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Delivering gender justice in academia through gender equality plans? Normative and practical challenges

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Abstract

This paper employs the concept of epistemic justice to examine the potential for gender equality plans (GEPs) to bring about sustainable transformative change towards gender equality in higher education. Mindful of both the limitations and opportunities of gender policy interventions, the paper highlights the importance of approaching gender inequality as a problem of justice and power rather than as an issue of “loss of talent.” The paper draws on Fricker’s account of epistemic justice as well as on Bourdieu’s analysis of power in the academic field, to evaluate seven GEPs in European universities for their potential to transform gender–power relations in academia. The analysis reveals that insufficient attention is paid to the role of academic power in creating gender injustice at all institutional levels and to the role of organizational culture in the perpetuation of gender inequalities in those settings. The study suggests that the incorporation of an epistemic justice lens in the creation of GEPs would address gendered power relationships and lead to sustainable equitable outcomes.

KEYWORDS

epistemic justice, gender equality, higher education, institutional change, power

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1 | INTRODUCTION

There have been persistent efforts to tackle gender inequalities in universities and research organizations in the European Union (EU) since the publication of the European Technology Assessment Network (ETAN) report (Osborn et al., 2000). That report found that gender played a disproportionate role in the likelihood of a person being able to enter, remain in and succeed within the scientific community. Noting the very slow increase in the percentages of women in top positions, the report proposed a series of recommendations designed to address the situation, combining a three-pronged policy approach: equal treatment, positive action, and gender mainstreaming (Rees, 2001, p. 256).

Since 2015, the EU has been recommending, and actively supporting, the implementation of Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) in academic and research organizations as a tool for structural change. The main vehicles for this strategy are through European research and innovation programs (FP6, FP7, Horizon 2020) and other supportive instruments, such as the GEAR online tool designed to inform and guide universities in setting up and implementing GEPs (Council of the European Union, 2015; EIGE 2016). A GEP is defined as a set of actions aimed at identifying gender inequalities and bias, designing and implementing measures to correct these, and setting targets and monitoring progress via indicators (EIGE, 2016). GEPs implemented in the context of EU funded projects must meet the three objectives of the European Research Area in relation to gender equality: (1) to remove legal and other barriers to the recruitment, retention, and career progression of female researchers; (2) to address gender imbalances in decision making processes, and (3) to strengthen the gender dimension in research (Council of the European Union, 2015).

Twenty years after the ETAN report, data on progress on gender equality in academia and research suggest that policy and legislative efforts at both EU and Member State level have had some impact, although the figures continue to portray a sector in which significant gender inequalities persist. The proportion of women professors in the EU rose from 14% in 2004 (EU-25) to 24% in 2016. Gender gaps in governance bodies also persist albeit with some progress in recent years: in 2007 the proportion of women among heads of higher education institutions in the EU-27 was a mere 13%, this increased to a modest 22% in 2017. Yet, women held about 46% of lecturing posts (Grade C) over this period (European Commission, 2013, 2019).

The “glass ceiling” metaphor is often used to represent gender inequalities in career advancement. It points to the influence of a set of invisible barriers that hinder women's progression to the highest positions of organizations. These barriers are invisible because formal organizational rules may carry the promise of a fair opportunity for women to compete with men in recruitment and promotion processes, yet informal norms and practices can act to undermine those chances by creating a ceiling against which women aspiring to the top positions collide (Teelken et al., 2019). In the academic sector, the under-representation of women among professors and university rectors represents the most visible and salient manifestation of gender inequalities. Yet, this is but one aspect of a problem that “resembles an unbeatable seven-headed dragon” (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012, p. 71). As studies on gender and organizations show, even if women were finally to break the “glass ceiling” and reach parity with men at the top structures, there is no guarantee that those organizations will operate in a more gender-egalitarian manner (Hamilton et al., 2019). In response to the limitations of the “glass ceiling” metaphor, additional metaphors have been used to portray the complex relationship between gender, inequality, and its structural and cultural determinants in organizations.

The “glass cliff” metaphor describes a phenomenon whereby women are more likely to be appointed to leadership roles in situations of problematic organizational change (Ryan et al., 2016). In the academic sector, an increased proportion of women have taken senior management positions in a variety of countries. While this development can bring potential benefits to the organization¹, studies show that it cannot be taken as evidence of the “glass ceiling” being finally broken (Peterson, 2016). The reason is that the growth of women in these positions is occurring at a time of decline in status and prestige attaching to these senior posts, thus becoming less attractive to men (Deem et al., 2000). This reduction in prestige is associated with the spread of an “entrepreneurial,” business-oriented ethos in higher education. It is when these appointments are no longer a sign of scholarly excellence and when their associated administrative duties have significantly increased, becoming harder to

combine with a successful scholarly career, that women have been allowed to enter them. The “glass cliff” metaphor highlights the importance of looking at changes to the kind of power and authority conferred by certain positions (including those at the top) when these become feminized (Castaño et al., 2019).

Understanding the role of gender in structuring power relations in universities also requires attention to “sticky floors,” a metaphor that represents the clustering of women in precarious forms of employment at the bottom of the academic hierarchy. Linked to neoliberal, business-oriented reforms in the higher education sector, these academics are employed on temporary and short-term contracts to deliver core academic functions such as teaching and research. Like “glass ceilings” and “glass cliffs,” “sticky floors” also point to barriers that are hidden from view. This highly feminized workforce at the bottom of the academic hierarchy is likely to get stuck in a “wheel of precarity,” with few opportunities to obtain secure work. Yet, their working conditions are individualized through the lens of “talent,” leading to stigmatization for their “failure” to obtain a permanent position (O’Keefe & Courtois, 2019). In addition, the metaphor highlights the invisibility of these workers—their nonstatus in the organization. Their work is often not properly acknowledged, they lack access to intellectual leadership, do not have the ability to pursue their own interests, nor to enjoy basic scholarly opportunities such as research leave (Love-day, 2018). This invisibility is exacerbated by the fact that their situation is rarely considered in studies and policy initiatives seeking to understand and address gender inequalities in universities. Institutional efforts of this kind tend to focus on women in permanent positions and on resolving the barriers encountered as they progress to the higher ranks (White, 2017).

