

supera

Supporting the Promotion of Equality  
in Research and Academia



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# Resistances to Structural Change in Gender Equality

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## Introduction

This document is based on the collaborative efforts of a range of H2020 structural change projects – particularly [SUPERA](#), [GE Academy](#), [Gender-SMART](#) and [GEARING-Roles](#). The contributions include three in-person and two online workshops conducted for these projects, focussing on resistances to structural change in gender equality. Content is also drawn from a SUPERA project webinar which followed up on the resistances toolkits developed during the in-person training. The purpose of the document is to provide practical support for those implementing structural change in research and innovation institutions.

After attending the resistances workshops, the majority of participants have reframed their thinking by acknowledging that resistances are a normal and necessary part of change. They also feel that resistances are something which can be managed, and felt encouraged to be subversive and strategic, often within unfavourable or challenging political circumstances.

*“We should celebrate as a success cases where the status quo has to start to work hard to reproduce itself and has to invest resources and energy in resisting gender change. The need for visible resistance to positive change is a success. It is evidence of the chipping away of patriarchy; it might be chipping away really slowly, but it is changing.”*

*(Fiona Mackay, quoted in Aruna Rao, Joanne Sandler, David Kelleher, Carol Miller, Gender at Work: Theory and Practice for 21st Century Organizations, Routledge 2016)*

The report is developed in three main sections – categorising and theorising resistances; common guidelines for dealing with resistances; and the resistances toolkit. An associated repository documents the kinds of resistances experienced in implementing structural change, as well as techniques for dealing with different kinds of resistances. We gratefully acknowledge the active and generous participation of all training participants in the process of developing this document.

## Categorising and theorising resistances

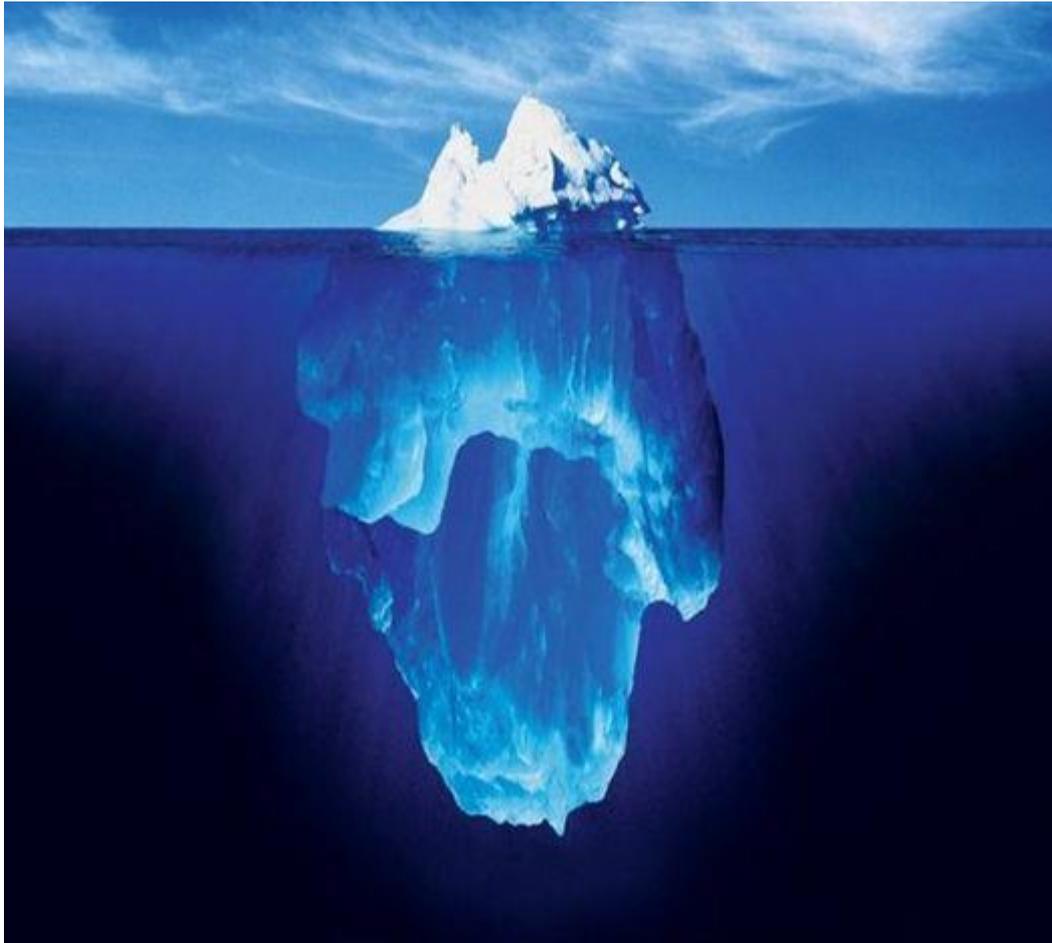
Categorising resistances is important, as it allows us to plan and act strategically according to the specific form and content of resistance. The categorisation and theorisation of resistances draws and builds on other work, such as: Mergaert (2012); Lombardo and Mergaert 2016, 2013; Mergaert and Lombardo 2014, as well as the FESTA project’s Handbook on Resistance to Gender Equality in Academia<sup>1</sup> (Saglamer e.a., 2016). This document presents

