, largely composed of "*older colleagues, the ones who react more*" . Such stakeholders may have *"progressed with their careers and their academic reputation but have not progressed into the next level in terms of society"* (P9, policy recipient, Greece), thus expressing stronger reactions towards change, and especially change involving gender issues.

Participants' experiences, especially those of GEP implementers, further reflect that overt resistance manifests in an even more intense way in universities in Serbia and BiH, occasionally escalating to micro-aggressions ("*This broader, deeply conservative and traditional setting where people simply are convinced that they are supposed to fight gender activists because they will bring you trans ideology*", P7, policy implementer, BiH). Traditional norms are further framed as exacerbating the fear of westernisation and being in turn strengthened by it (Figure 4.3, R2). As P7 further argues about opposing stakeholders, "*nobody is attacking them, but they still have this urge to protect, ultimately preserving and spreading the word about their values and norms*...". Such fears are shared among a majority of stakeholders who view gender issues as linked with *"a western ideology, where feminism is bad for whatever patriarchal culture here"* (P3, policy implementer, BiH). Certain stakeholders have also openly opposed GEP-related events, requesting to be removed from

the emailing lists informing the university community on these events. As further recalled by P20 (policy implementer, Serbia):

> There have been some replies, "take me off this bloody list", "I don't want to hear another thing about this" or "please don't send me anything that has to do with feminism anymore". Not much, two or three emails. But people are reacting [...] It caught me thinking, I mean it's a professional context. And it's a professional email sent from a body within the organisation. I wasn't sending that from my personal email. We have this "equality@email address" and that got me thinking, how safe you have to feel having views like that to openly write that?

Personalised attacks against GEP implementers have also taken place occasionally, mostly in response to awareness-raising initiatives for gender-inclusive language and LGBTIQ+ groups. Some stakeholders, even those in prestigious positions, openly oppose such initiatives, relying on ideological rather than scientific arguments to defend their position *("They would say, "okay, so that's just a step....It's just a precondition to create a British or western model of society for trans ideology, for paedophilia and so on"*, P7, policy implementer, BiH). Described *as "mediaeval knights with the urge to protect"* (P7, policy implementer, BiH) the local culture, such stakeholders also exert a significant psychological pressure to the implementers, while broadly evoking concerns and feelings of unsafety within the university community:

> We have groups of people like that. And then sometimes when they send emails or discuss these things at assemblies, they're very vulgar and they talk against it and they seem very violent. So, I think that people who are actually working for gender-based policies or trying to implement them…need to be very cautious because they get scared. (P8, policy implementer, BiH)

> I was like "why did I need this?" [...] because they had an assembly of their department where they discussed my workshop and how am I damaging the language... and not just me, all the members of the gender equality body, how we are a menace to society" (P7, policy implementer, BiH)

Proceeding further, GEPs themselves may also be perceived as Western-driven interventions, especially in Serbia and BiH. As interviewees' experiences suggest, GEPs' top-down initiation by the EC makes some university stakeholders view them as non-aligned with local, genuine needs. Instead, they frame them as *"Western topic"* and as means to ensure

harmonisation with EU legislation for EU membership purposes, overall expressing opposition and having "*a certain response, negative response to this topic*" (P17, policy implementer, Serbia). Defensive behaviours during departmental workshops have been observed, where for instance male colleagues ask to see references for the training material, to afterwards dismiss them as *"American staff"* and argue that nothing is *"convincing"* or *"compatible"* (P21, policy implementer, Serbia) with the local context.

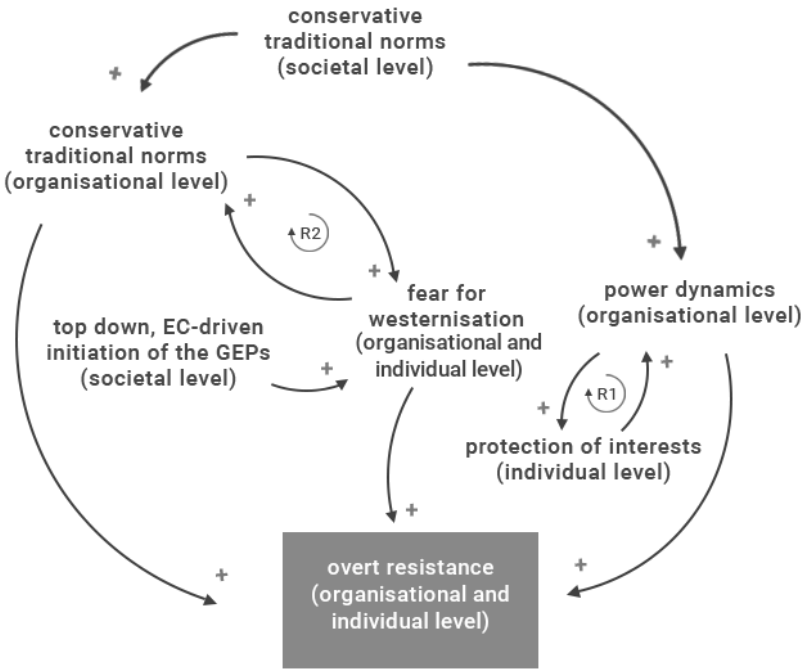
Finally, resistance towards gender issues and GEPs has escalated to legal disputes for some universities in Serbia and BiH. In particular, opposing and rather conservative stakeholders from those universities encouraged a series of processes where GEP implementers and university management received appeals from lawyers' offices. These demanded clarifications for the GEPs' initiation, for instance questioning the provision of financial support to gender initiatives from Western countries. They also question on what premises the GEPs promote gender-inclusive language, since *"that's not in the spirit of Serbian language"* and may even be perceived as *"not in line with the constitution"* (P3, policy implementer, BiH).

Serbian and Bosnian interviewees' reflections finally highlight how concerns about westernisation can often be intertwined with a strong appreciation of local elements, especially the socialist legacy of the former Yugoslavia. While the gender equality provisions of the socialist era were flawed in several aspects, particularly in encouraging traditional and gendered care models and responsibilities, they often continue to be viewed as exemplary and progressive - especially when compared to other EU countries. This applies especially to provisions about equal pay. Indicatively, P38 (policy recipient, BiH) articulated that *"in developed countries, ladies are owned positions but they are not paid as guys for the same position. Since we have been in communism and socialism, we don't have that issue"*. Thus, some stakeholders consider that this local legacy of *"socialism and self-management where women were really equal in salaries and everything"* (P36, policy recipient, Serbia), and their *"authentic movement"* (P8, policy recipient, BiH) is not only a source of pride, but rather a sufficient basis to introduce university gender policies. Within this context, EU directives and relevant western-centric frameworks should be preferably seen as complementary, and not as the main driver for change potentially overriding local models. As P8 (policy recipient, BiH) further reflected upon this issue:

> Contracts here may be better than in Western Europe because of the socialist heritage in terms of, okay, you have one year leave and you cannot be lowered in terms of your position [...] We do have here very strong and important tradition because we had a socialist country which encouraged, which promoted gender equality and women were working here, and we have the highest participation of female researcher countries from the Eastern Europe, ex-communist countries compared to western countries...So I don't think we should rely only on the western policies because we do have our authentic movement, which kind of raise women to certain positions (P8, policy recipient, BiH).

Figure 4.3 illustrates the contextual pathways evoking overt resistance.

Figure 4.3 Dark causal loop model on the emergence of overt resistance



4.6.2 Covert resistance

The GEPs are perceived to further evoke phenomena of covert resistance. As interviewees recounted, such phenomena are encountered more frequently, are less intense but harder to overcome *("I myself have not really found a solution of how to go beyond this. And it gives me a very frustrated, irritated feeling, I don't see a solution here"*, P17, policy implementer, Serbia). Interviewees illustrated that the manifestation of passive resistance towards gender initiatives ranges from *"a sexist joke"* (P12, policy implementer, Greece), *"addressing the GEP and the gender equality discussion with irony"* (P5, top management representative,

Greece), as well as reluctance in undertaking responsibility and implementing gender-related initiatives *("There's a huge resistance, and "Why? Why should I do it?" Or "somebody else should take care of gender""*, P38, policy recipient, BiH). Then, inertia is similarly portrayed as a form of resistance. Several universities have been repeatedly struggling with gender equality initiatives throughout the years, with the respective authorities exhibiting a difficulty in *"moving things forward"* (P12, policy implementer, Greece), for instance in establishing dedicated bodies and structures. The broader university community is similarly perceived as distant from gender-related initiatives and events, with P13 (policy recipient, Greece) arguing as follows:

> There's nobody who will come and say, "oh, what is this? Why are you doing this?" Blah, blah, blah. There's no obstacle in that front. It's just indifference. In this case, you could say there is a group of people who respond to these activities and then all the others just don't care.

Interviewees' experiences and observations further reveal several sources of covert resistance. Organisational members are often influenced by the broader traditional culture and stereotypes within the respective countries and universities - especially in Serbia and BiH -, thus marginalise gender initiatives ("*Our culture is very intolerant […] and I remember when we had one seminar about toxic masculinity that nobody showed up*", P8, policy recipient, BiH). Such patterns of covert resistance, strengthened due to broader traditional culture, especially pertain to activities that address minority groups beyond women, such as LGBTIQ+ groups:

> We are struggling right now because we had a couple of rounds of GEP workshops with teaching staff and non-teaching, administrative staff. You can see a lot of individual resistance […] or because they're immediately connecting gender equality with LGBTIQ rights and....at the Balkans, you have this resistance towards minority rights, especially if this minority is LGBTIQ. (P41, policy implementer, BiH)

The non-comprehension of gender inequalities and challenges, exacerbated by such dominant societal and organisational norms, further shapes passive resistance ("*Here there is still some kind of resistance. I'm not even sure that it's intentional. It's more about awareness. I mean our culture is quite patriarchal*" (P8, policy recipient, BiH). This is framed as especially prominent among male stakeholders. For example, there are difficulties in understanding the challenges of WLB for working mothers, and a tendency among stakeholders to diminish

their significance. As P21 (policy implementer, Serbia) explains, "*one of the challenges is that there is some sort of passive resistance from the male colleagues*", who see these issues as a *"rosy glass"* because *"they are in a comfortable position not to see them as a problem"*. Still, this lack of comprehension may at times be deliberate in nature, as those individuals *"are smart people, they don't want to scratch the surface, because they probably feel that there is something underneath"* (P21, policy implementer, Serbia). Notably, this lack of comprehension has been described as unexpected by some participants, stating that, prior to their involvement in the GEP, they idealised the academics as being more *"open-minded"* (P20, policy implementer, Serbia). Finally, this limited comprehension of gender issues and related institutional interventions is interpreted as significantly amplifying the broader hesitation towards change. This hesitation, stemming from the broader human tendency to question changes and resist what is unfamiliar or not fully understood, often perpetuates individual resistance and even escalates to organisational one, for instance among specific faculties. In such cases, GEP implementers also stressed the need for well-designed communication strategies to raise awareness: :

> I understand how this psychology works. People are manifesting individual resistance either out of fear that something will change when we introduce gender mainstreaming policies [...] or people are not informed of what it is and how their position will improve. So, we have to do much more in terms of informing people what gender mainstreaming is, that it's not going to endanger anybody. It's going to enable people to have the same opportunities for development. So, there is a lot of individual resistance. And also organisational resistance because as a university, it is basically, it is a collection of different faculties, some faculties are really closed, very traditional (P41, policy implementer, BiH)

Notably, interviewees perceive that on some occasions hesitation to change further prevents the more strong-minded stakeholders from being open to new initiatives and understanding the rationale behind them, thus creating a reinforcing feedback loop (Figure 4.4, R3). As P19 (policy recipient, Greece) articulated:

> That's also among the Greek people again and the mindset they have. And if it is something new, they're afraid a little bit to change, let's say, or accept it. […] And many times we have some backfire issues as a result. Like people do not show so much trust in these new initiatives, without any reason at all, because they see it's a new change

> and they say "oh, what is this going to bring in society and our work?" And they just keep misunderstanding it, let's say, because it's such a positive thing and they don't see it as a positive thing. So, they may see it like a neutral thing, which is so bad.

Furthermore, while some stakeholders understand the necessity of initiatives like GEPs, they may still display resistance due to feeling overwhelmed. Especially discussions with Serbian and Bosnian interviewees suggested that women may exhibit a passive resistance towards GEPs, expressed through indifference. This is largely attributed to the perceived *"double burden"* (P21, policy implementer, Serbia), whereby the expectation to be empowered and promote equality feels like *"another thing on their plate"* (P38, policy recipient, BiH) on top of all their existing responsibilities, including caregiving and household tasks. As P38 further reflected, this psychological overwhelm is often strengthened by the dominant, stereotypical norms of the region about caring responsibilities. Women's increased participation in the workforce was supposed to encourage male counterparts to undertake more domestic responsibilities, but such a shift remains challenging in the socio-cultural context of the Balkans ("*When females started to work, guys were supposed to be more, start to be more involved, which is a bit changing here, but Balkans are Balkans, these kind of changes, I'm not sure that will happen*"). P6 (top management representative, BiH) further articulated this situation:

> There are both some women surprisingly, and some men who think that it'll do no good to women, that it will just place an additional burden on them. They'll still have to do all the housework that they traditionally do, but if they want to be at the same level as men, they will have to do things on top of that as well. But I should say that those views are a minority, but they still do exist.