These metaphors highlight the invisibility of institutional barriers which are often perceived as individual in nature. They also offer a picture of the way gender shapes the distribution of power both within and across all levels of the academic hierarchy. Changing gender–power relations in academic institutions requires policy interventions that go beyond creating the conditions for tenured women to advance to the top positions in academia and research.

In this context, the implementation of institutional transformation programs towards gender equality is the main stated goal of GEPs being developed in universities in Europe and beyond. But what is the potential of GEPs to achieve institutional transformation? What pitfalls do they encounter? This paper explores these questions through the analysis of the GEPs of seven European universities. It utilizes a normative framework based on the concept of epistemic justice to examine the potential of GEPs to disrupt gender–power structures and dynamics to bring about sustainable, gender-equal institutional change.

This study has four parts. The first part presents different normative approaches to gender inequalities in Higher education institutions, highlighting both the strengths and weaknesses of each. Taking the work of Pierre Bourdieu on power in the academic field as a point of departure, this section develops an approach based on the concept of epistemic justice as a core component of gender justice in academia. The second part presents the methodological framework for analyzing GEP actions through the lens of epistemic justice. This section defines the research questions of the study, as well as describing the sample and clarifying the methods. Part three provides an analysis of GEPs in seven universities in Europe. This analysis identifies and evaluates general trends as well as good practice in efforts to disrupt traditional gender power relations through both cultural and structural change interventions. The paper ends with a discussion, in part four, of the prospects for achieving gender justice in universities through the application of GEPs, together with some recommendations based on the results of the study.

2 | PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER INEQUALITIES IN ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS

2.1 | Gender and power in academia

This inquiry into the capacity of GEPs in universities to disrupt traditional gender–power relations and achieve institutional change is informed by a concept of power—and more specifically, of academic power—as articulated

and developed in the work of Bourdieu (1986, 1988, 1993). Bourdieu distinguished different forms of power, or capital, in the academic field: economic capital (material resources); social capital (social connections, networks); cultural capital (education, knowledge, skills); and symbolic capital (prestige, status, recognition). These forms of capital are interconvertible and can be held either by individual academics or collective actors (i.e., higher education institutions, faculties, departments or research groups).

According to Bourdieu, the most significant form of capital in the academic field is symbolic capital—that is, the prestige and recognition associated with different types of activities (e.g., research) and their outputs (e.g., publications, citations) as well as positions within the university (e.g., full professorship; Heffernan, 2020; Rowlands, 2018).

Since these forms of academic power or capital are unevenly distributed, higher education institutions are deeply hierarchical structures, where academics and academic units occupy dominant and subordinate positions. The work of Bourdieu does not explicitly consider the ways in which gender constitutes a marker of power inequalities in these settings, yet his theory of academic power illuminates the dynamics of gender–power relations in universities. It also draws attention to the gatekeeping role of powerful actors. Both aspects are at the very center of gender inequalities and their perpetuation. In addition, academic power helps to understand why policy interventions aimed at advancing gender equality in the accrual of economic, social and cultural forms of capital in the academic field may not be effective unless the importance of symbolic capital is also taken into account. To give an example, a policy geared towards giving equal opportunities in the attainment of social capital through the elimination of barriers that dissuade or prevent academic women from applying for conference attendance funds may constitute a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for eliminating gender inequalities. The recognition of academic standing (symbolic capital) is granted through formal institutional rules (e.g., the standards used to evaluate a candidate's "merit" in recruitment and promotion processes) as well as informal ones (everyday exchanges in multiple academic and research settings). These formal and informal rules act to reinforce, and perpetuate, gendered structures of privilege and marginalization at all levels of the academic hierarchy (De Welde & Laursen, 2011). Informal rules take subtle forms such as shunning, overlooking and social exclusion (Waylen, 2014), and therefore are more difficult to identify and to change through policy interventions.

A transformation of gender–power relations in academic institutions may require sustained action that takes into consideration the role of symbolic power (in both its formal and informal expressions), its gender dimensions, and its impact on gender justice. While fairness and efficiency rationales are employed as normative foundations for legitimizing actions intended to deliver gender equality, they stop short of linking to the more overarching transformative norm of gender justice. This transformative norm, when applied to delivering gender equality, offers the opportunity for constructing actions that tackle the gender deficit in symbolic capital. It also facilitates a critical lens through which to evaluate the effectiveness of these actions in delivering equitable outcomes. The next section explores the concept of epistemic justice as a core aspect of gender justice in higher education.

2.2 | A problem of justice or of “loss of talent”? Normative perspectives

This section critically reviews normative arguments for advancing gender equality in higher education and research. It makes a case for the need to recast a normative approach based on the principle of gender justice that incorporates the concept of epistemic justice as one of its core dimensions.

2.2.1 | Justice and utility arguments for advancing gender equality

A classical argument used to legitimize gender equality interventions is that of “fairness.” This justification draws on rights to equality of treatment and equal opportunities between women and men regarding participation, employment, status and social and economic conditions, and the prohibition of gender-based discrimination. The

expectation in this argument is that people who are equally talented and motivated should have equal chances to attain desirable positions, as a person's fate in life should not depend on the social circumstances of their birth or upbringing (Rawls, 2001). We find these concepts enshrined in gender equality law. For example, EU legislation obliges Member States to ensure equal opportunities and equal treatment for women and men in all areas and to combat any form of gender discrimination. The European Institute for Gender Equality reiterates the importance of fairness as an underlying nondiscrimination principle in the higher education sector:

Gender balance and non-discrimination are a matter of fairness. Women and men, regardless of their ethnic background, must have the same opportunities to participate in, and the same power to influence, the higher education and research community (EIGE, 2016, p. 12).