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.festa-europa.eu/public/handbook-resistance-gender-equality-academia>

each of these three areas – why, how and who – including the additional insights developed during the training sessions.

### The iceberg analogy



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During one training, participants began to develop the analogy of an iceberg. They suggested that resistances should also be categorised according to those which are more visible and easy to address, and those which are more hidden and complex aspects of resistance to a change process. Those above the water, for example, include: lack of visibility, imbalanced panels and committees, etc. Under the water resistances include what is valued: evaluation of quality, the definition of success, the valuation of service and care work and leadership styles.

## Why?

It is useful to identify whether **a resistance is specifically about gender equality, or other issues altogether**. For example, many resistances can stem from personal insecurities/anxieties, or ignorance/fear/apathy. This can also be seen in a group dynamic where power relations are clearly defined. In some cases, people may see gender equality measures as a threat to their job status or their understanding of meritocracy.

Limited resources are another reason for resistances to gender equality measures – both human and financial resources. Moreover, there are conflicting interests and priorities for funding. In addition, the growth of the discrimination/diversity agenda often overshadows and conflicts with gender equality priorities. A further example includes also lack of capability; not know how to do it or uncertainty on how to start.

Often resistances stem from gender blindness – that is, lack of awareness of gender inequality in the institution. This usually comes from men, but also from women who do not consider themselves to have experienced any discrimination.

Another root cause is a perception that gender equality has already been achieved, or that an institution has already done enough. For some, this manifests itself as “gender fatigue” – often, but not always, by men - who are tired or bored of hearing the topic constantly mentioned in meetings.

A related phenomenon is “gender burn-out”, in which those (usually women) who have been working on gender equality for a long time may feel tired and/or hopeless regarding the prospects for real change. Moreover, the persistent and sometimes unpleasant nature of resistances can lead to exhaustion for those working on these issues. In some cases, this may mean that those who have worked on gender equality in the institution for a long time - but are not necessarily embedded in core teams of structural change projects – may be cynical or dubious about the prospects of change to be brought about by new projects.

It should be noted that our assumptions regarding what is behind resistances may at times be arbitrary, especially if we do not have information about the specific situation. As such, it is useful to engage in dialogue as much as possible with those who are resistant to gender equality, in order to best understand the underlying reasons. It is also useful to aim to identify whether a resistance is gender-specific or not.

### Questions to ask include:

- Is the behaviour aimed to prevent an implementation for gender equality in the relevant institution?

- Does the behaviour create obstacles for the project, but is not specifically related to gender equality issues?
- Is there a perception that gender equality has already been achieved in the institution?
- Is the gender equality agenda competing with other agendas – e.g. diversity, sustainability – for financial and human resources?

## How?

Resistances are manifested in two key ways – **actively/explicitly or passively/implicitly**. Active or explicit resistances include hostility, sexist humour, devaluation and disparaging women’s accomplishments or professional commitment, interrupting, denial of access to resources, etc. Other examples include the use of sexist language; and openly challenging the project methodology. In addition to these attitudes, explicit resistances include examples such as: counter-arguments using with “essentialist” discourses about gender inequalities; naturalising differences between women and men; and depoliticising and marginalising gender inequality arguments and data as a matter of contrasting opinions, rather than “facts”.

On the other hand, passive or implicit resistances are sometimes more difficult to identify. These include negative body language, foot dragging, inertia, chilly climate, making the procedures more difficult, giving less attention, uncomfortable social atmosphere, giving less access to institutional resources, discomfort, inappropriate treatment, providing mere lip-service support but nothing else, etc.