Finally, covert resistance often takes the form of a devaluation of gender initiatives, including GEPs. Interviewees' everyday experiences and encounters with colleagues suggest that this pattern is evident among both male and female stakeholders. Notably, postfeminist narratives shape the perception that there are no gender challenges and equality has been achieved. This assumption is often reinforced by the observed gender balance in institutional departments and units, and progress in closing pay gaps, with P38 (policy recipient, BiH) arguing as follows: "*So when it comes to females it's like "huh, whatever, why don't you go through the higher positions? whatever, you are paid the same as the guys. What's their problem?""*". In particular, *"it is often considered that these issues have a quaintness within the university"*

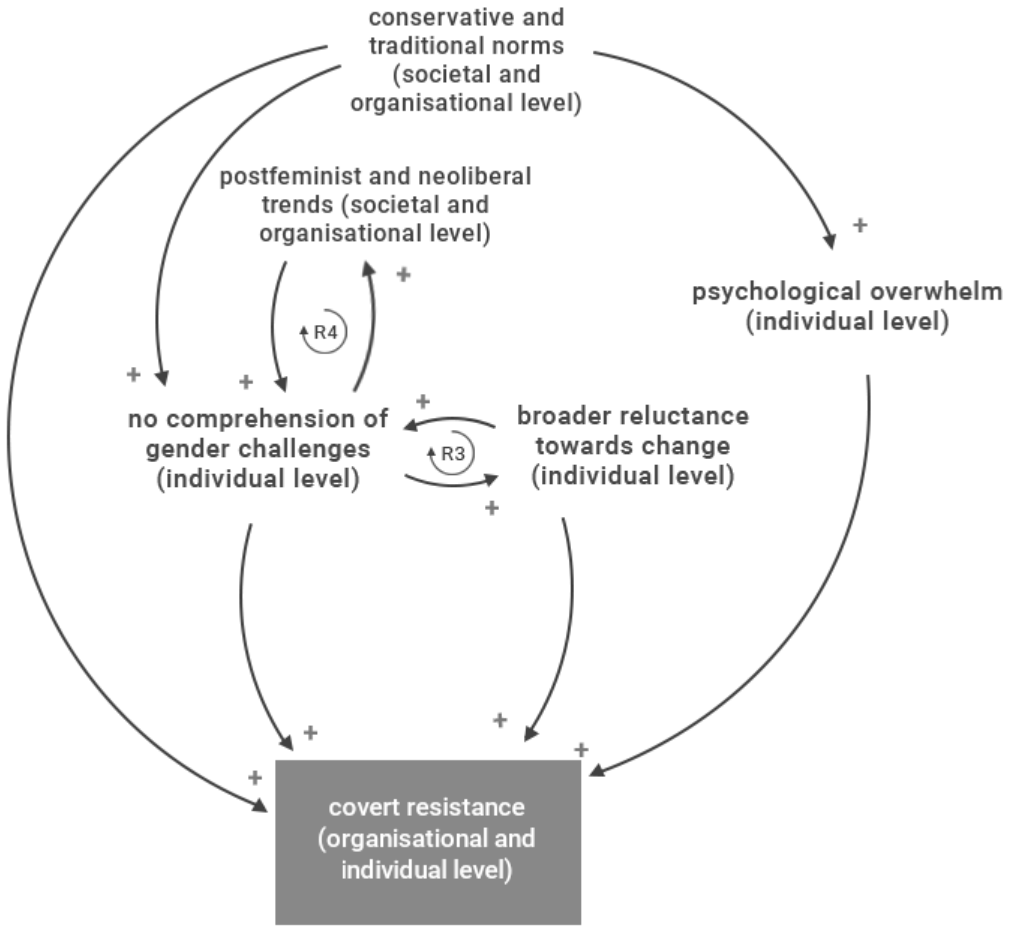
(P14, top management representative, Greece). University stakeholders express that they *"already have these things sorted out"* (P33, policy recipient, Greece) and that *"there is no need to talk about that, everything is okay"* (P18, policy recipient, Serbia). In addition, female stakeholders, especially younger ones, may resist such initiatives when driven by neoliberal ideals of self-management. Based on interviewees, those women often believe that personal effort and hard work ensure success, overall being *"very confident that nothing would stand in their way"* (P23, top management representative, Greece). In this way, they overlook systemic obstacles, while potentially perpetuating neoliberal and postfeminist discourses, especially within their university settings(Figure 4.4, R4), and diminish the value of GEPs. As further reflected by participants in relation to the reinforcement of postfeminist discourses and the aforementioned resistances:

> [...] it also comes from women, either in the rationale that "okay now, why are we discussing about these things, I did it, if you work, work, and so on, you can make it and be a successful woman […] And in this community of university people and higher education, etc., this then strengthens, promotes a logic that says, "but we already have these things sorted out"'. You understand what I mean. But we don't have them sorted out, we don't . (P31, top management representative, Greece)

> [..] like women in high positions who worked so hard to get there that they don't feel solidarity anymore with women who are lower in the hierarchy, they're a bit like "Yeah, it's hard. I did it. So you can do it too if you really want " (P21, policy implementer, Serbia).

Figure 4.4 further illustrates the interdependent system elements and practices that trigger covert resistance.

Figure 4.4 Dark causal loop model on the emergence of covert resistance



4.6.3 Performative compliance

Instead of enabling new gender-responsive structures and organisational processes, the GEPs often encourage a performative compliance approach, constituting a negative spillover effect. Participants across all countries unanimously suggested that the GEPs have been initiated and adopted to meet the HE eligibility criterion. While some acknowledged that this top-down approach *"can bring some change at the university"* (P1, policy implementer, Greece) and push some procedures forward in otherwise hesitant universities, most stakeholders questioned whether this *"instrumental role"* (P30, policy implementer, Greece) enables genuine transformative changes especially from a structural perspective. As P27 (policy recipient, Serbia) also reflected:

> Now even the ones who didn't want to respect gender equality policies, now are aware that there will be consequences if they don't follow the policies. So, they try at least on paper to fulfil gender policies. And that's also the major disadvantage because if it's something only on paper and not in reality, then it's tricky.

In more detail, the neoliberal goal for the universities to remain *"competitive"* (P37, top management representative, Serbia) and be able to claim EU funds was consistently noted (*"Was there any chance the university wouldn't be granted Horizon projects? Would they lose the money?"*, P11, policy implementer, Greece). Still, it remains rather ambivalent for interviewees whether the implemented GEP activities secure positive effects for gender equality progress, or just *"happen simply for the sake of happening"* (P33, policy recipient, Greece). P37 (top management representative, Serbia) and their reflections further articulate how the EC-driven initiation of GEPs activates competitiveness-based approaches, and ultimately increases the risk of performative compliance:

> And the biggest impulse, let's say, for this, to make the GEP, was to be able to be competitive. But I mean top-down approaches are always something that can have good and bad sides. I mean, even if you force people to have [GEPs], people can make it and not implement it […] But I don't think that the Balkans are the best space to explore this. We are so well trained in making efforts to be in compliance with the European Union requirements. We are mastering in the harmonisation with the regulations and also mastering in its non-implementation.

Therefore, interviewees even described the GEP as *"a piece of paper"*, and worried whether the major achievement is *"only a document on the portal listed with 1 million other documents"* (P36, policy recipient, Serbia). Also, participants' experiences reveal such debatable activities among many universities, which adopt their GEPs but don't invest genuine time in their implementation:

> When I compare with other universities, I could see that what they did with their GEPs was performative. They use a template, and they fill it just because it was asked from them. We did it really, this is not fake. This is something that we really have done and I'm really proud that we succeeded. (P26, policy implementer, BiH)

As a result, this competitiveness-based approach is perceived to heavily reinforce universities' tendency to opt for box-ticking measures ("*Finding a truly authentic situation […]. not "I am ticking something because I need to have the next plan, I need to get research projects, because I have to do the one, I have to do the other*"", P30, policy implementer, Greece). Institutional authorities often prioritise implementing the less demanding measures required by HE, ultimately engaging into minimum efforts to appear compliant. For instance, they refrain from addressing more challenging, structural reforms, such as establishing

gender equality offices or new reporting mechanisms for harassment. In such cases, while the GEP measures *"are theoretically good, they are what they should be"* (P25, policy implementer, Greece), concerns persist about how they are or will be implemented in practice. This is also evident in Serbia and BiH, which increasingly adopt EU legislation within the context of their EU membership candidacy, but questions remain for their follow-up implementation:

> [...] addressing the wider cultural climate and trying to address it really on the institutional level, this is where we come short. Institutions adopt plans, adopt documents purely formally, like now with the funding scheme, without the internal will to change anything about it. And then we are stuck in a situation where you can say that Serbia is generally we're adopting more and more EU legislation allegedly preparing to join the EU. But on the cultural level, on the level of implementation, what happened there? This is where the problems arise. Usually, it's just scratching the surface and clicking the boxes to have mandatory workshops, trainings…which can be a good thing though (P24, policy recipient, Serbia)

Furthermore, participants framed systematic and coordinated efforts are necessary to proceed beyond box-ticking exercises. Nevertheless, for such effort to pay off, authentic groups of people who want to dedicate their time are needed, beyond mere top-down approaches. P30 (policy implementer, Greece) reflected upon this situation:

> A plan of action over time, it binds us. But the truth is that a plan alone does not, one swallow does not make a summer... Where there's so much work to be done, in my experience, that's what I'm going to share, is that, you know, these things can't be done top-down. That is, "I made a plan and come tick my boxes, come and we can carry out this plan". Or if so, it doesn't make much sense to do so.

Moreover, some interviewees interpret GEPs' mere existence and associated activities under the HE mandate as largely tokenistic and for the sake of appearances. Echoing broader impression management efforts, the importance lies in *"appearing to promote equality, appearing to promote inclusion. Because that's why it comes as a big announcement from Europe, because that's what globalisation requires"* (P11, policy implementer, Greece). As P27 (policy recipient, Serbia) suggests about university stakeholders, *"some of them were making fun of it, like okay, "European commission said we must, so then we must""*. The lack of vision from university authorities to pursue such changes and *"meaningful initiatives"*

(P35, policy recipient, Serbia) further drives this attitude, as the top management should be *"leading by example and be in the front row"* (P4, policy recipient, Greece). Ultimately, such impression management efforts - pertaining to the GEPs but also frequently extending to additional change strategies based on interviewees - further and directly feed into institutions' performative compliance patterns. As P25 (policy implementer, Greece) reflects, "*in general, they can't do otherwise with the GEP and Horizon. They know that this is now necessary for us to appear better in any external stakeholders*". They also feed into through the mediating effect of box-ticking exercises, as expressed by P33 (policy recipient, Greece):

> But not too many things [GEP actions and events taking place], and most of these actions are, as you know, just like at any university, things that happen simply for the sake of happening. They don't have a meaningful impact in any way. For instance, such events, foreseen events part of the plan, are held every so often where four or five people, mainly women who are involved in these issues, speak, but this doesn't actually reach, for example, the female and male students.

Additionally, institutional authorities perceive as sufficient to publish such plans and disseminate them through institutional channels, accompanying them with *"flashy communications like "we're going to do this""* (P28, policy implementer, Greece). In this way, performative compliance further feeds back into impression management displays; as P28 further perceives, "*we have abandoned it [the GEP] since summer and we thus have the document standing over there [on the website] as required by the Commission and we do say it is us who developed it, and let's find a way to implement it"*. This creates a reinforcing dynamic, where the appearance of commitment is both the result and the justification for limited GEP action (Figure 4.5, R5). Notably, P38 (policy recipient, BiH) explains that issues perceived as *"trends"*, such as gender equality, are particularly susceptible to such phenomena. This is in part due to the institutions' obligation to align with donors' expectations and priorities, or at least strengthen the impression of doing so. Still, this considerably compromises the potential for genuine progress (*"So it's something going and returning back, maybe in different forms but still it's the same. I don't see the real change"*, P38, policy recipient, BiH).

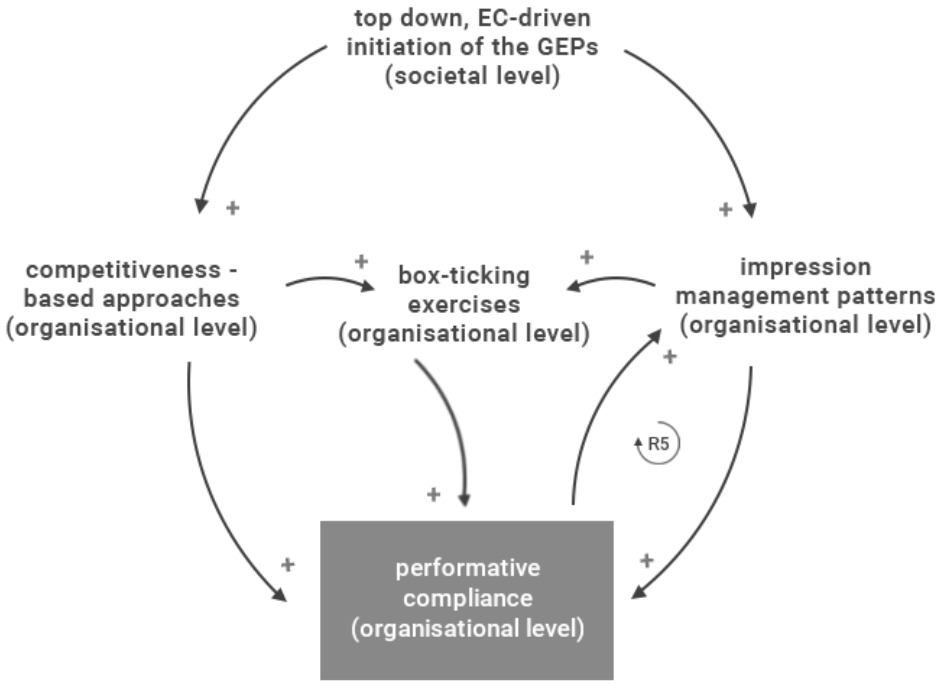
Finally, participants consistently stressed the need for the GEPs to move beyond minimum compliance attempts. Some gender challenges, particularly GBV and harassment, need great attention and well-designed efforts that include *"preventive measures"* to ensure that *"things*

like that will be less likely to happen in the future" (P29, policy recipient, Greece). Comprehensive monitoring and evaluation frameworks are also essential towards transcending performative approaches, with interviewees and especially GEP recipients recalling that they are not *"really sure if these kinds of mechanisms are right now in place"* (P4, policy recipient, Greece). As for GEP implementers, they also stress that such mechanisms are to be established in the upcoming period, precisely to enable modifications to the GEPs activities and next versions (*"Since we will have an evaluation of the achieved progress and of the entire action plan by the end of this year, there will be some adjustments, based on the experience and what is possible with the current resources"*, P3, policy implementer, BiH). Overall, the absence of such mechanisms is especially perceived as a significant risk to the utility and sustainability of the GEPs:

> Because ok, at the end of the day someone has to evaluate what moves are being made. Because as I said, if they leave it like that and it is forgotten, like many others... In other words, it was developed for now and the usefulness of the case, but will be left and forgotten afterwards (P2, policy recipient, Greece).

Figure 4.5 articulates the confluence of factors that persistently evoke a performative compliance approach to the HE mandate.

Figure 4.5 Dark causal loop model on the emergence of performative compliance



4.6.4 Concerns for future unintended consequences

In addition to the unintended consequences discussed above, we note that some participants expressed concerns that adverse consequences may emerge in the future. For instance, a few interviewees reflected that a disproportionate GEP focus on women's rights as opposed to other groups may overshadow the broader goal of equal opportunities and evoke inequalities and unfair treatment. This can also be exacerbated in light of simplistic communication. For instance, P27 (policy recipient, Serbia) reflected upon the following:

> And I think usually the people who promote it always are giving bad examples about how a male community mistreated the female community. And I think we are actually close to reaching a point when we are going to be the other way around [...] Which also is completely against these policies because then it's not equality anymore, it's not equal opportunities.