While this is a compelling statement, the main question is how to translate this abstract concept of equality *de jure* into concrete policy goals with a view to achieving substantive equality. While fairness arguments invoke universal rules that apply to macro-structures, when one moves from this abstract concept to implementable policy and practice in specific institutional settings, there is not necessarily agreement on what is "fair" between a discriminated group and the dominant group from which the injustice emanates. This lack of consensus is manifest in the resistance encountered in academia to changes that seek to bring fairness into the outcomes of academic processes.

A second normative approach for making the gender equality argument is that of "efficiency." In this instance the "good" is framed in utilitarian terms rather than in universal ideals of justice. This shift in orientation coincides with trends towards a technocratic style of policymaking that is evidence-informed, quantifiable, and results-oriented. Efficiency arguments justify the value of gender equality not as an end in itself, but as a means to achieve economic efficiency gains.

Efficiency arguments assume that talent is equally distributed between women and men and, therefore, that gender inequalities represent a waste of human resources. They posit that a greater involvement of women in academia and research will enrich knowledge production and bring important gains to both the economy and society in the form of greater innovation, competitiveness and economic growth. This is a business rationale that fits well with the rapid transformation of institutions of higher education in Europe into "entrepreneurial universities," where the business is the knowledge economy and the economic rationale for higher education is connected to competition for excellence (Elomäki, 2015; Sam & van der Sijde, 2014).

However, efficiency arguments present a variety of problems. First, promoting gender equality may not necessarily lead to efficiency gains, so that relying on this type of argument to justify gender equality policy without strong supporting evidence about its assumed impacts can jeopardize the prospects for gender equality action in the future (Doss, 2017). Second, efficiency arguments displaces the moral imperative to achieve gender equality, undermining the primacy of rights-based justice arguments according to which all individuals, independent of their gender, have a right to be treated as equals and to share power, knowledge and resources equitably (Gerard, 2019). Third, efficiency arguments may be blind to discriminatory practices by shifting the responsibility of failure to succeed onto those individual women who cannot contribute, or can contribute in only limited ways, to the goals of the organization. Last, but not least, efficiency arguments obscure unequal power relations (Esquivel, 2017). As the efficiency frame views gender differences as competencies that are beneficial for the organization, the initiatives generated by this approach focus on bringing more women into already established gendered power structures. Actions based on this premise can hinder a transformative politics, insofar as efficiency-oriented reforms may protect the status quo from meaningful challenge.

2.2.2 | Epistemic justice: A core dimension of gender justice in academia and research

Given the shortcomings of both efficiency and fairness as a basis for delivering gender equality, the challenge is to develop a normative approach centered on gender justice which can reveal the specific gender discriminations

occurring in institutions of higher education and research. Such an approach can render visible the operation of Bourdieu's forms of academic power and thereby provide a more robust basis for delivering gender equity in academia.

In academia, epistemic exchanges are at the very heart of everyday activities and social interactions. Furthermore, the mission, goals, and values of these institutions, as knowledge producers and transmitters, are predominantly epistemic. To draw out the gender aspect of epistemic justice it is important, first, to define what we mean by the "epistemic" and, second, to explore the nature of epistemic injustice in these settings.

Scientific inquiry involves a wide variety of interconnected actions such as posing research questions, forming hypotheses, designing methodologies, setting up instruments, gathering evidence, analyzing, interpreting and disseminating results, and so on (Hookway, 2010). It also involves sharing, explaining, discussing, and critiquing the knowledge created through teaching, peer discussions, and publication. This constitutes the core of the epistemic community that is the academy. Power, and more particularly, symbolic power, is central to the creation, exchange and imparting of knowledge.

In her work on epistemic injustice, Fricker (2007) identifies one kind of injustice which occurs when a speaker's assertions are given unduly low weight because of a listener's prejudices about the social group to which the speaker belongs. This injustice is evident, for example, when it is expressed through dismissive comments, patronizing remarks, or other interventions that undermines the speaker's knowledge. Epistemic injustice thus occurs when the credibility or epistemic authority that a person is afforded does not correspond to the credibility/epistemic authority that she deserves. This dynamic is one where the nature of symbolic power (prestige, status, and recognition) is revealed.

Epistemic exchanges are social practices and, as such, epistemic injustice will be rarely reducible to individual acts of injustice because epistemic authority can only be conferred by an epistemic community according to established norms. The social character of such norms does not guarantee that processes of credibility assessment will be objective, as they may favor those groups who are already powerful or privileged. Individuals who are male, middle class, middle-aged and white are more likely to be granted epistemic authority in relation to individuals who are female, belong to an ethnic minority group, are young or old (Fricker, 1998). Furthermore, dominant groups in higher education institutions may block the progression of others with a view to preserving their power positions. This is carried out, for example, by powerful groups and individuals promoting the characteristics, career patterns and markers of scientific excellence that they self-identify as possessing and that subordinates are supposed to lack.

Epistemic injustice is closely linked to other forms such as socioeconomic and cultural injustices emanating from "maldistribution" and "misrecognition" (Fraser, 1995). The sexual division of labor along productive/reproductive lines is often cited as a key factor leading to gender inequalities in career advancement in academia and research (Lutter & Schröder, 2020). Although it could be argued that gender injustice linked to the sexual division of labor is not strictly "epistemic," its epistemic consequences are obvious in these contexts. When a woman's academic career is thwarted due to childcare responsibilities the social injustice committed has an important epistemic dimension because of the type of institutions and practices involved (Hookway, 2010, p. 154).