### Questions to ask include:

- Is it possible to trace the origin of decisions, i.e. is decision-making transparent or opaque?
- Do colleagues/departments make “sophisticated-sounding excuses” about why things cannot be changed?
- Do colleagues/departments agree to actions and then not follow through on the planned activities?
- Are resistances one-off/daily/or part of a broader pattern which can be discerned at departmental/institutional level?
- Are those who are resisting doing so consciously or unconsciously? Are they aware of their behaviour?
- Are the resistances primarily targeted towards the content or the methodology of structural change? E.g. in institutions which have already widely accepted the need for gender equality measures, resistances may manifest themselves as criticisms of the presentation or communication of issues

These are useful ideas for refining a theory of resistances to structural change for gender equality, and should be taken into consideration when developing such analytical work further. At each training, the theory and categorisation of resistances was explored and advanced. The discussions were centred around a basic framing exploring the **Why? How? Who?** of resistances. As the trainings developed, the groups added to and refined these categories drawing on their own personal experiences of resistances.

## Who?

It is not always easy to identify from whom the resistance is coming, but can be loosely categorised as **individual, group or institutional**. Individual resistances come from a single person, more often from men (who don't see the need to change the status quo), although not exclusively. A particular challenge here is with women who are resistant to gender equality measures (sometimes labelled as "collaborators of the patriarchy"). This may be the reflection of the views of senior women in academia (the "queen bee" phenomenon) – the idea that "I am the living example that women can make it without special measures being put in place for them." Furthermore, dilemmas may emerge senior women, as it does not always serve their careers to be seen to ally with gender equality in order to be successful/maintain status.

A group resistance emerges from a collection of individuals, and may be amplified by a number of factors: male dominance in a department; an "us vs them" culture regarding gender equality measures; and failure to deal with badly behaved or unreasonable colleagues. It should also be noted that the same people may behave differently as individuals versus in a group scenario. Group and power dynamics play a role here, highlighting the importance of a power analysis of different implementation scenarios.

Institutional resistances are more difficult to address, as they tend to be a product of institutional culture or an institution's legal or administrative procedures. However, it should be noted that often what is presented as an "institutional" obstacle is sometimes just an excuse for individual or group resistances. Moreover, what can often appear initially to be an individual or group resistance can, over time, reveal patterns that show that the resistance is institutional.

As with the How question, the superficial or preliminary manifestation of resistances may be seen differently as the project develops. A key point here is that if a resistance can be traced back to someone high up in the organisation, then it is likely to be an institutional resistance and should be addressed as such. It should be noted that in some workshops, participants found it more difficult to identify institutional resistances compared to individual

resistances. This suggests that more work needs to be done in order to support core teams to identify institutional resistances, and to develop techniques to deal with these.

**Questions to ask include:**

- To what extent can these traits be more associated with institutional culture than with personality or characteristics of an individual?
- Do these personal traits and opinions conflict or concur with the procedures and culture of the institution?
- Are bureaucratic procedures being used to justify inaction on gender equality?
- If so, are these procedures real or perceived obstacles to structural change?

## Common guidelines for dealing with resistances

The purpose of this activity is to develop common guidelines across structural change projects for dealing with resistances more effectively. During the training, participants are asked to work in groups to develop some guidelines in two key areas – caring for the core team; and tackling resistances to implementation.

### Caring for the core team

An emerging theme in structural change projects is the lack of recognition of “academic care work”. While core teams of change agents work hard to implement GEPs, this is often not acknowledged in any formal manner or reflected in workloads or promotion opportunities. In addition, there is a high risk of demotivation, exhaustion and burn-out because the work is hard and the battles are fierce, as well as expectations around presenting gender equality in a “friendly, non-threatening manner” (see, for example, Debra Myerson’s work on “tempered radicals”<sup>2</sup>). Sometimes, structural change is being promoted by one person or small group, who have to deal with all the resistances to gender equality across the institution.

At the same time, progress is slow and there is often backlash to contend with, making it difficult to broaden the circle of allies within an institution. As a result, tensions can develop between members of the core teams. As such, participants consistently reiterate the need to care for the core team as a key aspect of dealing with resistances. Many had experienced unpleasant and stressful situations related to resistances to structural change, and as such it was agreed that a set of key principles were needed to support those working on gender equality projects.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://debram.people.stanford.edu/book>

Care guidelines for the core team can be called the “**Four Ss**” (you might remember these as ‘for us’):

- Success – celebrate small wins to help motivation
- Sanity – use energies where they can have most impact
- Self-care – look after each other’s well-being
- Sustainability – bear in mind this is a long-term process