Then, concerns pertain to measures like quotas being initiated within the GEP context. While acknowledging their potential to initiate progress, interviewees fear that quotas may evoke positive discrimination. They also consider that an increased representation of women will not necessarily evoke genuine change. On the contrary, women appointed in high-authority positions may eventually act as proxies of male stakeholders in power positions. Also, women themselves may not necessarily support feminism and gender agendas just because of their gender *("Is it simply the presence of women per se, that will give some, that will bring something? Many women reproduce cultural norms which are anti-gender, which are patriarchal"*, P24, policy recipient, Serbia). Further concerns relate to political correctness associated with gender equality topics. While generally perceived as beneficial, a few participants feel that political correctness may restrict people and make them unable *"to say anything that is authentic"* (P30, policy implementer, Greece) due to the increased *"criticism now regarding these topics"* (P9, policy recipient, Greece). Finally, GEP implementers, especially from Serbia, consider that if they push gender initiatives in an intense way, for example through mandatory training, this would *"mean there would be even more resistance"* (P21, policy implementer, Serbia). The same applies to promoting gender-inclusive language in a decisive way:

> For the initial years it couldn't be very ambitious [...] they don't like to change some words because of gender equality. And if we don't touch that topic, then we can do

many good things. But if you're stubborn and you want to go into that topic, then there's a huge resistance suddenly. (P40, policy implementer, Serbia)

4.7 Discussion

In the present article we explore the perceived impact of GEPs, focusing on their unintended, adverse consequences. Conducting an instrumental case study addressing GEPs in Balkan academia, we collected data from GEP strategic documents, and semi-structured interviews with employees from seven universities across Greece, Serbia, and BiH. Building on the archival data, we first articulated the interventions' intended outcomes. Afterwards, based on the in-depth analysis of participants' experiences and observations, we articulated GEPs' key unintended consequences. These encompass overt and covert resistance as a form of a back-firing effect to the intended outcome of inclusive organisational culture. They further include performative compliance to the HE mandate as a negative spillover effect against the intended outcome of gender-responsive organisational structures. Through the framework of our study, grounded in gendered organisations theory, CAS theory, and complex interventions' analytical foundations, we also explore the mechanisms and non-linear pathways that are perceived to give rise to these unintended consequences. These pathways, further delineated through dark causal loop models, are driven by intricate, systemic interdependencies that exist between societal, organisational, and individual elements and gender practices. Their articulation provides valuable input to refining GEPs' initial programme theory, initially assumed to be largely linear, thus yielding valuable insights for both scholars and practitioners.

4.7.1 Empirical contributions

To begin with, we contribute to scholarly research on GEPs within academic settings (O'Neil, 2023; Ní Laoire et al., 2021). Focusing specifically on GEPs as a recently introduced gender policy intervention across Europe, we offer novel insights on their perceived impact and respond to scholarly calls to delve deeper into their "heuristic potential, especially concerning changes in academia" (Cannito et al., 2023, p. XIV). Proceeding further, our research specifically contributes to scholarly discussion about such policies unintended and adverse consequences (Tzanakou, 2019; Kalpazidou Schmidt and Cacace, 2017). It firstly verifies their prominent risk to generate or exacerbate resistances (Tildesley et al., 2022; Palmén and Kalpazidou Schmidt, 2019), and most importantly suggests contextual factors that shape both overt and covert resistance in the under-explored Balkan region. Both overt and covert

resistance reflect regression towards the aspiration of inclusive organisational culture. Some university stakeholders, instead of becoming more responsive and open to gender issues, often exhibit signs of radicalisation and openly oppose gender initiatives and efforts towards gender equality change or passively sideline them. Resistance towards gender interventions in universities is well documented in previous research (Snickare and Wahl, 2024; Bleijenbergh, 2018; Powell et al., 2018), including research addressing GEPs across Europe (Krzaklewska et al., 2023; Lombardo and Bustelo, 2022; Tildesley et al., 2022) and Balkan countries (Afiouni et al., 2025; Karydou, 2024; Caprile et al., 2022). Our study thus further sheds light to the manifestation of these phenomena and university actors' associated, multifaceted experiences. Likewise, it corroborates the influence of specific factors and practices in shaping resistance towards GEPs, including traditional norms (Karydou, 2024; O'Neil, 2023), postfeminist trends (Krzaklewska et al., 2023) and power dynamics (Afiouni et al., 2025).

However, while recent literature has predominantly focused on passive resistance to gender interventions (Krzaklewska et al., 2023), often associated with non-genuine commitment (Stierncreutz and Tienari 2023; Smidt et al., 2021), our findings stress an additional, overlooked dimension: overt resistance manifesting as radicalisation. This active form of opposition is first driven by entrenched, context-specific factors, particularly conservative ideologies operating at broader national levels (Krzaklewska et al., 2023; O'Neil, 2023) and consequent organisational norms. The Balkan region, including all three countries addressed, are predominantly described as patriarchal societies both by existing scholarship and participants' accounts. Especially Serbia and BiH, belonging to the broader Western Balkan region, exhibit a stronger attachment to local culture and traditional values (Spahić Šiljak et al., 2022); for instance, religious regimes (ibid) and traditional family models (Ćeriman and Vučković Juroš, 2024) often uphold anti-gender attitudes and movements. Then, as demonstrated by our interview data, the emergence of the EC top-down mandate can further compound local opposition. While stakeholders from these countries generally aim to prevent perceived external influences on their local culture and legacy (Ćeriman and Vučković Juroš, 2024), this anxiety is now reinforced due to GEPs' top-down and apparently Western-driven initiation. The study findings reflect an intense fear of westernisation, also exacerbated in view of global DEI narratives centred around LGBTIQ+ rights. As our data collection took place before the US-driven backlash against DEI, interviewees described strong reactions to trends and interventions perceived as externally imposed, accompanied by the urge to mitigate disruptions to local and authentic ideals. Through these findings, we offer novel

insights into how overt resistance and especially radicalisation against gender equality issues can be shaped in rather traditional environments and institutions with strong appreciation of local heritage. Additionally, through the findings pertaining to Serbia and BiH, our study exemplifies experiences around the emergence of resistance in countries not being EU Member States (Cannito et al., 2023). In such geopolitical settings, external mandates may be overall viewed as cultural threats instead of opportunities for gender equality progress.

Moreover, regarding GEPs' intended outcome to reform university structures and processes to support gender equality, the findings highlight a considerably negative spillover effect. Such structures and processes did not oppose gender equality progress within the GEP context but often lacked a genuine transformation. GEPs' top-down initiation especially activated a series of interconnected gender practices at the organisational level, collectively fostering a performative compliance approach. These practices stem from competitiveness-based agendas, prioritisation of box-ticking GEP activities, and impression management efforts to project a positive image and institutional alignment with EU-level gender equality expectations. The study findings thus verify that the first round of GEPs implemented under the HE mandate may often orient towards meeting minimum requirement thresholds (Karydou, 2024). Proceeding further, our results reflect that such gender interventions risk reinforcing the so-called politics of documentation (Ahmed, 2007), where equality-related policies and documents are formally in place but their translation into practice remains ambiguous (Yarrow and Johnston, 2023). Finally, our findings resonate with concerns that such interventions risk evoking symbolic, box-ticking exercises in academic settings (Tzanakou, 2019), while broadly being situated in business-driven, neoliberal goals (Afiouni et al., 2025; Yarrow and Johnston, 2023; Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019).

4.7.2 Theoretical and methodological implications

Employing the typology of DEI initiatives' unintended consequences provided by Leslie (2019), we further theorise the emergence of back-firing and negative spillover effects. Examining GEPs as a specific DEI intervention, our study advances understanding of how and why back-firing and negative spillover effects manifest in academic and organisational settings, and especially in institutions that are highly influenced by both EU-level and local-level practices.

Moreover, our study theorises the emergence of unintended consequences in an innovative, conjunctive way. Employing a comprehensive yet fine-grained framework found at the

intersection of gender and organisation studies, complexity theory, and systems thinking, rich qualitative findings reflect that adverse consequences are produced in dynamic and interdependent ways. The unpredictable, emergent causality of the organisational system holds a salient role (Greenhalgh and Papoutsi, 2018); shaped by elements, gender practices, and activated mechanisms found across the societal, organisational, and individual level of system, it triggers unintended consequences that are multi-dimensional (Leslie, 2019) and have more than one, interdependent antecedents. In this way, our study operationalises the complexity of gender interventions and their systems (Kalpazidou Schmidt and Ovseiko, 2020; Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2020) and responds to scholarly calls to examine the interdependencies of mechanisms triggering unintended consequences (Leslie, 2019). In doing so, it further advocates for the CAS-driven, conjunctive theorising of gender interventions' unintended consequences, to resist current reductionist approaches in the study of organisational life (Tsoukas, 2017), including organisational interventions (Kalpazidou Schmidt and Cacace, 2017). The dark causal loop models introduced in our study especially represent a novel, systems-based methodological approach to delineate the emergence of unintended consequences and articulate how gender interventions unfold to produce their outcomes. Overall, the study's CAS-driven framework provides a robust theoretical and methodological basis to explore in-depth the consequences of additional gender equality-related interventions in various organisational settings.

Additionally, the study's theoretical framework couples gendered organisations theory with CAS theory. In this way, it exemplifies how the interconnectedness of organisational elements hindering inequality can be explored and enriches scholarly arguments on the value of systemic gender knowledge to support gender equality interventions (Lansu et al., 2019). Furthermore, the adopted framework has enabled us to address gender as practice within emerging policy regimes. We highlight how societal (EU-level and national) gender practices, as well as organisational and individual ones can influence gender interventions, and shape their success in terms of meeting their intended outcomes. The study particularly sheds light on how local and often traditional norms, values, and ideologies associated with gender provoke resistance, often while being reinforced by perceived external disruptions. Then, it also suggests how institutional actions and broader agendas can strengthen the performativity of gender and ultimately favour compliance approaches.

4.7.3 Managerial implications

The study further highlights a set of practical, managerial implications. These build on the insights gained into the "black-box" of GEPs, and the enhanced understanding of how gender interventions can deviate from their intended outcomes (Kalpazidou Schmidt and Graversen, 2020, p. 1). We suggest that GEP decision-makers and implementers should remain cautious of the potential for adverse consequences and opt for emergent strategies (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985). Such approaches can acknowledge the complexity of both the interventions and the systems in which they are embedded, and encourage flexible practices that consider unforeseen risks and adapt accordingly, before detrimental effects occur.

Then, resistance rooted in local norms perceived as incompatible with gender equality goals, calls for extensive awareness-raising and contextual communication efforts. The same applies to resistance stemming from the non-comprehension of gender challenges. Awareness-raising and communication efforts should sensitise organisational stakeholders and address potential misconceptions about both gender equality change and broader organisational transformation. In doing so, they can also mitigate perceived threats to existing privileges, for instance among high-authority stakeholders. For instance, relatable narratives that address the needs and experiences of multiple stakeholder groups can prove valuable (Ní Laoire et al., 2021; Ely and Meyerson, 2000).

Additionally, considering the consequences related to GEPs' top-down and perceived Western-driven initiation, we suggest that their transition from policy to practice requires contextual interpretation (Tildesley et al., 2023). Situated GEP measures, which are potentially co-formulated with the broader university community, can localise these interventions, and thus increase their legitimacy and stakeholders' motivation to support them. In this way, a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches can provide support to GEPs to meet their intended outcomes.

Moreover, even if compliance is an essential aspect of GEPs' enactment in the EU context, institutions need to strengthen the moral side of the gender equality agenda instead of its business-related orientation. Corresponding communication messages and justifications (Leslie, 2019), especially by GEP implementers, can be incorporated in GEP implementation plans. These have the potential to strengthen the number and action of allies that invest genuine effort in these plans, thus counteracting organisations' tendency for symbolic approaches. Robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms at institutional level can similarly

mitigate the risk of performative compliance. They can set tangible benchmarks for success (Thomson et al., 2022; Palmen and Kalpazidou Scmidt, 2019) and define accountability mechanisms that are essential for the cases where success is not met.

4.7.4 Study limitations

Finally, we acknowledge some limitations. Our study focused on negative unintended consequences, although such consequences can also be positive in nature. Future research could thus address such outcomes stemming from GEPs, for instance exploring positive spillover effects. This constitutes a promising research direction, as some study participants already highlighted unexpected forms of collaboration emerging between stakeholders from different schools and disciplines. Then, while our case study yields valuable insights into GEPs' through the examination of Balkan academia, these cannot be generalised to the entire region or EU. As participants' experiences and the overall study findings suggest, cultural norms hold a prominent role; therefore, future research can address additional countries to strengthen the contextual understanding of GEPs' impact. Similarly, further inquiry can enrich the understanding of how non-EU countries associated with HE respond to the GEP mandate. Future research can explore such responses particularly after the adoption of subsequent GEP versions; the first round of GEP implementation following the HE eligibility criterion may have exhibited a heightened potential for adverse consequences due to the absence of prior groundwork, thereby suggesting the need to examine whether future iterations alleviate or reproduce similar phenomena. Finally, while the study's CAS-driven approach underscores the interdependent nature of mechanisms evoking GEPs' unintended consequences, future research can further explore how such consequences themselves are interconnected (Leslie, 2019). Longitudinal studies, especially after more years of GEPs' implementation, can further trace these dynamics.

4.8 Conclusion

GEPs are rapidly adopted across Europe, aiming to promote gender equality in academic organisations through both structural and cultural change. Still, our study highlights that these plans may not necessarily achieve their intended outcomes. Instead, they can be experienced as policies that produceg unintended, adverse consequences in terms of back-firing and negative spillover effects, including overt and covert resistance, and performative compliance. Our findings especially reflect university actors' perspectives around the systemic and contextual mechanisms that shape and reinforce such consequences in a

conjunctive way, thus providing input for a refined and dynamic GEP programme theory. Similarly, our findings advocate for the additional, nuanced exploration of GEPs and their 'dark side' to further advance understanding of these interventions and foster strategic contextual changes in GEPs' policy lifecycle.

4.9 References

These are available under the thesis' full reference list.

Chapter 5. Conclusion

This thesis examines the effectiveness of GEPs, focusing on how it is perceived and experienced by university members and drawing on the specific case of Balkan academia. Considering existing research that underscores the ambivalent effectiveness of university gender policies, including falling short to realise intended goals and producing adverse consequences, and the need for additional critical reflection on the transformative potential of both university gender policies (Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2023) and GEPs (Kalpazidou Schmidt and Vigsø Pedersen, 2025; Cannito et al., 2023), the study focuses on the factors that potentially hinder GEPs across the policy lifecycle, including formulation, implementation, and emergent outcomes. Employing a comprehensive framework that integrates gendered organisations theory with CAS theory, the study conceptualises GEPs as complex interventions operating within gendered and CAS-driven institutions. In doing so, it has applied a qualitative systems-based process evaluation, foregrounding institutional policy discourses and especially university stakeholders' experiences around the GEPs. An initial GEP programme theory was developed, articulating the initial assumptions on how GEPs are expected to unfold and achieve their intended outcomes, which was revealed to be largely linear. The analysis then explored how GEPs' effectiveness is experienced and perceived in relation to implementation fidelity, quality, and stakeholder reach, including how these dimensions are shaped by formulation processes and decisions. It further examined their potential to generate unintended adverse consequences. In depth, qualitative findings reflect that, to date, GEPs are considered to exhibit ambivalent effectiveness, due to a multitude of systemic and contextual interdependent factors centred around gender as practice (Gherardi, 1994). The negative effects of these factors are also found to be exacerbated through reinforcing feedback loops. The detailed examination and integrative articulation of these factors and their effects have enabled the development of a refined programme theory for GEPs. This challenges linear and reductionist assumptions about their unfolding and operation, lays the groundwork for further comprehension and investigation, and overall offers valuable insights to scholars, decision-makers and practitioners (Skivington et al., 2021b).