Epistemic injustice is also closely linked to a form of cultural injustice emanating from either misrecognition or nonrecognition, whereby an individual or a social group is not deemed one's conversational peer (Giladi, 2018, 2020). In academic and research contexts, the granting of epistemic authority is an act by which we recognize an individual as competent and trustworthy in relation to the various activities required for the production and transmission of knowledge. It is in such acts where the operation of symbolic power is more clearly manifest. One illustration of the gender-power dynamics at the root of (gender) epistemic injustice in higher education is the kind of interactions often observed in, for example, an academic seminar. In this setting, eye contact, body language, seating allocation, who gets to speak, who dominates the discussion, who is being cut short, whose ideas are developed and whose are ignored, denote power relations in operation (Reed, 2018, p. 185). In these informal contexts, gender epistemic injustice is committed through masculinist micropolitical

practices (Montes & O'Connor, 2019; O'Connor et al., 2017) which devalue, or put into question, women's epistemic authority.

Epistemic injustice, in sum, is a form of injustice institutionalized in the norms and standards of "excellence" and "merit" that results in the marginalization or exclusion from epistemic communities of individuals that do not belong to the dominant group. Consequently, the ability of those individuals to use the shared capital (economic, social, and cultural) that are necessary to advance knowledge—and hence advance academic careers—is hindered, thwarting the development of their own epistemic potential and the attainment of their epistemic goals (Dotson, 2014). Ultimately, epistemic injustice "can cause deep and wide harm to a person's psychology and practical life" (Fricker, 2007, p. 145), including loss of confidence in one's intellectual abilities, self-belief and intellectual courage, all of which are essential conditions to participate in scientific inquiry and the production of knowledge.

Restoring gender equality in academia can benefit from a normative account of gender justice that unveils, and articulates, the multiple ways in which the withholding of epistemic authority (symbolic power) on the basis of gender damages individual women, academic institutions, and scientific inquiry. Borrowing on Fraser's theory of participatory parity (Fraser, 2007) and applying it to the academic field, restoring gender epistemic justice may require a politics of recognition that focuses on the damage inflicted when women are systematically marginalized, and which is aimed towards the achievement of gender equality within the "status order" of this field.

2.2.3 | Institutional change for gender justice: The promises and perils of policy interventions

Drawing on a normative account of gender equality based on gender justice, we have highlighted the importance of its epistemic dimensions in academic contexts. We have also drawn attention to how an institutional change policy aimed at achieving gender equality would require a transformation of the gendered structures of academic power. But what would such policy look like? And more specifically, how can we assess GEPs in universities with regards to their capacity to tackle gender epistemic injustice?

In addressing these questions, two sets of considerations must be taken into account. The first concerns the conditions for policy to achieve desired outcomes. As indicated in the previous section, acts of gender epistemic injustice can take place in formal contexts, such as, for example, in formal assessments of academic merit and scientific excellence of an individual's academic career. Besides these formal settings, acts of epistemic injustice can also occur in the context of everyday interactions when performing typical academic and scientific activities, such as seminar discussions, lectures, conference presentations and group experiments. In order to tackle those practices, the importance of changing not only institutional structures, but also the culture of an organization, is now being increasingly recognized. For example, the Athena SWAN Charter includes an explicit commitment to both structural and cultural changes to advance gender equality, "recognising that initiatives and actions that support individuals alone will not sufficiently advance equality" (Advance HE, 2019). The GEAR tool draws attention to the challenge involved in realizing this goal, stating that changing the culture of an organization requires systematic efforts "until the desired change in values has been internalized by all involved in the organisation" (EIGE, 2016, p. 39).

Findings from analyses of work-life balance policies in universities show the limited effectiveness of structural change programs, particularly in cases where traditional cultural norms about the gender division of labor and the ideal male worker continue to be deeply embedded in the culture of the organization. Even if this policy confers equal formal rights to both women and men, the informal expectation in such cases is that women will be the ones who avail of this right, while men will continue to be fully dedicated to their academic activities. In such instances, the intended transformative goal of structural change programs will not be achieved (Hobson, 2018; Sallee, 2012).

The second set of considerations concern the limitations of written policy for an evaluation of its potential to realize gender justice. The fact that an institution has a GEP in place does not in itself guarantee a gender just set of

outcomes (O'Connor, 2020). Those policies must be interpreted, and they must be implemented. Thus, universities may engage in GEP actions for reasons other than a commitment to justice and equality; for example because they have a legal duty to do so (Ikävalko & Kantola, 2017), or to remain competitive in the global market (Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019). Increasingly, having a GEP in place is a positive element in seeking research funds, and in attracting talented staff and a greater pool of potential students.

Previous studies show how GEPs can have multiple effects. While a GEP may be initiated by a managerialist logic where the goal is to formulate a reasonable technocratic document and to follow it through the different phases, it can also provide opportunities for transforming gender–power relationships in the organization. The policy process can itself raise awareness about gender inequalities through the collection of quantitative and qualitative data. Furthermore, the process can also create inclusive spaces for discussion, learning, cooperation and support. These activities can facilitate a wide engagement in gender equality work from students and staff at different levels of the organization. They can also assist in consensus-building on gender equality priorities and actions. All of these measures offer the potential to create an active sense of ownership and ensure a sustained commitment to institutional change (Ovseiko et al., 2017).

However, an analysis of written policy cannot alone fully capture the background or effectiveness of the wider implementing context, as this would require a deep qualitative analysis based on participant observation and/or interviews with the main actors involved, plus a longitudinal quantitative monitoring of the gender equality outcomes of different types of policy measures. With these limitations in mind, the analysis in this study is focused on the more modest inquiry of assessing the main approaches employed across a sample of European universities and analyzing their potential to deliver epistemic justice.