In order to keep up with our change endeavours, which require non-negligible efforts in terms of time, energy and mental strain, it is important to practise self-preservation. One aspect of this is setting boundaries as a team and be clear about what is and is not acceptable. This includes, for example, not going alone to difficult meetings; and practising how to deal with particularly difficult people or bullies. In some cases, it may be necessary to agree not to enter a specific situation. Also, teams can develop (or draw on existing) guidelines for inclusive meeting behaviour and publicly denounce unacceptable behaviour in order to leverage external pressure from relevant stakeholders. Working towards the adoption of such inclusive meeting behaviour principles at organisational level may constitute an action in the GEP. While we draw on the notion of “transformative courage”<sup>3</sup> to describe our work in institutional change, it is nevertheless important not to exhaust ourselves with constant pressure. This is a key to success and to achieve sustainability in the long run.

Importantly, within the ‘For Us’ approach, participants developed the **Anticipate – Prepare – Rehearse strategy**.

*Anticipation* involves engaging with colleagues in order to reflect which kinds of reactions can be expected, which arguments may be used by whom against our work, and to understand what are the underlying resistances. Following this, realistic objectives can be set for a meeting or scenario. Here it is helpful to establish a best case and worst case scenario, and plan accordingly: “what do I want to get out of this meeting ideally?” and “what is the minimum that I am willing to accept as a result of this meeting?”.

*Preparation* requires carefully considering the timing of project interventions and taking a flexible approach. Building on the previous stage, it is useful to acknowledge the specific political context of institutional change – i.e. what is happening in the institution that is relevant for understanding change and resistance? This can bring discussions on gender equality closer to the human, personal context of individuals and groups, grounded in their

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<sup>3</sup> Baer, S., Keim, J. and Nowottnick, L. (.n.d.) *Intersectionality in Gender+ Training*. Retrieved from: [http://www.quing.eu/files/WHY/baer\\_keim\\_nowottnick.pdf](http://www.quing.eu/files/WHY/baer_keim_nowottnick.pdf)

current concerns and realities. Plan to attend strategic and potentially difficult meetings with two team members rather than alone.

*Rehearsal* involves practising arguments and counter-arguments and learning to communicate politically. You may consider organising communications training specifically related to gender equality. It may be useful to develop a range of mantras, such as “Women are NOT a minority!” Techniques such as role plays, as used in the training, can help to rehearse specific scenarios in order to prepare most effectively. A role play scenario requires the following steps:

- Participants agree on a common resistance all are facing in their institution
- 4-5 participants volunteer to participate in the role play (or multiple role plays if this is an in-person workshop)
- The participants agree on the different roles present in this scenario, and allocate these between them
- The “worst case scenario” for this example of resistance is played out, with explicit and highly visible resistances
- Participants and observers are asked to reflect on what could have been done differently to achieve a different outcome
- The role play is repeated using the recommendations developed by the group
- The whole group reflects on the difference between the two scenarios, and whether this kind of activity could be useful for preparing the team for similar scenarios in the future

Participants in the workshops came up with agreed “dos and don’ts” for dealing with resistances. For example:

**Dos:**

- Be patient – change takes time
- Celebrate every small success
- Look for allies and internal experts
- Involve men and try to have balanced committees
- Identify role models in your and other institutions
- Ask for resources and expertise
- Confront your internal bias
- Make sure you have clear and common goals as a team
- Be ambitious and flexible (be ready to change your strategy); and use the windows of opportunity

- Look after each other
- Acknowledge when something isn't worth the energy/prioritise
- Share the experience with your allies/people that might have had similar experiences

**Techniques for dealing with resistances include:**

- Breathe calmly
- Don't take it personally
- Find allies
- Train yourself
- Work with positive people
- Give yourself permission to take breaks
- Choose your battles

## Tackling resistances to implementation

Implementing structural change for gender equality is an inherently *political* endeavour. However, many of those working in core teams are not necessarily trained to "think and act politically". As such, this is the starting point for learning to deal with resistances. Participants in the workshops outlined many examples of how they work strategically to manage and overcome resistances. These tips are intended to support core teams in their work on implementing structural change.

**Acting strategically**

- Identify the different people involved in decision-making and implementing change and assess how important each individual is for change, as well as how easy they may be to influence
- Try to meet people in advance of meetings. This helps to identify and anticipate their behaviours and values, as well as understanding their motivations/resistances to supporting structural change for gender equality.
- Identify those people who may be hostile to the overall project, and build alliances with different groups to enlist additional support. In some cases, student representatives may be useful allies.
- Devise mechanisms for addressing task inequality (e.g. rotate dull, unpopular tasks), and commit colleagues to conducting allocated tasks.
- Develop obligations to action. Support colleagues to experience change through cognitive action, e.g. by attending gender training or other relevant experiences.
- Shift the focus from the Head of Department to another person with power in the department - shift between different levels and different people.