The aim of this chapter is first to synthesise the findings of the thesis and to delineate its contributions. Specifically, the findings of the thesis' empirical papers (Chapters 3 and 4) are discussed with respect to the research questions posed (sections 5.1-5.3): RQ1. Which are the factors that potentially hinder the formulation of GEPs of Balkan universities?; RQ2. Which

are the factors that potentially hinder the implementation of GEPs of Balkan universities?; RQ3.Which are the factors that potentially evoke unintended and negative outcomes for the GEPs of Balkan universities? Further details on insights gained regarding GEPs' transformative potential effectiveness, not mentioned in the standalone papers, are also provided. Similarly, insights into GEPs' unfolding and associated influencing factors across the different geopolitical contexts addressed by the study are reported (section 5.4). The study's contributions are then outlined in theoretical, empirical, and methodological terms (section 5.5 - 5.7.). Finally, the chapter discusses research limitations and presents recommendations for future research (section 5.8).

5.1 RQ1: Which are the factors that potentially hinder the formulation of GEPs of Balkan universities?

The first empirical paper (Chapter 3) examines the formulation processes of the GEPs in the universities studied. In line with the HE guidelines (EC, 2021a), most universities conducted a comprehensive audit. In these cases, drawing from institutional historical data (e.g. on staff gender composition), surveys, interviews and focus groups with university stakeholders, they identified prominent challenges to gender equality and areas for improvement. In this way, the plans' objectives and measures were defined and contextually adapted to meet the HE suggestions for GEPs' content. Overall, several obstacles were encountered in the GEPs' formulation stage, as summarised in section 5.1.1. Concurrently, insights have been gained into some enablers, as reported in section 5.1.2.

5.1.1 Obstacles encountered in GEPs' formulation process

In terms of hindering factors identified, these first relate to setting ambitious goals. In some cases, the GEPs proposed some measures and lines of action that proved to be unrealistic. This was largely due to the plans' tight timespan, and constraining institutional structure regarding, for instance, limited resources devoted to subsequent GEP implementation and bureaucratic delays. Although the ambitious design of the GEPs was not always viewed as a pitfall, policy implementers retrospectively condemned that some different design decisions could have been taken. These relate especially to further mainstreaming gender equality provisions in formal organisational processes, and to extending the plans duration to additional years.

Additionally, a key factor viewed as hindering GEPs' formulation refers to stakeholder engagement. On the one hand, small teams from Gender Equality Committees and Boards

primarily led GEPs' development. Given that individuals in these positions are not financially compensated for such additional tasks and responsibilities, substantive participation was occasionally limited given the added workload. This situation also imposed excessive workload to those genuinely involved and discouraged some stakeholders from getting involved in the first place. This resulted in the loss of potentially valuable contributions from other organisational members, whose insights could have enhanced the design and subsequent operationalisation of the GEPs.

On the other hand, limited stakeholder engagement further encompasses policy recipients' participation in the formulation stage. The findings suggest that the formulation process was not consistently open and inclusive; notably, university students were excluded from GEP-related surveys, interviews, and focus groups. Still, in everyday interactions within the universities, generational gaps and differentiating perspectives about gender equality are evident between students and those leading the GEPs. Thus, given that students are among the GEPs' beneficiary groups, their exclusion often took the form of a design limitation and a missed opportunity to incorporate further valuable perspectives in the plans. Other recipient groups, including academic and administrative staff, also refrained from participating in audit processes or sharing their perspectives and experiences. The findings indicate that this reluctance is strongly linked to prevailing conservative norms within the region and its institutions, and to organisational power dynamics. These increase stakeholders' concerns about potential stigmatisation associated with open engagement in gender equality interventions such as GEPs.

Moreover, collaboration within the GEP formulation teams was occasionally disrupted. The findings reveal that institutions' structures are highly vulnerable to external crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted and constrained onsite operations. This period of instability caused some minor communication gaps among team members, occasionally evoking delays in GEPs' follow-up actions. Furthermore, participants' experiences reflect that internal collaboration was undermined, and occasionally escalated to conflicts as well, due to power dynamics. Personal and competing interests were observed throughout the formulation stage, in terms of taking credit for the GEPs' successful initiation; consequently, stakeholders' personal ambitions were at times seen as shaping GEPs' content in a biased way. Similarly, alignment with political ideologies and membership in political parties was observed to occasionally strengthen these behaviours. Some stakeholders were highly vocal during

formulation, risking compromising the authenticity of the GEP agenda setting and, therefore, its subsequent implementation.

5.1.2 Enablers in GEPs' formulation process

Despite the above challenges, the thesis also identifies certain enablers in the formulation stage. The involvement of people from different disciplines, departments, and university units was beneficial, especially in bringing together varying mindsets and perspectives regarding gender equality. When ensured, this diversity of perspectives was considered particularly important; all universities examined are large institutions, and gender conditions significantly differ across decentralised university levels (e.g. school or faculty level) and different schools. Thus, policy developers were able to consider a greater variety of institutional needs and gaps during the formulation of GEP objectives and measures. Notably, such collaboration also indicates unintended but beneficial spillover effects beyond the GEPs' intended scope, including new alliances, as also discussed in the second empirical paper (Chapter 4).

5.2 RQ2: Which are the factors that potentially hinder the implementation of GEPs of Balkan universities?

The thesis further addresses GEPs' implementation in the first empirical paper, as outlined in Chapter 3. The study first outlined foreseen implementation plans, including GEPs' multiple implementation levels in accordance with the GEP multiple thematic areas and embedded measures. It also identified GEPs' beneficiaries and stakeholders involved. Subsequently, it has delved deeper into university members' lived experiences around the GEPs, exploring the systemic factors and in-between interdependencies that are considered to hinder the plans' implementation, in terms of fidelity (including quality) (section 5.2.1) and stakeholder reach (section 5.2.2). Similarly to the formulation stage, some insights have been gained on factors that facilitate and enhance GEPs' implementation process (section 5.2.3).

5.2.1 Factors hindering the fidelity and quality of GEPs' implementation

The study's qualitative findings reveal that institutional structures, entrenched power dynamics, and limited support mechanisms compromise the fidelity and quality of GEPs' implementation. Conservative societal norms within Balkan universities, along with restrictive regulatory frameworks, similarly have a hindering effect. In more detail, the institutional structure and organising of all universities examined rather compromises GEPs' implementation, with its negative effects being reinforced through several feedback loops. Persistent obstacles indicatively include the large size and occasional fragmentation of the

universities, resource scarcity, and weak prioritisation of gender equality agendas. Recurrent periods of instability, often triggered due to leadership turnovers and consequent structural reforms, further weaken the efforts placed to gender equality efforts. Concurrently, the heavy dependence of public institutions to national legislation, visible both in their routine operations and especially their change efforts, reflects an additional hindering factor, namely broader regulatory frameworks. As participants' views suggest, national laws either restrict intents for transformative radical change, or fail to support GEP implementation in a tangible way.

Then, the study provides rich findings on the influence of EU-level regulatory frameworks, namely the HE mandate on GEPs. In these first years after its introduction, the GEP eligibility criterion has considerably intensified their adoption. Still, regarding GEPs' practical implementation, it is considered to enhance financial motivation, thus considerably affecting the depth and authenticity of the GEP actions undertaken. When not compromising GEP actions' quality, the HE mandate is not viewed as facilitating implementation consistency either. Albeit formally mandated, the compliance to this eligibility criterion is not adequately monitored by institutional stakeholders, partly in the absence of relevant guidelines, thus some planned actions risk remaining unfulfilled.

Moreover, the study indicates that patriarchal and conservative socio-cultural norms, often coupled with stereotypes, are considerably entrenched in the Balkans, and further shape university environments. These norms, often shared and promoted by high-authority people of a typically older age, result in the selective prioritisation of planned GEP actions. Less controversial issues are generally put forward and implemented first, such as awareness-raising actions on GVB, with participants highlighting that structural inequalities remain unaddressed. The same applies to addressing additional marginalised groups, especially LGBTIQ+ communities, thus ultimately assigning a gender binary framework to most GEPs.

Proceeding further, the persistent absence of institutional support for both gender issues and GEPs is revealed to be a major hindering factor central to several feedback loops, undermining the genuine progress of GEP implementation. Limited support, for instance on behalf of high-authority people, is often coupled with long-lasting absence of institutional infrastructures to support gender interventions, such as dedicated gender equality units, and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Finally, power interests are observed to urge well-established university stakeholders in leadership positions to sideline GEP efforts, especially

the ones that can disrupt the current status quo. Thus, the study reveals that institutional support is further reduced due to rigid hierarchical structures. Political interests are also indicated as shaping non-supportive behaviours and consequent conflicts in these cases, similarly to GEPs' formulation stage.

5.2.2 Factors hindering the stakeholder reach of GEPs' implementation

Chapter 3 findings further suggest key factors that are experienced as obstacles to GEPs' implementation, in terms of its reach to intended stakeholders and beneficiaries. Outdated communication practices, low awareness of gender issues, and stakeholder reluctance to actively engage bear a significantly negative influence, also exacerbated by the challenges to implementation fidelity and quality discussed earlier. Notably, communication strategies that rely on email outreach and scientific discourse on gender inequalities fall short in engaging the broader university community, and especially the younger generation of students. Similarly, such communication approaches cannot adequately challenge the low awareness and comprehension of gender issues among university stakeholders. This limited awareness and sensitisation often manifests as deeply rooted among them due to prevailing conservative norms (social and institutional ones), and absence of prior institutional groundwork to raise awareness or provide gender-related education in universities.

As for stakeholder reluctance to be reached by the GEPs and participate in their activities, the present thesis reveals that this largely stems from a confluence of traditional gender ideologies and power structures. These dynamics collectively evoke fear for stigmatisation and possible professional repercussions, as university members may be perceived as challenging dominant norms. Such concerns are especially shared among individuals with non-permanent contracts, or those in lower positions. As such, openly questioning or opposing well-established gender roles and ideologies is often avoided, reducing stakeholder motivation and openness to engage with the GEPs as a legitimate institutional policy.

5.2.3 Enablers in GEPs' implementation

Exceptions to the above challenges are also noted, that is perceived enablers to GEPs' implementation. The occasionally facilitating effect of national-level legislation is already noted in Chapter 3, for instance referring to the institutionalisation of Equality Committees in Greek public universities based on state law. Additionally, alongside conservative societal norms, emergent societal progress in gender equality issues is recognised by the study's participants. For instance, this has increased gender awareness and sensitisation, occasionally

facilitating GEPs' unfolding. Social movements, especially the #MeToo movement, also coincided with GEPs' adoption in several instances. Gender issues thus gained publicity and enhanced some university authorities' responsiveness towards GEPs, for instance asking the Equality Committees to prioritise GBV and sexual harassment issues. Finally, based on Serbian participants, a country's multicultural character, and some regions' in particular, can enable openness to diversity and consequently gender issues, ultimately enhancing support towards GEPs.

Then, limited institutional support for the plans, for instance on behalf of university authorities, is often counterbalanced with informal support by key stakeholders functioning as change agents. Across all countries, some organisational members invest personal efforts to spread awareness on gender issues among the academic community. Indicatively, this takes place through their lectures, especially when related to gender studies or social sciences more broadly. In the case of Serbia and BiH, interviewees also commended support from some key, high-authority stakeholders, who actively lobby for certain GEP measures or strengthen informal support by advocating and devoting activistic effort. This is also complemented by support from external actors, such as local NGOs and international bodies (e.g. UN Women) working on gender equality, especially in the absence of local feminist movements within the universities. Finally, a few gender initiatives existed in Serbian and Bosnian universities prior to the GEPs' adoption, and are suggested to facilitate some measures' implementation, such as those about gender-related research. These are notable exceptions amidst the long-standing absence of institutionalised action on gender equality.

5.3 RQ3: Which are the factors that potentially evoke unintended and negative outcomes for the GEPs of Balkan universities?

The thesis further explores GEPs' unintended adverse consequences. It also examines the contextual mechanisms and interdependent societal, organisational, and individual factors shaping such consequences. The empirical work conducted firstly established GEPs' expected and intended outcomes, namely to foster progress towards gender-responsive organisational structures and inclusive organisational culture. Next, rich qualitative insights centred around university actors' nuanced perceptions revealed that GEPs can produce adverse consequences against these intended outcomes, in terms of both back-firing and negative spillover effects (section 5.3.1 and section 5.3.2 accordingly). Finally, they provided some insights on GEPs' potential to produce positive unintended consequences as well (section 5.3.3).

5.3.1 Back-firing effects and associated factors

Findings suggest that both overt and covert resistance constitute a back-firing effect against the intended outcome of inclusive organisational culture. Instead of encouraging university stakeholders to become more sensitised and supportive towards gender issues, the GEP activities often urge them to express open opposition. Factors related to traditional and rather conservative gender ideologies and norms at both societal and organisational level play a salient role. Notably, participants' accounts have revealed that these are further reinforced by concerns over a perceived westernisation of university practices and the imperative to protect local culture by externally imposed directives, such as the EC mandate on GEPs. In some instances, open resistance may even escalate to micro-aggressions and conflicts with GEP implementers, especially in response to GEP measures promoting gender-inclusive language. Furthermore, similarly to the implementation stage, power dynamics and interests can exert a significant influence. The study reveals that overt resistance is often motivated by a wish to minimise disruption to the status quo and preserve entrenched hierarchies within the university system. High-authority stakeholders of a typically older age is a factor worth noting as well. On the one hand, their age often correlates with less open-minded perspectives about gender issues, leading to greater resistance. On the other hand, given the reported, deeply hierarchical and rigid structures of Balkan academia, these stakeholders have devoted many years to secure their position of influence; hence, they are often viewed, especially among GEP implementers, as being unwilling to make compromises to their acquired status for the sake of institutional progress and reforms in the area of gender equality. Therefore, apart from limiting support towards GEPs during implementation, power dynamics can adversely escalate to overt resistance as well.