3 | METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 | The study sample

In exploring the real-world potential and limitations of GEPs to deliver gender epistemic justice in academia, this paper analyses and evaluates recent GEPs approved in seven European Universities: (1) The University of Nottingham, England (2017–2020); (2) The Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain (2019–2023); (3) The University of Bologna, Italy (2017–2020); (4) The University of Helsinki, Finland (2019–2020); (5) The University of Geneva, Switzerland (2017–2020); (6) The University of Minho, School of Engineering, Portugal (2017–2019); and (7) The University of Stockholm, Sweden (2017–2018).

These GEPs were selected to represent recent examples from a variety of European public higher education institutions. All documents are available online and published in English, French and Spanish. In selecting the GEPs, the quality of information provided was prioritized over the sample size, favoring those that included a narrative about the nature of the problem to be addressed, the results of the institutional assessment process and a justification of the actions based on assessment results. When this information was lacking from the GEP documents, other relevant material published on the university websites were consulted (for a list of documents consulted, see Appendix Table).

There are three elements common to the sample institutions. The first is that they provide clear evidence that women academics are faced with obstacles along the career path (see Appendix Table). The second is an explicit commitment to gender equality at the institutional level. Two of the universities (Geneva and Helsinki) are members of the League of European Research Institutions, an association of 23 leading research-intensive universities committed to gender equality. Three universities have been participants of EU-funded projects supporting institutional change through GEPs (Barcelona, Bologna, and Minho) and one is a signatory to the UK gender equality accreditation scheme, the Athena Swan Charter, established in 2005 to encourage and recognize commitment to advancing the careers of women in academia (Nottingham). The third element is that the majority have endorsed the European Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers (European Commission, 2005).

The Code includes gender equality principles in the areas of recruitment, selection, transparency, judging merit, career breaks, and variations in the chronological order of CVs, recognition of mobility experience and of qualifications, seniority, and postdoctoral appointments.

Beyond these commonalities, there are significant differences across the institutions with respect to their national legal and policy frameworks; the results of the initial assessments of the situation and the priorities for action identified by their stakeholders; the institutional tradition of GEP implementation; and the levels of institutional autonomy in the evaluation of individual merit and in the hiring and promotion of academic staff.

3.2 | Methods

The empirical part of this study is an exploratory first analysis aiming to address the following questions: To what extent are GEPs in European universities recognizing gender epistemic injustices? What type of initiatives are being introduced in this regard? What major gaps can be identified in practice?

As an exploratory study seeking to identify and evaluate approaches, identify gaps and highlight good practices in efforts to disrupt entrenched organizational cultures through policy interventions, the analysis of GEPs is not comparative in the conventional sense. Given the differences between the institutions, a comparative case analysis does not constitute the most suitable technique to address the general questions above. Furthermore, the analysis does not seek to test or to validate a hypothesis to obtain conclusive results. Instead, following a more inductive approach, the aim is to develop the current state of knowledge on the epistemic aspects of gender justice in academia, its policy implications, and to open new avenues for future research.

The analysis is based on documentary evidence. Given the variation in the information included in the GEP documents, in some cases additional material, such as separate statistical reports and organization strategic plans—were also consulted.

Each GEP, including introduction, assessment reports, and action plans, in conjunction with the supporting documents, was interrogated and interpreted alongside two axes derived from the theoretical framework developed in previous sections. These are:

- (1) Challenges and opportunities in mobilizing commitment and collective engagement around gender justice in the organization.
- (2) Challenges and opportunities to effect a transformation in the gendered culture of the organization through changes in the norms (both formal and informal) by which epistemic authority is recognized.

The authors are aware of the limitations attending to this study, given its exclusive documentary focus. First, the meaning we extract from the GEPs is followed up in the ancillary documentation, but not examined for accuracy and validity through other methods (e.g., interviews). Our focus is not to evaluate the application of the GEPs in their real-life settings. Instead, this is a first-step exploration of the extent to which a range of university GEPs, in different cultural contexts, embed a gender justice approach to gender equality. Thus, we are seeking to reveal the underlying normative principles guiding the GEPs. In the words of Bowen (2009, p. 29), it is “a case of text providing context.” Second, these are documents aligned with university corporate policy and university's leaders' agenda. In some circumstances, this could be a disadvantage given the risk of bias, with the institution presenting a face consonant with the public relations image it wishes to project. In this instance, however, this is precisely what we wish to evaluate—the sort of normative frame the institution demonstrates in terms of gender equality.

Bearing in mind the limitations of an exploratory study based on secondary research methods, it nonetheless provides valuable insights into gender inequalities in academia as an issue gender epistemic justice and the extent to which institutions are responding to this, highlighting challenges, as well as laying the ground for the design of a more systematic case-study research.

4 | ANALYSIS OF GEPS IN EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES

4.1 | Mobilizing commitment to gender equality and collective engagement in the GEP process

The GEPs reviewed in this study typically begin by describing the legal and policy context for gender equality at international, European, national, regional, and local level. This provides a general framework for the aims and objectives of the action plan, its approach, its scope, as well as the target population of its measures.

The Equality and Diversity Plan of the University of Helsinki is underpinned by the Finnish Act on Equality between Women and Men and by the Non-Discrimination Act. The first is aimed at preventing gender discrimination, promote equality between women and men, improve the status of women, particularly in working life, and preventing discrimination based on gender identity or gender expression. The second is aimed at preventing discrimination on the basis of age, ethnic or national origin, nationality, language, religion, belief, opinion, health, disability, sexual orientation, or other personal characteristics. Within this legal framework, the Helsinki Plan takes an equality and diversity approach, covering the discrimination grounds specified by the legislation. At the same time, it broadens the concept of gender to consider gender identities beyond traditional binary understandings.