Proceeding to covert resistance, a key finding is that several university stakeholders passively reject gender equality-related change, due to their non-comprehension of organisational gender inequalities, which is often driven by the dominant gender norms of the region and its institutions. As participants have articulated, those stakeholders often diminish the value of GEPs as policy interventions, and likewise devalue the severity of the challenges they address. Postfeminist discourses and narratives may further strengthen assumptions that gender equality has been achieved; therefore, even if some professional challenges remain, they are perceived as merit-based obstacles possible to overcome through dedicated and consistent work. As a result, such discourses are strengthened, and systemic and structural inequalities are masked and organisational members remain unaware of them, instead of

becoming more sensitised. Furthermore, it is worth stressing that while low awareness and comprehension of gender issues is found to hinder GEP implementation - indicatively by reducing institutional support and stakeholder reach - the thesis additionally reveals its salient factor in shaping GEP emergent outcomes. The main difference lies in the non-linear pathways and interdependencies activated per policy stage. For instance, in the case of emergent outcomes, the non-comprehension of gender issues is interdependent to stakeholders' hesitation towards change, prompting them to move beyond mere non-engagement towards tacit rejection of gender equality issues.

Finally, an additional key finding on the manifestation of covert resistance refers to the intersection of traditional norms and consequent gendered expectations. Participants' observations have revealed that female organisational members, already overwhelmed with domestic tasks, often refrain from advocating for gender equality and change, viewing it as an add-on responsibility. Although indifference is found to emerge during GEP implementation as well, the thesis findings demonstrate that it significantly varies in scale and form of manifestation. It can range from a mere lack of engagement in the implementation stage, up to deliberate disregard and thus being classified under the spectrum of covert resistance.

5.3.2 Negative spillover effects and associated factors

The thesis' qualitative insights further reveal the emergence of performative compliance to the HE mandate as a key adverse consequence. The intended outcome for GEPs has been to advance existing organisational operations and structures in support of gender equality or establish new ones. Instead, GEPs' top-down adoption based on the EC mandate activates various impact mechanisms, shaped by systemic interdependencies and feedback loops. These amplify organisational constraints to achieving positive GEP outcomes. Main findings reflect how competitiveness-based approaches and neoliberal discourses, broadly infused into academic institutions, strongly shape GEPs' unfolding. In particular, such approaches emphasise organisational visibility, business-driven logics, and funding acquisition over authentic commitment and progress in social issues. Participants' similarly view them as falling short in forming genuine alliances to support the GEPs. In this way, box-ticking approaches and exercises further emerge, similarly fostering administrative compliance over transformative GEP progress. For instance, the favouring of compliance is made visible in the cases of prioritising the implementation of the least demanding GEP measures.

Finally, broader DEI imperatives, including those promoted across Europe, may encourage academic institutions to be inclusive but also intensify impression management strategies. With respect to GEPs, especially university authorities often drive forward symbolic measures and communication artefacts to negotiate social pressures. Hence, in the concurrent absence of mechanisms to ensure substantial GEP implementation and institutional accountability, performative and surface-level compliance invertedly and collectively emerges.

5.3.3 GEPs' positive unintended consequences

Exceptions to the above challenges and GEPs' considerable potential to evoke unintended negative consequences are also noted. In particular, participants' everyday experiences with the GEPs suggest their possibility to trigger a few positive unintended consequences, specifically positive spillover effects. These first include fostering new multidisciplinary collaborations among university stakeholders. Especially during the GEPs' formulation stage, stakeholders from various departments and units had to collaborate and integrate their different perspectives in a fruitful way towards a common goal, that is the development and approval of the plan. In this way, members of Equality Committees from social science faculties and schools collaborated with their counterparts from STEM-oriented ones. Beyond this multidisciplinary collaboration, committee members collaborated with administrative employees and units, such as IT units that enabled the collection of gender-disaggregated data at university level. This has been described as a considerable success by some participants, serving as a basis for new allyships as well. Then, an additional positive consequence refers to increased knowledge and awareness on gender issues among GEP implementers. GEP implementers are not among the primary GEP beneficiary groups; still, these stakeholders unexpectedly articulated increased knowledge and awareness in some topics addressed by GEPs, such as gender dimension integration in research and teaching. Even if already considered as knowledgeable in such areas, especially those involved in social sciences research, their involvement in the GEP formulation and consequent implementation further enriches their awareness.

5.4 Insights on GEPs across different geopolitical contexts

The aim of the instrumental case study on Balkan academia has been to enrich knowledge on GEPs through the insights provided by this specific case and provide an integrated account on how their effectiveness is experienced and perceived. Notably, the thesis' findings enable a

rich understanding of the constitutive role of context for GEPs, and especially how it shapes obstacles to their policy lifecycle. Still, while several of the identified hindering factors and unintended consequences extend across the three different settings (Greek, Serbian, and Bosnian academia), their manifestation and intensity are what occasionally requires local understanding beyond the general notion that 'context matters'. In this way, context does not merely constitute a background and deterministic condition but plays a salient, emergent role in shaping key interactions at a fine-grained level (Ní Laoire et al., 2021). The following sub-sections articulate the identified contextual nuances across the three settings, specifically regarding GEPs' implementation and unintended consequences. .

5.4.1 Contextual variations in GEPs' implementation

With respect to GEPs' implementation, the influence of conservative and patriarchal norms appears more pronounced in BiH and Serbia, in line with the reported prominence of stereotypes (Spahić Šiljak et al., 2022), and anti-gender movements coupled with a re-traditionalisation of gender values (Ćeriman and Vučković Juroš, 2024; Caprile et al., 2022). Indicatively, this has evoked greater difficulties in reaching out to and engaging target stakeholders within universities, since some describe increased hesitation and anxiety to openly advocate for gender equality and GEPs. Conversely, in all three settings, broader traditional culture obstructs the comprehension of gender equality challenges in similar ways.

Further nuances are observed in institutional support for GEPs and gender equality efforts, including prior groundwork in these areas. Despite the bigger prominence of conservative norms in Serbia and BiH, a few institutionalised gender equality provisions existed prior to the GEPs' introduction and continued to slowly progress. This may have been potentially motivated by those countries' overall efforts to address the crises and hurdles following the Yugoslav wars (Psychogios et al., 2019). Additionally, EU candidacy and efforts to increasingly align with EU frameworks and legislation is reflected by some stakeholders as playing an important role. Support from external actors, such as NGOs, and engaged leadership figures is also stressed more often. Conversely, in Greek academia a lack of commitment is encountered more frequently, but in implicit ways, for instance through delays and power-preserving patterns observed more frequently by participants. Moreover, Greek institutions experience greater difficulty in establishing formal gender equality structures and institutional support, both before and after GEPs' introduction. Therefore, challenges in GEP implementation within the Greek context, although manifesting in subtler ways, suggest systemic inertia that neither fully opposes nor supports change, making the obstacles deeply

entrenched as well. Collectively, these insights further indicate that the countries' EU membership status, being an important criterion determining their examination, does shape gender policy efforts, but in nuanced ways. In Serbia and BiH, EU aspirations may motivate institutional action but also cannot easily mitigate organisational and individual concerns stemming from broader socio-political norms and values. Then, Greece's EU Membership does not preclude low levels of organisational engagement and support for gender equality efforts, nor does it eliminate systemic inertia. This reveals both the influence and limits of EU integration, and how it translates to practice under the confluence of structural and cultural regimes, and associated socio-institutional landscapes.

5.4.2 Contextual variations in GEPs' unintended, adverse consequences

Regarding unintended adverse consequences, the most prominent differentiations have been observed with respect to overt resistance. This proves to manifest more often and in more challenging ways in Serbia and BiH as opposed to Greece. As Chapter 4 indicates, hierarchical structures within university settings are encountered in all three contexts. However, in the Greek context, power dynamics and strategic interests to maintain existing organisational privileges and individual interests, such as career aspirations, play a more salient role. This potentially relates to the systemic inertia and lack of upper echelons' support identified as strongly hindering GEPs' implementation as well. As for traditional gender ideologies and patriarchal norms, these feed into open opposition in all three countries and respective universities. Notably, in the case of Greece, opposition predominantly relates to concerns about altering well-established gender roles, both societal and organisational ones. It further relates to potentially altering the use of native language through the promotion of gender-inclusive language that introduces new terms (e.g. with female suffixes), perceived as grammatically incorrect by several stakeholders. In Serbia and BiH, stakeholder concerns about gender roles and native language being negatively impacted due to feminist GEP approaches similarly feed into resistance. However, in these two countries, overt resistance also relates to supporting the rights of additional groups beyond women, notably LGBTIQ+. Also, resistance is intensified in light of concerns for westernisation and external frameworks overriding local cultural values. With GEPs being initiated in a top-down way by the HE mandate, they are often perceived as Western-centric interventions which may sideline local legacies, such as socialist traditions for gender equality reforms. In this way, some university stakeholders consider that EU directives should function merely as complements to minimise disruption to local models. Therefore, on the one hand the patriarchal and traditional norms of

these two countries mostly suggest opposition to changes in gender roles and norms, including discourse used in everyday communication, in a similar way to the Greek context. On the other hand, concerns for Westernisation additionally imply a defence of locally rooted approaches for addressing gender equality issues. Collectively, these dynamics suggest that GEPs' unfolding and transformative potential can indeed be undermined by entrenched traditional norms, but also by the tension between frameworks perceived as externally imposed and the safeguarding of authentic values and movements. Thus, the exploration of GEPs' unintended consequences suggests that overt resistance may be broadly encountered across the three Balkan settings, but its specific form and pathways exhibit nuances shaped by local context and peculiarities, including socio-political ones.

With reference to covert resistance, systemic dynamics evoking its emergence are more homogeneous across the three Balkan settings, for instance in relation to the effect of postfeminist discourses and reluctance to change. Additionally, broader traditional norms operating in the wider societies and respective universities feed into covert resistance either directly or through the mediating effect of additional elements and gender practices. A stronger effect is observed, though, in Serbia and BiH in two particular instances. First, anti-LGBTIQ+ narratives are more prominent; besides triggering overt resistance as aforementioned, they also marginalise GEP activities, like public events, in a more covert way. Second, as reflected by participants and prior literature (e.g. Ćeriman and Vučković Juroš, 2024), traditional family models and consequently assumptions about gendered caring responsibilities are more widespread; in this way, female organisational members experience a form of psychological overwhelm, and may sideline engagement with gender equality interventions and GEPs due to viewing it as a burden on top of their professional and care responsibilities. In this way, intimate insights are provided on how covert resistance can be intertwined with lived experiences, as shaped by local patterns of unpaid domestic labour.

As for the emergence of performative compliance, similar patterns have been noticed across the three contexts. This suggests that such compliance patterns can possibly constitute a more generalisable response to externally driven requirements as also observed in similar university gender interventions (e.g. (Yarrow and Johnston, 2023). However, an aspect worth noting refers to the Greek setting. Impression management patterns were more negatively perceived by organisational members, particularly when initiated by with high-authority actors, and were often described as more intense. This further appears to be linked to Greek participants' perceptions that those in power positions considerably shape GEPs' success,

often by obstructing their application. Therefore, while the thesis' findings provide broader insights into the unintended consequences of top-down policy transferability, they also offer a more fine-grained understanding of the varying intensity of pathways and relational patterns leading to those consequences. In particulate, they articulate how the features of local organisational structure and culture (e.g. hierarchical features) form the strength and manifestation of these pathways.

5.4.3 Cumulative reflections on the role of context

Taken together, the above insights foster in-depth understanding of how context shapes GEPs' unfolding and outcomes. While several influencing factors are observed across all settings, their manifestation and intensity can also vary in subtle and intimate ways. This suggests that certain dynamics pertaining to GEPs may be dominant across contexts, such as broader regional contexts, but others are shaped by local conditions, including socio-cultural and organisational ones (Kalpazidou Schmidt and Vigsø Pedersen, 2025).

Therefore, context does not merely represent a predictable condition but plays a constitutive and emergent role in shaping how key mechanisms are enacted and play out at a fine-grained level (Tildesley et al., 2023; Ní Laoire et al., 2021). For instance, limited stakeholder engagement in GEP affairs is encountered across all examined settings, but broader gender discourses (e.g. anti-gender discourses at national and organisational levels) intensify constraints to GEPs' outreach. Likewise, resistance is an adverse outcome commonly encountered, but its intensity and form (e.g. ideologically-driven opposition, power-driven resistance) can subtly differ. These findings reflect that context and local specificities actively shape not only whether certain dynamics occur, but also how they are enacted and reinforced within organisational systems.

This has important implications for both GEPs' theory and practice. The nuanced insights acquired suggest the importance of boundary conditions (Whetten, 1989) in the exploration of such organisational interventions. Applied frameworks can capture pathways shaping GEPs and their perceived value; still, the applicability of such theoretical frameworks is contingent to the contexts and systems within which these pathways are enacted and unfold (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007). Considering such contingencies can refine theorisation by aligning it more closely with empirical realities. Subsequently, this can contribute to bridging research-practice gaps (Busse, Kach and Wagner, 2017), particularly in the field of gender equality policies and interventions (see also Section 5.5 on theoretical contributions).

Then, the insights gained across different geopolitical settings illustrate that GEP practitioners should refrain from designing or implementing them as standardised policy interventions under one-size-fits all paradigms (Kalpazidou Schmidt and Vigsø Pedersen, 2025). Therefore, differentiated strategic plans and responses, and especially emergent strategy approaches (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985) that can consider unexpected specificities in GEPs' lifecycle can prove highly valuable (Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2020). Likewise, plans that capitalise on organisational learning to account for diverse and situated perspectives and experiences can address complexities and challenges pertaining to GEPs (Lansu et al, 2019; Zippel and Ferree, 2019). This can ultimately pave the way for contextual adaptation rather than mere policy transferability and replication (see also Section 5.8. on implications for policy and practice).

5.5 Theoretical contributions

The present thesis theorises and advances understanding of organisational gender policies and their perceived effectiveness in a novel way. More specifically, it develops a novel integrative framework to guide the nuanced exploration of gender policies, enabled by theoretical integration of the gendered organisations theory with CAS theory. Moreover, the thesis theorises gender as practice through the CAS lens, and by extension provides a context-sensitive theorisation of gender policies that also encourages greater nuance in decolonial perspectives. Finally, it theorises in an integrative way the unintended and adverse consequences of gender policies. The following sub-sections present these contributions.

5.5.1 Development of an integrative framework

Responding to scholarly calls to move beyond simplistic (Kalpazidou Schmidt and Cacace, 2017) and linear analytical approaches in gender equality interventions' research (Kalpazidou Schmidt and Ovseiko, 2020; Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2020), the thesis develops and applies a theoretical framework found at the intersection of gender and organisation studies, complexity theory, and systems thinking. This framework enables the conjunctive examination of gender policies and interventions and views their potential for effectiveness as a result of the system's emergent causality, shaped by the confluence of numerous multi-level and interdependent factors.

In particular, the study's framework couples gendered organisations theory with CAS theory. First, this constitutes a key theoretical contribution itself, as interpretative theory-driven approaches may often be sidelined in the study of gender interventions' operational logic,

indicatively within evaluative paradigms (Kalpazidou Schmidt and Graversen, 2020; Kalpazidou Schmidt and Cacace, 2017). Secondly, it constitutes a novel theoretical integration. It enables the conceptualisation of organisational gender policies as complex interventions in CAS; in doing so, it views gender policies as dynamically evolving in self-organising systems, rather than as static policy acts detached from context. Also, while Acker's theory (1990) suggests the multiplicity of deeply embedded elements hindering equality and relevant gender policies, the CAS theory offers a valuable lens and heuristics to delve deeper into their interconnectedness as well, and articulate it in a theoretically robust way. This theoretically-grounded lens especially enables the rich examination of the non-linearity and feedback exchange that exist between those elements, being spread across the individual, organisational, and societal level of the given gendered and complex systems. It similarly produces what Lansu et al. (2019) call systemic gender knowledge, and extends relevant scholarly arguments on the valuable contribution of knowledge on gendered practices and obstacles to pursue effective interventions (Bustelo, Ferguson and Forest, 2016). Finally, the coupling of these theories represents an interdisciplinary theoretical innovation. It advances the application of complex interventions and CAS concepts beyond the health sciences field and the evaluation of socio-economic policies with health implications, where they are predominantly applied so far. Hence, the thesis overall contributes to recent relevant efforts within the gender and organisations field (Kalpazidou Schmidt and Vigsø Pedersen, 2025; Bührer et al., 2020), overall advocating for scholarly research that addresses the complexity of organisational life (Tsoukas, 2017; Tsoukas and Dooley, 2011) and the complexity of organisational inequalities (Benschop, 2021), resisting reductionist approaches.

5.5.2 Theorising gender as practice in a context-based way

Moreover, the CAS-informed application of gendered organisations theory constitutes a valuable way to theorise and contextually explore in depth gender as practice. It sheds light to the strong role of multilevel context - societal, organisational, individual - that shapes in a situated and intricate way both the gender we think (i.e. gender symbolic enactment) and the gender we do (i.e. concrete institutional actions) and their influence on gender equality policies. A holistic yet fine-grained perspective on organisational gender interventions, and how they are affected by situated and interdependent gender practices, is thus provided. This can especially account for local dynamics, subject to both cultural and structural context (van den Brink and Benschop, 2012b), whose importance is suggested by relevant research on

gender policies and interventions (e.g. Kalpazidou Schmidt and Vigsø Pedersen, 2025; Kalpazidou Schmidt and Graversen, 2020).

Furthermore, the thesis provides a context-sensitive theorisation of gender policies and how they are experienced and perceived in terms of effectiveness. The applied theoretical lens enables the acquisition of rich qualitative insights by the case of Balkan academia (thus shaping empirical contributions as well). These insights stress the role of local context in shaping gender interventions, for instance pertaining to conservatism, fear of Westernisation, and EU accession dynamics across varying geopolitical settings. Accordingly, they indicate the importance of boundary conditions (e.g. where, when) (Whetten, 1989) for further theorising organisational gender interventions. There is a need to consider the contexts that shape the limits and applicability of management theories and practices around these interventions, to overall contribute to aligning theoretical models with practical realities (Busse et al., 2017.)

Finally, taking the salient role of context into account, the present thesis suggests that current decolonial perspectives open space for greater nuance and inclusion of additional voices (Hamman et al., 2020). As Banerjee (2021) notes, new intellectual spaces can support decolonial research agendas, for instance by including marginalised voices in knowledge production. In the present case, moving beyond predominant East-West and North-South dichotomies while examining and theorising organisational gender issues can capture the epistemological value of regions that are outside the Anglo-Saxon context and also diverge from typical colonised systems. A zoom in on intra-regional dynamics is also encouraged to acquire enriched insights on specific institutional, cultural, and historical settings, and thus encourage theorisation that accounts for on-the-ground realities and lived experiences. Overall, apart from providing enriched and nuanced knowledge, such efforts are also in line with rejecting universalism in colonial gender theories and research (Lugones, 2010).

5.5.3 Theorising gender policies' unintended and adverse consequences

Finally, the thesis theorises gender policies' unintended, adverse consequences in a conjunctive way. It advances understanding of their emergence, extending relevant work on DEI initiatives' unintended consequences and replying to scholarly calls to examine their numerous, multi-dimensional and interdependent antecedents (Leslie, 2019). Moreover, theoretically robust insights are especially provided on how backfiring and negative spillover effects are evoked, and the associated impact mechanisms. The thesis refrains from

presenting these effects in a simplified way as failures of policy formulations (including design) and implementation; instead, it frames them as emergent outcomes at the interplay of contextual elements and gender practices. In this way, it enriches and advances scholarly efforts for the theory-driven and complexity-driven examination of gender interventions' outcomes (Kalpazidou Schmidt and Graversen, 2020).

5.6 Empirical contributions

The thesis contributes to the existing scholarly literature and body of knowledge on GEPs (e.g. Kalpazidou Schmidt and Vigsø Pedersen, 2025; O'Neil, 2023; Clavero and Galligan, 2021) and university gender policies (e.g. Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2020; Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019; van den Brink and Benschop, 2012b). Drawing on rich empirical evidence and especially rich qualitative data on university members' lived experiences and realities, it provides valuable insights into GEPs' transformative potential, responding to relevant scholarly calls (Thomson et al., 2022; Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2020). It sheds light on the "black box" of these policies (Kalpazidou Schmidt and Graversen, 2020, p. 1), explaining how they unfold dynamically and deviate from their intended progression pathways. The thesis identifies and examines in-depth interdependent hindering factors across the complex systems of universities and across the GEP policy lifecycle, namely from policy formulation and implementation to emergent outcomes, thus enriching relevant scholarly inquiry in a robust and evidence-based way (Kalpazidou Schmidt and Vigsø Pedersen, 2025; Zabaniotou et al., 2021). Overall, the findings suggest that GEPs are viewed by university stakeholders as often exhibiting an ambivalent effectiveness in meeting their foreseen goals and implementation plans (Caprile et al., 2022; Lombardo and Bustelo, 2022), similarly to other university gender policies and interventions (Ovseiko et al., 2017). Additionally, the present thesis extends scholarly reflections that policies like GEPs risk producing unintended and adverse consequences against intended outcomes (Krzaklewska et al., 2023; Yarrow and Johnston, 2023; Drew, 2022). The following subsections articulate in detail the thesis' empirical contributions.

5.6.1 Empirical insights on national-level norms and organisational dynamics

Notably, empirical findings suggest the salient role of broader national norms, local organisational culture, and the situated practice of gender overall. An empirical contribution lies in articulating how traditional and conservative gender ideologies and norms (O'Neil, 2023; Rosa and Clavero, 2020; Latti, 2017), prominent in regions like the Balkans (Ćeriman

and Vučković Juroš, 2024), strongly impede GEPs in meeting their intended actions and outcomes. Nuanced insights on the effect of such norms in overtly traditional settings as described by participants (Serbia and BiH) as opposed to more covertly traditional ones (Greece) are similarly provided. The thesis further enriches existing insights on how national-level regulatory frameworks may not adequately support university efforts and policies for gender, including GEPs and their implementation (Anagnostou, 2023). Thus, it enhances scholarly calls on the necessity of state support (Karydou, 2024).

These conditions are compounded by organisational dynamics. Empirical evidence reflects how university organising and structural issues cause several constraints for radical changes and transformative GEP progress (Kalpazidou Schmidt and Vigsø Pedersen, 2025; Krzaklewska et al., 2023; Lombardo and Bustelo, 2022). For instance, these relate to universities' public status, large size, weak GEP communication strategies, and insufficient resource allocation. The findings also highlight how the absence of prior institutional groundwork on gender issues and policies, including sensitisation and awareness efforts, can disrupt the target GEP implementation (Krzaklewska et al., 2023), especially due to reduced stakeholder mobilisation (Tăriceanu, 2022). Regarding the latter aspect of institutional groundwork, the thesis reveals that the absence of a robust foundation, both structural and cultural, for the GEPs to build upon makes it considerably challenging for institutions to genuinely meet numerous gender goals in tight timespans, given the three-year average duration of GEPs.

Moreover, qualitative evidence suggests that stakeholders' (both high-authority stakeholders' and GEP beneficiaries') dispositions and attitudes towards gender issues and lack of meaningful engagement to the GEP affairs during formulation and implementation disrupt the desired GEP unfolding. Notably, they activate several feedback loops that limit both the implementation fidelity and quality, and reach of the GEPs. Those dispositions and behaviours can even extend to covert and overt resistance (Tildesley et al., 2022), which ultimately constitute an adverse consequence and trigger back-firing effects. Finally, the thesis provides empirical insights on power interests associated with GEPs (Afiouni et al., 2025; Clavero and Galligan, 2021). These are revealed to highly obstruct GEPs' legitimisation within the institutions and their meaningful implementation, since the plans are perceived as possible threats to the current state of affairs and status quo of the universities. Their contribution to shaping resistance patterns is similarly verified (Afiouni et al., 2025; Caprile et al., 2022), through insights pertaining to the policy stage of emergent outcomes.

5.6.2 Empirical insights on the Horizon Europe mandate and its effects

Concurrently, a key contribution stems from the thesis' empirical examination of the HE eligibility criterion for GEPs. With this mandate being into force only from 2022, there are only a few scholarly reflections on its contribution to GEPs' progress. In response to scholarly calls to explore GEPs' heuristic potential for change following the HE mandate (Cannito et al., 2023), this study reveals the ambivalent and mostly restrictive effect of this mandate. Although acknowledging it has functioned as a catalyst for GEPs' institutionalised adoption (Kaydou, 2024), the thesis also points out to prominent risks to foster financial motivation and symbolic implementation to meet EU-driven requirements and broader neoliberal narratives. In this way, empirical evidence extends scholarly discussions on the politics of documentation, the so-called "doing the document rather than doing the doing" (Ahmed, 2007, p. 590). The findings and organisational' actors experiences stress the risk of performativity and instrumental compliance for GEPs, particularly when influenced by competitiveness-based approaches (Yarrow and Johnston, 2023; Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019). Coupling this with the empirical setting of Balkan academia and particularly Serbian and Bosnian institutions, the thesis advances understanding of how EC-driven gender policies can translate into practice in non-EU Member states (Cannito et al., 2023). Notably, these policies may be pursued by institutions for EU harmonisation purposes, namely to consolidate national efforts to acquire membership status. In this way, insights on the nuanced effect of the different stages of EU integration and membership status are similarly provided.

5.6.3 Empirical insights on resistance to GEPs and local discourses to gender equality

Empirical evidence further reveals how the pathways triggered due to GEPs' EC-driven and top-down initiation can escalate to resistance, especially overt opposition. In countries and institutions being in strong connection with their local identity and legacies, GEPs can be perceived as Western-driven impositions and thus potentially pervasive to local, authentic approaches to gender equality. Hence, the socio-constitutive role of context, including local specificities, in policy transferability instances is also acknowledged (Tzanakou et al., 2025; Ní Laoire et al., 2021). Notably, scholarly insights on experiences and perceptions around GEPs' unintended and adverse consequences after their adoption under HE are still largely missing. The thesis provides such qualitative insights, highlighting the under-explored potential of GEPs as university gender policies to trigger open resistance, including conflicts, when they apparently clash with local and more traditional, including patriarchal, norms.

Accordingly, these insights bring to the forefront the issue of open resistance and radicalisation. This is considerably important at a point where recent literature largely focuses on passive resistance to GEPs and gender interventions (Krzaklewska et al., 2023), often associated with non-genuine and performative commitment (Stierncreutz and Tienari 2023; Smidt et al., 2021).

Based on these context-sensitive insights on resistance, the thesis empirically enriches emerging research on GEPs and university gender policies outside Western-centric contexts (e.g. Afiouni et al., 2025), especially in the under-explored Balkan region (e.g. Karydou, 2024; Caprile et al., 2022). Empirical findings stress the importance of local gender discourse, and how situated gender practices shape those policies' lifecycle, often in contrast to intended aspirations. These practices notably include both material (e.g. institutional behaviours) and non-material aspects (e.g. gender ideologies) within the universities.

5.6.4 A refined, evidence-based programme theory for GEPs

The above empirical insights are enriched by articulating the non-linear interdependencies and reinforcing feedback loops that exist between the contextual, systemic factors experienced as hindrances to GEPs throughout their lifecycle. These interdependencies and loops exacerbate the negative effect of the identified factors, occasionally with a delay, and hinder GEPs' formulation and implementation. They similarly evoke adverse consequences. Notably, such interdependencies also assign a dual role in some hindering factors, in line with the inherent complexity of the university systems. Factors such as limited comprehension of gender issues, broader societal and organisational norms around gender, and power interests, follow different causal pathways and exert a different influence per policy stage, evoking mere lack of engagement and support up to resistance towards GEPs.

Ultimately, this in-depth qualitative analysis of the university systems' emergent causality has enabled the provision of refined programme theory tailored to GEPs, which challenges in an evidence-based way initial and rather simplistic assumptions on how GEPs will unfold and progress. Instead, it suggests that GEPs unfold dynamically while being dependent on multi-level factors and unpredictable interdependencies throughout their entire lifecycle. This refined programme theory offers a deeper empirical understanding of GEPs as complex university interventions (Skivington et al., 2021b), and provides valuable guidance to practitioners and decision-makers for refining future GEP strategic frameworks (Rogers, 2008). Finally, while grounded in empirical data, this refined programme theory also carries

some consequent theoretical implications (section 5.5). It can be used as an integrative framework for further comprehending GEPs, including their operational logic and any tensions associated with their transformative potential. Thus, it can serve as basis to pose and address future questions based on a new logic of practice (Tsoukas, 2017) and accordingly understand further and in a conjunctive way how such gender interventions are expected to work and progress.

5.7 Methodological contributions

The present thesis further exhibits methodological contributions, namely by operationalising and engaging with the complexity of both the gender interventions and the organisational systems in which they are embedded (Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2020). These contributions are outlined next.

5.7.1 Application of a qualitative systems-based analysis

The study has implemented a qualitative systems-based analysis , foregrounding institutional policy discourses around GEPs and especially university members' lived experiences and interpretations around these plans. As Skivington et al. (2021b) note in the updated guidance for complex interventions, practical and methodological examples of integrating systems thinking remain limited, especially beyond modelling systems techniques addressing public health interventions. Therefore, this thesis provides a robust and adaptable methodological framework to apply a qualitative systems-based analysis, such as a systems-based process evaluation, to study complex gender equality interventions. As further suggested by Moore et al. (2015) and Gear et al. (2018), the study's methodological approach builds on rich qualitative data to explore complex system dynamics, and articulate non-linear pathways and feedback loops. In this way, the study makes a contribution to the methodological literature on complex social interventions by applying a qualitative, interpretative approach. Future studies can use this framework to address additional interventions in settings other than academic ones, especially in cases where systemic interdependencies and unexpected consequences are anticipated. Context-based adaptations can also be made, for instance integrative qualitative insights from additional sources such as focus groups.