This example highlights the role of external regulatory frameworks relating to gender equality in both fostering and shaping the contours of GEP analysis and action. Legal frameworks are underpinned by normative equality principles of equal treatment, equal opportunities and nondiscrimination, yet another framing condition is commitment from institutional leaders. Without this commitment, it is unlikely that institutional change will be achieved, as the GEP can easily become a bureaucratic box-ticking exercise. This issue is explicitly acknowledged in the GEP of the Autonomous University of Barcelona, which states that achieving gender equality “requires a strong political commitment, mainstreaming gender in all type of actions carried out by the institution and the involvement of the whole university community” (Universidad Autònoma de Barcelona, 2019, p. 3). The challenge of mobilizing commitment and engaging the university community in gender equality work is also recognized and addressed in the GEPs of Helsinki, Nottingham, and Minho, each of which take a broad participative approach to building consensus on gender equality. However, the information provided in these GEPs reveals important gender gaps in engagement, which confirms the generalized assumption that gender equality work continues to be viewed predominantly as “women’s work.”

There are some good indicators of commitment to gender equality and levels of engagement in GEP design and implementation. The first is the response rate of surveys/questionnaires carried out during the GEP assessment phase. These vary across institutions but typically include culture surveys, an evaluation of actions implemented in previous GEPs and emerging areas for action. The response rate of these surveys range between 6.7% in Barcelona, 34.7% in Nottingham, and 62.8% in Helsinki.² In these three institutions, the majority of respondents were women (66.3% in Barcelona, 61.6% in Helsinki, and 58.4% in Nottingham). Measures to increase engagement mainly focus on better communication plans, diversifying the channels used, as well as “encouraging managers to ensure that staff had both time and opportunity to complete the survey” (University of Nottingham, 2017, p. 18).³

Another indicator of engagement is the level of participation in relevant training and awareness-raising events, as well as membership of networks related to gender equality, diversity, and inclusion. Although the GEPs analyzed do not include detailed information, both the Nottingham and Helsinki GEPs record a low participation of male staff in training on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (e.g., 72%⁴ of women participants in both Helsinki and Nottingham⁴).

In response, Nottingham includes a measure to make sure that all staff avails of training opportunities in equality issues.⁵

Low levels of men's engagement in GEP design and implementation represent an important barrier to institutional transformation towards gender justice in academia. Redressing the unequal distribution of academic power along gender divides requires a broad participation in the generation of data as well as in actions geared towards gender sensitization. There are examples that illustrate progress in this regard. The GEP of the University of Helsinki increased staff participation in their surveys by 18% points over the period 2015–2017 (from 44.7% to 62.8%), although this was accompanied by a small increase in men's participation (2.5% points). In Nottingham, a low participation in the 2016 Athena Swan Survey was addressed through the distribution of paper copies, encouraging managers to ensure that staff had both time and opportunity to complete the survey, as well as sending personalized reminders to staff who had not completed the survey. As a result, the response rate in the following 2017 Staff Engagement Survey nearly doubled, increasing from 34.7% to 61% (University of Nottingham, 2017)⁶.

4.2 | Effecting a cultural transformation

In the academic world, the conferring of epistemic authority is governed by the principle of merit. Decision-making processes regarding recruitment, promotion, nominations, grant awards and publications, are made on the basis of this principle (Scully, 1997, p. 413).

In today's higher education institutions, merit is assessed through standards of "excellence" which are assumed to be objective, quantifiable, and measurable. There is a strong focus on research and related outputs, such as publications in peer-reviewed journals, journal rankings, citation indexes, the ability to obtain research funds, alongside other indicators such as the holding of leadership roles (Shore & Wright, 2017).

Numerous studies challenge the idea that selection decisions in academia are solely based on individual achievements according to objective and measurable standards of excellence and regardless of the candidate's gender (Thornton, 2013). These studies show how the "excellence" system for evaluating merit reproduces gender inequalities through the gendered construction of the concept, the existence of implicit gender bias in the application of its standards, and its stratifying gendered outcomes. Criticisms of the claim that evaluations of academic excellence are objective and gender-neutral call for a revision of current meritocratic systems through the incorporation of institutional policy and practices addressing this issue (Linková, 2017; Helgesson & Sjögren, 2019; Treviño et al., 2018).

4.2.1 | Recasting academic excellence in the selected institutions

Five GEPs in this study contain a variety of actions aimed at changing the formal norms and procedures used in assessments of academic merit, as well as the cultural values engendering traditional perceptions of the "ideal academic." One typical action aims at neutralizing the negative impact of maternity, paternity and other care leaves in recruitment and promotion decisions, as well as in evaluations of research performance, by discounting the periods of professional inactivity derived from the take up of these types of leave (Barcelona, Bologna, Helsinki, Nottingham, and Stockholm). This measure is not necessarily targeted at women exclusively but is also intended to change traditional gender norms by encouraging more men to take up those leaves and to share care responsibilities with women.

A related action consists in moving away from an exclusive research focus in evaluations of academic merit by taking into account nonresearch activities such as teaching and leadership roles (Nottingham).⁷ Like the previous measure, this action is not necessarily aimed at facilitating the career advancement of women exclusively. As

teaching roles continue to be feminized, it can contribute to the blurring of the gendered division of academic work through a reevaluation of roles. This action also moves away from a quantitative evaluation of merit through introducing standards that require more qualitative assessments, although with limited success in practice. As explained in the GEP from Nottingham: "Promotion success has been greater via the research and teaching pathway where employees have a research focus. This may be in part because criteria regarding teaching, leadership, and citizenship are more qualitative so can be harder to interpret" (University of Nottingham 2017, p. 151). This phrasing implies that quantitative criteria continue to be favored over qualitative criteria in assessments of academic merit. If qualitative criteria are perceived as being less accurate than quantitative measures, their use may be viewed as being susceptible of giving the candidate an "easy pass."