5.7.2 Use of system archetypes for comprehensive inquiry

Moreover, the use of system archetypes to articulate findings on factors hindering GEPs' policy stages constitutes an innovative methodological choice. In particular, the thesis has employed causal loop models to delineate rich empirical findings and translate them into

graphical presentations, to maximise understanding of GEPs' complex progression pathways, such as pathways involving feedback loops. Hence, the present study enriches methodological efforts to represent and delineate systemic gender knowledge and qualitative insights on system dynamics (Lansu et al., 2019).

An additional methodological contribution refers to extending the use of existing graphic models to articulate complex interventions' unintended consequences and underlying mechanisms. Building on Bonell et al. (2015) and dark logic models, the thesis introduces dark causal loop models. Dark logic models adopt a linear rationale and structure, to depict pathways towards adverse consequences; instead, dark causal loop models integrate systems-based thinking, and thus articulate and illustrate the emergence of unintended consequences in a non-linear and integrative way. Ultimately, these models constitute both a viable methodological option and visual tool to represent the findings of a systems-based analysis and enhance the understanding of interventions' adverse outcomes.

5.8 Implications for policy and practice

The thesis's findings, and especially the empirical insights gained, feed into a set of practical implications and recommendations. These are relevant to GEP practitioners, university decision-makers, and stakeholders involved in GEP policymaking, for instance at EU level.

5.8.1 Recommendations for strengthening GEP application

First, extending relevant scholarly arguments (Tzanakou et al., 2025; Ní Laoire et al., 2021), the present thesis calls for critical attention to context. This can ensure that factors experienced as barriers to GEPs are addressed or prevented in fitting ways, by encouraging the enactment of policy frameworks after contextual interpretation (Tildesley et al., 2023). Such follow-up interpretation can especially strengthen integration of local elements in GEP policy frameworks. Notably, thesis' findings suggest that context does not only shape whether certain obstacles and consequences emerge, such as limited stakeholder engagement or resistance, but also how they manifest locally; thus, here is often a need for differentiated strategic responses across settings. For example, overt resistance due to perceived external influences on local norms and cultural legacies may need responses that invest in legitimacy-building and alignment with existing cultural narratives. Covert resistance, in settings characterised by more subtle opposition and long-lasting inertia, could benefit from aligning gender equality to the organisation's logic and especially its goals (Stierncreutz and Tienari,

2023) while opting for sustained commitment, for instance on behalf of leadership representatives (Caprile et al., 2022).

Moreover, empirical findings stress the strong role of power dynamics, and the rigid and hierarchical structures that are encountered in settings like the ones of Balkan academia. In such settings, both top-down support and strong alliances are needed to legitimise the importance and value of GEPs through collective stakeholder mobilisations. Feminist networks and alliances can also prove highly valuable in these cases (Afiouni et al., 2025). They can resist the isolation and weakening of feminist and transformative efforts, and instead foster knowledge spillover to address both local (e.g. conservative norms) and global challenges (e.g. neoliberal logics) (Mendoza, 2002).

Awareness-raising can support the above in a horizontal way. Systematic actions can address all university stakeholder groups and ranks and cover both local gender challenges and global gender issues, such as contemporary DEI backlash. Such efforts can genuinely engage stakeholders and address gender inequalities in academia at both local and global levels. Achieving gender awareness and inclusive organisational culture can also build a robust and favouring foundation for additional, including structural, GEP measures in the future. For instance, they can lay the groundwork to open up the scope of future GEPs and gender policies to address additional minority and marginalised groups, overall integrating intersectionality principles. This is of paramount importance, as intersectional approaches can critically counteract multiple hierarchies and inequalities in universities (Rosa and Clavero, 2020), offering a “radical re-imagining” of academia (Afiouni et al., 2015, p 15).

Finally, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms can likewise play a central and horizontal role (Thomson et al., 2022; Palmen and Kalpazidou Scmidt, 2019). Importantly, they can enable institutional accountability for GEPs’ progression based on success benchmarks. They can also mitigate varying, situated forms of box-ticking and performative compliance, for instance in light of funding acquisition or alignment with societal pressures. Such evaluations at the institutional level can be further supported by external evaluations by the EC. For instance, compliance checks at randomly selected organisations have been announced (EC, 2024), to verify both adherence to the mandatory GEP requirements and commitment to the implementation of the GEP measures. Such coordinated action can further strengthen responsibility over GEPs’ progression.

5.8.2 Recommendations for refining GEP strategic frameworks

Finally, drawing from empirical insights on the strong and unpredictable interdependencies between contextual obstacles, the thesis calls for CAS-driven strategic frameworks to inform GEPs' translation into practice. Such frameworks can notably prioritise attention to multi-level context, and consideration of organisational responses to newly introduced interventions (Chandler et al., 2016). Moreover, CAS principles can favour the application of emergent strategy approaches (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985). These approaches enable robust reflections on emergent obstacles and unintended consequences throughout the entire policy lifecycle, to adjust policy plans and implementation accordingly. In this way, universities can capitalise on organisational learning and gender knowledge to respond to local dynamics and context (Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2020; Zippel and Ferree, 2019) and overall foster successful policies and interventions (Lansu et al., 2019; Ely and Meyerson, 2000).

5.9 Study limitations and recommendations for future research

This study acknowledges certain limitations. Addressing these can enhance scholarly inquiry into GEPs and university gender equality policies. Concurrently, these limitations highlight promising directions for future research that can generate enriched and nuanced insights.

5.9.1 Case study scope

To begin with, thesis' findings cannot be generalised across EU or Balkan academia as a whole. By conducting an instrumental case study, the aim has been to enhance the understanding of GEPs and their perceived effectiveness, drawing from the specific experiences of Greek, Serbian, and Bosnian universities. Future research should thus examine additional countries and university settings to further broaden our understanding. At the same time, both similarities and context-based peculiarities have emerged in how GEPs unfold, are experienced, and ultimately hindered in the addressed settings, although their explicit comparison is beyond the scope of this instrumental case study research. To delineate in an explicit way such similarities and differences across different geopolitical contexts, comparative case studies could for instance be conducted. Such research can similarly shed further light on how non-EU countries associated with HE respond to the GEP mandate, compared to EU Member States.

5.9.2 Examination of GEPs' lifecycle

Then, most GEPs examined had not completed their first implementation cycle at the point of examination, and notably at the time period when interviews were conducted. Being half-way

through their pre-set implementation period may have limited organisational stakeholders', especially policy recipients', knowledge on GEP affairs and activities. Overall, refined GEPs are expected in the upcoming years by capitalising on the experiences of earlier and completed ones. Examining these policies over additional years of implementation can yield enriched insights, including factors enabling their implementation and entire lifecycle.

Future studies can also examine additional aspects pertaining to GEPs' potential for change in academia. One promising direction is the exploration of GEPs' unfolding at decentralised university levels, such as at school and faculty level, which may uncover differentiated dynamics. Indicatively, this study's participants already suggested that GEPs implementation at these levels faces fewer obstacles and is subject to a greater flexibility.

Furthermore, regarding emergent outcomes and unintended consequences, this thesis addressed adverse consequences and how they emerge due to interdependent elements and gender practices. Future inquiry can further explore how such consequences themselves are interconnected (Leslie, 2019), potentially reinforcing each other. Also, it should be noted that such unintended consequences can also be positive in nature. Future research could address such unintended outcomes emerging from GEPs, for instance exploring positive spillover effects. This constitutes a promising research direction, as some study participants already highlighted unexpected forms of collaboration emerging between stakeholders from different disciplines and university units. Similarly, GEP implementers reported an increased gender awareness gained out of their involvement, even if not being among the primary target groups of awareness-raising actions.

5.9.3 Diversity of participant sample and intersectional insights

The present study recruited participants from three categories, including top management representatives and academic leaders, policy implementers, and policy recipients in terms of individuals employed at the universities. Regarding policy recipients, university students not employed at the universities, such as bachelor or master students, were not recruited. Nevertheless, extending the participant sample to university students can enrich our knowledge on GEPs' effectiveness, as they represent a critical beneficiary group. Their inclusion appears to be promising, as the thesis already provides insights on prominent generational gaps in how gender equality is perceived and should be acted upon through institutional policies and measures.

Greater participant diversity can also be fostered in future studies by including the voice of individuals belonging to the LGBTIQ+ community. Their perspectives can be valuable in identifying gaps in GEPs' strategic goals and actions, and in gaining insights on how to foster the inclusivity and intersectional frameworks of GEPs. A related limitation of the present thesis is the few insights gained on intersectionality practices, largely due to the predominantly gender binary frameworks that most GEPs adopted. Taken together, these stress the need for further research on how GEPs address intersecting inequalities and additional minority or often-excluded groups beyond women. Such research is of paramount importance when further considering latest developments in the DEI field and especially global backlash against DEI agendas. The thesis, having collected its data prior to these developments, does not provide relevant insights. On the contrary, fears for westernisation are associated with the global rise of the so-called woke culture preceding the US-driven attempts to narrow down social and institutional progress in the rights of groups belonging to the LGBTIQ+ communities.

5.9.4 Application of CAS perspectives

Finally, by using system archetypes and causal loop models, the thesis has articulated in an enriched and comprehensive way GEPs' unfolding and progression pathways, and the interdependent factors experienced as hindrances. Still, such archetypes cannot predict long-term intervention pathways and effectiveness, namely due to the systems' continuous self-transformation and adaptation to surrounding environments (Osman et al., 2024; Moore et al., 2017). Future CAS-driven inquiry could investigate evolving GEP pathways further, first by testing empirically the integrative and refined programme theory of GEPs. Future studies can also employ additional CAS concepts not covered in the present thesis, such as path dependency and tipping points. Longitudinal studies can also prove valuable in that regard. The same applies to CAS-driven studies that employ quantitative data alongside qualitative ones, to capture system dynamics in an enriched way and provide additional findings on interdependent factors influencing GEPs' effectiveness.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Overview of ethics procedures related to the study

The present study acquired ethics approval from the Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology (ELMPS) Committee of the University of York. In alignment with the university's procedures, an ethics application was submitted. This outlined the following: aims and objectives of the research; methods of data collection; sampling and recruitment strategies; sensitive topics and participant distress potentially arising during data collection and corresponding mitigation plans; procedures in place for ensuring anonymity and confidentiality; data protection and retention provisions. The ethics application also included the informed consent form and participant information sheet. The Committee reviewed and approved both.

All prospective participants were approached in an ethical and transparent manner. Invitations for participation in the study were shared via email. The invitations provided a brief overview of the study and reasons why the given recipient was invited to participate. Each email invitation further included the detailed participant information sheet, providing additional information on the study's aim, objectives, and ethical safeguards. The informed consent form was also attached in the email invitation, and participants were asked to sign this only after fully comprehending the information provided and agreeing to share their data.

To ensure anonymity, all interview transcripts underwent a careful review. Participants were assigned pseudonyms (Participant 1, Participant 2 etc.), and any potentially identifying information was removed. Moreover, throughout the thesis, the findings sections indicate quoted participants' country and role category (e.g. P1, policy implementer, Greece) to offer further contextual grounding, but no other information on participants' demographics is disclosed. This has been a deliberate decision. While acknowledging that further demographic details could provide readers some additional insights into participants' experiences, this has not been provided to safeguard anonymity and confidentiality. In particular, several participants were anxious about being identifiable based on their arguments and quotations from their interviews, as only a few people in each institution were known for their involvement in gender equality issues. Similarly, concrete details on universities past institutionalised initiatives on gender equality are not provided in Chapters 3 and 4, to preserve their anonymity.

Appendix B: Participant information sheet

Participant Information Sheet (participation in an interview)

Gender policies in the pathway towards organisational change in Balkan universities: intended policy and emergent outcomes

1) Background

The University of York would like to invite you to take part in the following research project: "Gender policies in the pathway towards organisational change in Balkan universities: intended policy and emergent outcomes".

Before agreeing to take part, please read this information sheet carefully and let us know if anything is unclear or you would like further information.

The contact details for this study are:

Principal investigator / PhD student: Maria Michali, School for Business and Society, University of York - Church Lane Building - York, YO10 5DF, mm2598@york.ac.uk, +306978421691

Supervisor: Prof. Federica Angeli, School for Business and Society, University of York - Church Lane Building - York, YO10 5DF. federica.angeli@york.ac.uk

Chair of ELMPS: Prof. Tony Royle, School for Business and Society, University of York - Church Lane Building - York, YO10, tony.royle@york.ac.uk

2) What is the purpose of the study?

The study aims to explore why the gender policies of organisations often do not achieve the planned outcomes, and prove to be ineffective. It will examine the gender policies of six Balkan universities, in Greece, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (two universities per country). It will analyse the factors that negatively affect the development, implementation and outcomes of these policies, as well as any gaps that exist between intended (planned) policies vs actual outcomes.

Even if the topic of gender in organisations has received a lot of research attention, several gender policies do not achieve the desired outcomes and organisational change. At the same time, most relevant insights come from studies taken place in the US, UK, and generally

the Western world. Thus, there is a need to gain new knowledge based on new contexts. Such new knowledge will help in better understanding why some gender policies succeed, and others fail. It will also help the development of more effective organisational policies that build on genuine needs and achieve the desired change.

The study firstly includes the examination of the gender policy documents of the universities. Then, it includes interviews with organisational members of the universities, who belong to specific categories (ranks). These categories are:

1. Top management of the university (people involved in the policymaking of the organisation). Deans, associate deans, heads of departments, and heads of various academic services are asked to participate.
2. People that implement the organisational gender policies. People that work in HR departments, members of Gender and Equality committees, members of Gender Equality boards are asked to participate.
3. People that experience the application of organisational gender policies. Employees in various positions, either administrative or research positions, are asked to participate).

Thus, you are invited to participate in a one-to-one interview. The interview will be conducted by the researcher in a strictly confidential way. You will be asked about your personal impressions and experiences in relation to the gender policies of your organisation.

Your participation in the study is estimated to take place within six months after the ELMPS committee of the University of York approves the study. The interview will be held online via the Zoom platform (University of York Zoom account). It is estimated to last about 1-1,5 hour.

3) Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to take part because you are an organisational member of a university located in the Balkan area (in Greece, Serbia, or Bosnia and Herzegovina). You also belong to one of the following categories (ranks):

1. Top management representatives of the university (Deans, associate deans, heads of schools and departments, heads of various academic services are asked to participate).

2. People implementing the organisational gender policies (people working in HR departments, members of Gender Equality Committees and Gender Equality Boards are asked to participate).
3. People experiencing the application of the organisational gender policies (employees in any position, either administrative or research position, are asked to participate).

Maximum 60 participants are recruited for this study, maximum 10 per university.

4) Do I have to take part?

No, participation is optional. You do not have to take part, but your participation in the study is greatly appreciated. If you decide to take part, you will take a copy of this information sheet for your records. You will be also asked to complete a participant consent form to show that you understand what taking part involves.

Under the GDPR, you have a general right of access to your data, a right to rectification, erasure, restriction, objection or portability. You can also change your mind about taking part at any time during the interview, without giving a reason. You can withdraw from the study completely up to six weeks after your participation. Beyond this point, your data will have been included in the study and it will not be possible to remove it.

You are not obliged to answer any questions that you do not want to. You can also stop participating in the interview at any time while it is conducted. For example, if you experience any distress or unpleasant feelings while discussing your work experiences, the interview can be paused or terminated. In case of experiencing distress, additional measures refer to rescheduling the interviews, being provided with a list of local helpline numbers, contacting the rest of the research team.

The interview will be audio recorded upon your consent. Only audio files will be kept. Video files automatically downloaded after the zoom recording will be immediately and permanently deleted. The audio files will be afterwards fully transcribed.

Maria Michali is responsible for the security and confidentiality of the data. You will receive a copy of this information sheet and the signed consent form to keep.

5) Will you share my data with anyone else?

No. Data will be accessible to the project team at York only.

6) How long will you keep my data?

The data will be kept for a period of five years after the completion of the researcher's thesis. After that, the researcher will dispose (destroy) them. This time period covers the following purposes: realising an academic publication; verifying published research findings; realising a further analysis.

The University will put in place appropriate technical and organisational measures to protect your personal data. For the purposes of this project, the researcher will audio record and then transcribe the interviews. The researcher will also anonymise all data collected through data masking and pseudonymisation. In data masking, personal identifiers such as names, any details related to age, addresses, locations etc. will be removed from the transcribed files of the interviews. In pseudonymisation, a coded reference will be given to each participant: "participant 1, participant 2, participant 3 etc.". A coded reference will also be given to each organisation: Greek university 1, Greek university 2, Serbian university 1 etc.".

All the above data and information will be treated with confidentiality. Audio files will be permanently deleted after transcribed. Then, transcribed files will be saved in password-protected and encrypted files in an encrypted computer. They will also be backed up in the University of York Google drive (the account is password-protected and has a 2-factor authentication). The University is committed to the principle of data protection by design and default and will collect the minimum amount of data necessary for the project.

At the end of the research project, all data will be deposited and archived at the Research Data York Service (the University of York institutional repository). They will comply with the legal obligations and university policy that apply to data management. Depositing data in an institutional repository can facilitate anonymous data discovery.

In most cases, data deposited at the Research Data York service are retained for a minimum period of 10 years from transfer or the last access of those data, whichever is the later.

Finally, the researcher has a duty of care to inform the relevant agencies if any illegal activity or safeguarding issue is disclosed to her.

7) Will I be identified in any research outputs?

Systematic activities will take place for ensuring the anonymity of all participants. All data collected will be anonymised through data masking and pseudonymisation. However, there is a small possibility that you may be identifiable based on specific thoughts or events you will share, since direct quotations will accompany the data analysis in the PhD thesis and relevant publications. In all cases, the researcher will attempt to mitigate the risk of identification and avoid personal details that may identify an individual.
8) Questions or concerns This research has been ethically reviewed and approved by the University of York Economics, Law, Management, Politics, and Sociology (ELMPS) Ethics Committee. If you have any questions about this participant information sheet or concerns about how your data is being processed, please contact Ms. Maria Michali (mm2598@york.ac.uk) and Prof. Federica Angeli (federica.angeli@york.ac.uk) in the first instance. If you are still dissatisfied, please contact the ELMPS Ethics Committee at elmps-ethics-group@york.ac.uk or the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@york.ac.uk.
Please read the separate Privacy Notice sheet which explains how personal data will be used within a research project at the University of York.

Privacy Notice.
(for interview data)

This sheet explains how personal data will be used within a research project at the University of York. For details specific to the project, please see the participant information sheet given to you by the project team. For this project, the University of York is the Data Controller. We are registered with the Information Commissioner's Office. Our registration number is Z4855807.

What information do we have and where do we get your data from?

Please look at the participant information sheet given to you by the person telling you about this project. If you have any questions, you can ask them to explain.

What is our legal basis for processing your data?

Privacy law (the UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and Data Protection Act 2018) requires us to have a legal reason to process your personal data. Our reason is we need

it to perform a public task. This is because the University has a public function, which includes carrying out research projects. We need to use personal data in order to carry out this research project.

Information about your health, ethnicity, sexual identity and other sensitive information is called "special category" data. We have to have an additional legal reason to use this data, because it is sensitive. Our reason is that it is needed for research purposes. All research projects at the University follow our research ethics policies.

How do we use your data?

Please look at the participant information sheet given to you by the person telling you about this project. If you have any questions, you can ask them to explain.

Who do we share your data with?

The participant information sheet tells you any people and organisations your data will be shared with. As well as this, we use computer software or systems to hold and manage data. Other companies only provide the software, system or storage. They are not allowed to use your data for their own reasons. We have agreements in place when we share data. These agreements meet legal requirements to ensure your data is protected.

How do we keep your data secure?

The University is serious about keeping your data secure and protecting your rights to privacy. We don't ask you for data we don't need, and only give access to people who need to know. We think about security when planning projects, to make sure they work well. Our IT security team checks regularly to make sure we're taking the right steps. For more details see our security webpages.

How do we transfer your data safely internationally?

If your data is stored or processed outside the UK, we follow legal requirements to make sure that the same level of privacy rules still apply.

How long will we keep your data?

The University has rules in place for how long research data can be kept when the research project is finished. Please see the participant information sheet given to you by the person telling you about this project for more information.

What rights do you have in relation to your data?

You have rights over your data. The participant information sheet explains how you can stop participating in the study, and what will happen to your data if you do. If you want to get a copy of your data, or talk to us about any other rights, please contact us using the details below.

Questions or concerns

If you have any questions or concerns about how your data is being processed, please use the contact details provided to you by the person telling you about this project. If you have further questions, the University's Data Protection Officer can be contacted at dataprotection@york.ac.uk or by writing to: **Data Protection Officer, University of York, Heslington, York, YO10 5DD**.

Right to complain

If you are unhappy with how the University has handled your personal data, please contact our Data Protection Officer using the details above, so that we can try to put things right. If you are unhappy with our response, you have a right to complain to the Information Commissioner's Office. You can also contact the Information Commissioner's Office by post to **Information Commissioner's Office, Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire, SK9 5AF** or by phone on **0303 123 1113**.

Appendix C: Informed consent form

Maria Michali, Doctoral Student research project

Gender policies in the pathway towards organisational change in Balkan universities: intended policy and emergent outcomes

Participant consent form (participation in an interview)

Thank you for agreeing to take part in the above titled research project, conducted by Maria Michali and the University of York. Please complete this form to indicate your consent for your participation and to give consent for your responses to be used in the project.

	(Tick as appropriate)	
Have you read the information sheet provided and understood what the research project is about?	Yes ❒	No ❒
Have you read the privacy notice and understood how your personal data will be used within a research project at the University of York?	Yes ❒	No ❒
Do you understand you can withdraw at any time during the interview, and have been informed how to do so?	Yes ❒	No ❒
Do you understand that you can withdraw completely from the study (including withdrawing your data) up to 6 weeks after your participation, and have been informed how to do so?	Yes ❒	No ❒
Do you understand that your right to confidentiality will be maintained, and your responses will be anonymised and pseudonymised?	Yes ❒	No ❒

Do you understand that along with the measures to maintain anonymity, you may be identifiable based on direct quotations included in the thesis and relevant publications?	Yes ❒	No ❒
Do you understand that the information you provide may be used anonymously in future research?	Yes ❒	No ❒
Do you agree to take part in the study?	Yes ❒	No ❒
If so, do you give your consent for your interview to be recorded?	Yes ❒	No ❒

Please write your name here (in BLOCK letters):_____

Please sign here:_____

Interviewer's/Researcher's name: MARIA MICHALI

Interviewer's/Researcher's signature: 

Date:_____

Appendix D: Overview of interview procedures and interview guide

Semi-structured, online interviews

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews will all participants. Interview data are frequently exploited in case studies and complex interventions' research because they provide rich empirical data. Interviews are generally considered as "reliable gateways" for examining organisational environments and complex organisational realities (Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2012, p. 12). The semi-structured nature of the interviews especially provides the ability to examine participants' lived experiences in depth. It enables interview discussions to address specific aspects, while leaving room for follow-up questions to maximise the insights gained (Adams, 2015).

To accommodate the different geographical distribution of the study's participants, all interviews took place online using the institutional Zoom account. The interviews were scheduled on dates and times that accommodated participants' professional and personal responsibilities. In some cases, a few interviews were rescheduled to accommodate unexpected obligations encountered by interviewees.

Interview guide

In line with the format of semi-structured interviews, the researcher developed an interview guide, functioning as a useful basis. The order of the questions was occasionally adapted based on the discussions taking place with the interviewees, and accordingly different follow-up questions were posed to the participants based on the nature and content of the discussions held. Moreover, some questions pertaining to participants' views on the processes through which GEPs were formulated (e.g. audit procedures) were not asked when participants argued that they were not aware on what formulation processes had taken place.

The guide first included an opening script to introduce the research and its aims to the participants. Then, it included the main questions to be asked, separated in opening, main, and closing questions. The main questions addressed each policy stage covered in the study, namely policy formulation, implementation, and emergent outcomes. A few summarising questions were also outlined under the main part. The guide also included some prompts to be used when moving from one category of questions to the other, from instance from the opening questions to the main ones. It is noted that the initial interview guide underwent some minor modifications after conducting the first ten interviews. These modifications

ensured a better phrasing or rephrasing of some questions to improve clarity. Finally, some interviewees requested to review the interview questions prior to the interview. Accordingly, the interview questions included in the guide were communicated with them via email in advance.

The final interview guide is provided below.

Opening script

"Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study and the present interview. Before we start, I will briefly share with you a few information about myself and the present study. After this short introduction, please feel free to take the time and ask any relevant questions.

I am Maria Michali, a PhD Candidate at the University of York in the UK , at the School for Business and Society. I am currently pursuing my PhD in Management, and my study aims to explore the effectiveness of organisational gender policies in the pathway towards change. Even if the topic of gender in organisations has received a lot of research attention, several gender policies of various types of organisations continue not to achieve their target goals or results. Therefore, my study aims to explore this, by looking at the development, implementation, and outcomes of gender policies of universities in the Balkan area. Universities have been selected because they are among the organisations that experience considerable gender inequality. Then, Balkan countries have been selected because most relevant studies have taken place in the US, UK, and generally Western countries. Thus, there is an additional need to examine new contexts and gain more insights.

This interview includes questions about your personal impressions and experiences in relation to the gender policy of your organisation.

I would also like to take a couple of minutes and inform you on the measures taken in this study in order to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Information related to your interview will not be shared with any other participants or third parties. The interview will be recorded based on the consent you provided; the recording will be transcribed, and all personal identifiers (e.g. names, locations) will be removed from the transcribed files. A label will also be given to you and your organisation when I mention something relevant in my thesis or any publications. In other words, I will refer to you as participant 1, participant 2 etc. Your organisation will also be mentioned "Greek/Serbian/Bosnian university 1, 2, X" etc. Finally,

there are no right and wrong answers in this interview, you can choose not to answer specific questions, and you also have the right to withdraw at any time during the interview.

That is all from my side. Is there anything further you would like to ask me?"

Introductory questions ("Let's start with the first questions of our study")

- Could you please describe your work position in your organisation?
- How many years have you been working in this organisation?
- Can you tell me about your work routine and main responsibilities? (For example, how is a typical day at the office?)
- Could you also tell me about your main interactions within your organisation?

Main questions ("Let's now proceed to discussing the gender policies of your organisation. Based on the existent search I have already made, in terms of gender policies your organisation currently has a Gender Equality Plan…")

- Therefore, I would like to firstly ask what you know about this Gender Equality Plan (GEP)? Could you share a few details about it and its content?
- Are you somehow involved, or have you been involved with the GEP of your organisation?

GEP formulation

- What do you think about the development of the GEP of your organisation? By development I mean what do you think about the reason why it was developed, and the needs and goals it addressed? / Which are the main needs and challenges this gender policy needs to address in your organisation?
- Are you aware of the process through which the GEP was developed? What do you think about this process? [reference to specific audit processes and surveys taking place]
- What were the main insights you gained through the development process? [applicable to participants involved in the GEP formulation]

GEP implementation

- What are your views about the measures and actions included in the GEP?
- What do you think about the way these measures and actions are put in practice?

- What are the main lessons you learnt while trying to translate the policy into practice? [applicable to participants involved in the GEP implementation]
- How do you perceive the engagement/involvement of the members of your university to the GEP?

GEP outcomes

- What can you say about the results of the GEP? / What do you think about the changes, if any, that the GEPs have brought to your organisation?
- Has the GEP affected you and your organisational experience as a member of the organisation? Has it changed anything for you specifically and how?
- How would you describe/characterise these policies, based on what they originally aimed to do? [optional]

Summarising questions ("And now as we approach the end of the interview, I would like to ask you…")

- Would you do anything differently in relation to the GEP? [applicable to those involved in the GEP] / Do you think there is something that should have been done differently?
- To summarise, could you share one major success story and one major obstacle encountered throughout the so-far GEP lifecycle?
- Could you summarise your impressions about the GEP of your university?

Closing questions ("These have been the questions from my side…")

- Is there anything else you would like to add in relation to the above?
- Is there anything else you would like to ask me in relation to the above, or what we have discussed in general?

Recording, note-taking, and transcription

All interviews were recorded upon participants' consent, using the corresponding function of Zoom. The researcher refrained from keeping notes during the interviews, to avoid distracting the participants and be able to pay full attention to the ongoing discussions. Notes and reflections were documented after each interview in a separate document. These well consulted during the analysis of the interview transcripts, to ensure further analytical depth.

The interviews were transcribed using MS word, employing the dictate and transcribe functions. The resulting transcripts required several manual checks by the researcher while

listening to the audio files, especially the transcripts of the interviews conducted in Greek. As mentioned throughout the thesis, thirty interviews were conducted in English, and twelve in Greek allowing some participants greater comfort in expressing themselves, especially those not being fluent in English. During the manual checks of the transcripts, the transcripts were also anonymised. Finally, the transcripts were imported to NVivo to proceed with the data analysis.