Finally, three GEPs include positive action measures in selection decisions (Barcelona, Helsinki, and Nottingham) which incorporate a gender equality of outcome perspective into formal assessments of academic merit, even if they do not necessarily aim to change traditional evaluation standards. This type of measure consists in selecting the underrepresented gender in cases where there are two or more candidates of equal merit and qualifications according to whatever criteria is used. Other GEPs include gender targets or quotas in shortlists (Geneva). The goal is to tackle both vertical and horizontal gender segregation in academic and research careers by facilitating gender parity via a change in decision-making procedures.

In sum, while a majority of GEP surveyed in this study include actions aimed at changing the application of the criteria deployed in formal assessments of academic merit, only one of them (Nottingham) includes actions to change the criteria by which merit is defined. This GEP records the challenges in efforts to counteract traditional gendered constructions and measures of merit, which raises a question about the prospect of achieving gender epistemic justice in a climate of neoliberal ethos where "worth" is mainly dictated by market values (Rosa & Clavero, 2020).

4.2.2 | Levers for informal cultural change

Action aimed at changing both the standards and procedures by which academic merit is formally assessed must be supported by actions directly aimed at informal cultural change. This is because misrecognition not only happens in formal assessments of merit but also at the level of micro-political practices. However, informal practices are particularly difficult to change, as they are "often infused with cultural stereotypes and supported by wider organisational and societal structures" (O'Connor et al., 2017, p. 12). Good mechanisms for the detection of informal practices that lead to the misrecognition of women's epistemic worth are key to giving visibility to this issue.

A major gap identified in the majority of GEPs is a lack of sufficient data and information regarding the extent to which the culture of the organization acts to discriminate against women. The GEPs of Barcelona, Bologna, Helsinki, Minho, and Nottingham provide a description of the methodology used in the institutional assessment phase, all of which comprised cultural/wellbeing surveys, interviews and/or focus groups. However, only three of these GEPs (Barcelona, Helsinki, and Nottingham) include data collected through these methods, while the self-assessment reports of the remaining four GEPs focus exclusively on quantitative data from human resources units.

The quality of the data gathered through cultural/wellbeing surveys very much depends on the questionnaire design. A well-designed questionnaire that is based on a good understanding of the dynamics of gender-power relations in the academic world can identify problems of recognition, both in formal and informal contexts, in assignments of epistemic authority. In addition to providing a good evidence-basis for policy design, the publication and wide circulation of the results of these surveys can be a powerful awareness-raising tool among key stakeholders and the university community as a whole.

However, the culture surveys fall short in their potential to deliver high-quality data. Two pitfalls found were lack of specificity in the content of the questionnaires and lack of sex-disaggregated data in the presentation of the findings.

On the matter of specificity, the GEP from Helsinki includes data findings from a wellbeing survey carried out as part of the institutional assessment stage. While the data presented is gender disaggregated, it refers to five quite general questions such as “I have not experienced inappropriate treatment or workplace harassment during the past year.” Respondents were asked to agree or disagree on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Although the overall response was highly positive at 4.2, there was no collection of qualitative views. In qualitative responses separately gathered for the university equality and diversity plan, it was suggested that the reporting of harassment would be aided by the assignment of a harassment liaison to each faculty (University of Helsinki, 2019, p. 7).

In Nottingham, the GEP includes results from two surveys (a Staff Engagement Survey and an Athena Swan Survey) each including five questions. Similar to the Helsinki GEP, these are general questions which barely tap on issues of mutual recognition arising from gender power relations, especially in informal contexts (e.g., “If I raised a concern about discrimination, I am confident the University would do what is right”; “My gender has no bearing on whether I will have a successful career in this University”). Yet, lack of specificity has policy implications. In this university, results from one of the culture survey questions (“What is your perception of the equality of treatment in the University with respect to promotions/regrading?”) revealed that a high proportion of women respondents (43%) perceived that they were disadvantaged in this respect, in contrast to a mere 17% of men respondents who did. While these gender differences may point to an underlying problem to be further investigated, the Action Plan interpreted these results as a problem of communication: “Our AS survey shows female staff are more negative than male about their progression opportunities. Given data showing promotion/regrading success is higher for female staff, this emphasised to us the importance of communicating our achievements and continuing to support all our colleagues appropriately” (University of Nottingham, 2017, p. 108).

In order to identify how gender–power relations shape micropolitical practices in academic institutions, more nuanced cultural surveys, plus other qualitative methods of data collection, are required.⁸ The GEP of Barcelona presents data results from a more comprehensive survey, as it includes questions aimed at identifying issues related to the promotion of a culture of mutual recognition and respect (e.g., “In the classroom, department or unit where I work, sexist or discriminatory comments against women, LGBTI-phobic comments and xenophobic or racist comments are not tolerated”). The survey also includes questions to identify issues of inequality and discrimination in formal assessments of merit (e.g., “Equal opportunities is guaranteed through fair processes of selection, recruitment, promotion, and CV evaluation”). Yet, as the data collected through this survey are not gender disaggregated, it does not provide a portrait of gendered privilege and discrimination in the application of both formal and informal rules governing epistemic recognition. This GEP reports that approximately half of respondents agree with the statements that the principle of equal opportunities is guaranteed in selection (52%), promotion (48%), and CV evaluations (47%) but the lack of gender disaggregation does not allow for the detection of gender differences in these perceptions.

Training constitutes a major tool for cultural change in all seven GEPs, although its effectiveness is limited if there are significant gender gaps in participation, as revealed by the results of the assessment exercises. Micropolitical practices surrounding acts of misrecognition need to be understood in terms of power relations, which require reflexivity on the part of those holding epistemic privilege as well as on the part of those who experience gender epistemic injustice. However, the concept of power is absent from both the narratives and the actions in the majority of the GEPs analyzed.

One exception is the GEP from Stockholm, which opens by framing the problem of gender inequality as follows: “Unequal power structures, both formal and informal – are a general problem in society.” The action plan comprises three sections focused specifically on power structures and career paths, namely: (1) identifying and countering the effects of power structures, (2) increased gender awareness, and (3) clarity and transparency (University of Stockholm, 2017, p. 3).

In this GEP, gender awareness related to the operations of both formal and informal power is deemed as one of the most important tools to counter unequal power relations. It highlights the role of gender-trained leaders in

institutional change and includes training geared to raising awareness about power relations for directors of studies, managers, and research leaders.

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper sought to unpack the concept of epistemic justice as a prism through which to analyze gender inequality in higher education institutions. Applying Bourdieu's analysis of power in academia, the paper provides an analytical structure to understand the operation of systemic gender inequalities in higher education as a matter of epistemic injustice. The concept of epistemic justice brings gender power relations to the fore to more clearly show where injustice occurs and requires remediation.

One clear indicator of epistemic injustice is the persistence of gender gaps in the share of full professorship positions. The argument made in this paper is that, in order to understand gender inequalities in academic power, repeated acts of epistemic injustice committed against women academics and researchers throughout the course of their careers should be taken into account in policy design and implementation.

From this study, a number of resources and conditions are shown to be required to deliver gender justice in higher education. The first is that the approach to tackling gender inequalities be sensitive to gender power relations in the academic world, and the multiple and interrelated forms through which these power dynamics are manifested. Thus, explicit discussion of how economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital present in an institution, provides a strong basis for undertaking further work supportive of gender equality. A second requirement is an institutional consensus on the value of having gender justice as a guiding principle, informing the formal and informal life of the university. In this regard, commitment from university leaders' matters, as this signals the importance of gender equality to the institution.

However, these two normative features will not produce a more gender-equal academic environment without the aid of specific measures and plans to address real-world violations of epistemic justice. This is where GEPs have utility. The process of producing a GEP can provide the setting for reflexivity, consensus-building, and interrogation of the gendered norms (both formal and informal) that underpin the assignment of epistemic authority. If the imbalance of power experienced by women in higher education is to be addressed in a sustainable manner, this paper suggests that action aimed at effecting institutional change in academic organizations need to tackle both epistemic privilege and discrimination, reset a traditional culture that normalizes unequal gendered expectations and behaviors, and distribute epistemic-supporting resources in a gender-just manner.

The paper utilizes this normative framework in an analysis of seven GEPs in European universities. Specifically, it surveyed provisions aimed at transforming organizational cultures through changes in both formal and informal rules governing the conferral of epistemic authority, while mindful of the conditions that need to be in place for sustainable institutional change to occur.

The analysis found significant challenges in delivering gender justice in academia through GEP action. First, it found that gender equality continues to be perceived as women's work, as revealed by gender gaps in levels of participation and engagement in GEP design and implementation. Second, the analysis revealed deficiencies in detecting gender epistemic injustices emanating from organizational cultures due to lack of gender disaggregated data as well as insufficient recognition of this issue in the design of culture surveys used in institutional self-assessments. Third, the analysis identified important challenges in the implementation of measures aimed at changing the formal criteria by which academic merit and scientific excellence is evaluated in recruitment and promotion processes. In a "publish or perish" neoliberal culture, where market values dictate worth, masculinized ideals of academic profiles are reinforced and prospects for a recognition of diverse academic skills significantly compromised.

While this is a first exploratory study, findings from the analysis pave the way for future research on gender inequalities in academia informed by a theoretical framework based on the concept of gender epistemic justice. The

study provides the groundwork for more systematic research geared towards theory development and testing, expanding on methods of data collection beyond documentary analysis as well as contrasting cases over time and space through longitudinal and comparative case-studies.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are publicly available at the URLs listed in the Appendix Table.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ For example, these women can change masculine management styles; use their power to represent other women and, more generally, promote gender equality in the organization.
- ² In Barcelona, the survey was sent to everyone in the university, including both students and staff (39,335 individuals in total, yielding 2622 responses); in Nottingham the Athena Swan survey only included university staff and yielded 2703 responses; in Helsinki the survey was conducted among contractual employees plus 194 grant/funded researchers and other noncontractual employees. Only data related to the participation rate of contractual employees, which yielded 5229 responses, is provided in the gender equality plan (GEP).
- ³ Lack of knowledge of GEPs can hinder participation in surveys. In Barcelona, only 57.5% of those surveyed reported to have some knowledge of the previous GEP, while the rest of the respondents either “heard of it” (25.2%) or did not know of its existence (8.8%). In the light of these survey findings, the urgency of improving communication constitutes a priority.
- ⁴ In Nottingham this gender gap in Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) training refers to professional and support staff only. For academic staff participation in this type of training, no gender gaps were found.
- ⁵ “We will compile attendance stats for EDI development and use these to ensure that any Schools with poor (<50%) attendance or absence of particular staff groups are targeted for further development.”
- ⁶ However, a breakdown by gender of participation in this survey is not available in public documents—the 2017 Athena Swan application or the 2018 Annual Report of the Staff Engagement Survey.
- ⁷ The teaching and leadership promotion pathway was created to ensure the recognition of the role of teaching-focused academics.
- ⁸ Mindful of the limitations of survey data, it is possible that findings indicating the prevalence of gender epistemic injustice in informal settings were complemented by qualitative interviews and focus group data. However, the results of these qualitative data-gathering techniques were not explicitly included in the Nottingham GEP documents, and only summarily reported in the Helsinki GEP.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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