- Use strategic framing - link gender equality to the strategies and strategic objectives of the organisation (like being highly ranked on rating lists; attracting high-profile scholars, etc.).
- Bear in mind that what is said during a meeting is less important than what goes into the meeting minutes: insist on action points for gender equality to be integrated in minutes.

### **Networks and alliances**

- Recruit students as “gender ambassadors”
- Use peer pressure – create a short video on why gender equality is important using high level allies
- Engage men in the core and extended team
- Take advantage of a core team member with a reputation as a “moderate feminist” to get an invitation to be on a board
- Look also for allies outside the institution (e.g. to team up with for certain actions)

### **Dealing with bureaucracy**

- Acknowledge the constraints, then say “When *could* you do it?”
- Respond to bureaucratic responses such as “it’s not in the system” by creating a system to implement this from now on
- Map processes and decision-making in order to see how roadblocks could be addressed
- See how the gender equality work can smoothen or ease others’ bureaucratic tasks

### Improving arguments and communication

- Train the core team in communication skills
- “Aggression” vs assertiveness
- Acknowledge and package the resistance (i.e. talk around it; take the emotion out of it)
- Develop “scripts” for arguments – look for examples in the GEAR tool<sup>4</sup>
- Deal with people’s fears in a constructive way
- Bring examples from other institutions
- Conduct more communications training with the group to enhance skills in this area
- Tools to break disrespectful situations, e.g. a clearly state “Don’t speak over me”
- Speak to the specific motivations of individuals, e.g. standing for promotion
- Explain to colleagues in a meeting that any specific challenges should be addressed by one speaker only, not as a whole group, in order to deflect mass disruption
- Use other colleagues in the meeting to constructively challenge explicit resistances
- Be aware when a person is wearing their “I can’t see you, I can’t hear you” sunglasses and understand that it may be impossible to influence this person in this particular moment. This helps to deflect attention away from difficult individuals and focus on other aspects.
- Draw parallels to other systems of oppression, e.g. use the same example but as a matter of racism instead of sexism
- Use humour (e.g. publish most embarrassing gender-biased picture of the month, use a tool such as ‘Count it’ to count number of men and women in meetings and measure speaking time); use images and cartoons to draw the attention to men-only committees and groups<sup>5</sup>

## Resistances Toolkit

A large part of each workshop is dedicated to the Resistances Toolkit. The participants develop a toolkit per institution. There are four main stages to this exercise.

### Stage 1

1. Identify a resistance which is a key challenge for implementing structural change in your institution
2. Categorise the resistance using the framework and questions outlined above - why, how, who

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<sup>4</sup> <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/toolkits/gear/advocacy>

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. the “Cendir Five” initiative of the Filmor team in Turkey: <https://onedio.com/haber/sirf-erkeklerden-olusan-fotograflarin-korkulu-ruyasi-olan-acil-mudahale-timi-cendir-beslisi-881046>

3. Acknowledge alternative reactions to this resistance as individuals and a team, drawing on the care guidelines outlined above
4. Identify the techniques and strategies required to deal with this resistance, setting out concrete action points, using the tips developed above

\*Repeat Stage 1 for all major resistances currently being experienced\*

## Stage 2

1. For each resistance identified, assess the following: how easy/difficult is this to address? How important is this to the overall implementation of the GEP?
2. Using this categorisation, prioritise which resistances are to be addressed and in what order.

At the end of Stage 2, each team should have identified some concrete steps for addressing resistances in their institution.

## Stage 3

Stage 3 involves a Follow-up Session to explore the use and implementation of the resistances toolkit in each institution. To date, this has just been done with one project, but should be repeated for all institutions which have sent participants to the resistances workshops. The follow-up session can take the format of a webinar, following this structure for each institution in turn:

1. A representative of the institution presents how the toolkit has been applied since the workshop
2. Share initiatives and actions undertaken to address the resistances prioritised during the training, and reflect on how successful these have been
3. Identify persistent and emerging resistances, using the categorisation outlined above

Following the presentations, the trainer facilitates a collective reflection on how the resistances toolkits have been implemented.

Key reflections from SUPERA follow-up webinar:

- Following the training, participants were better able to name the problem and keep working in that direction.
- The categorisation of resistances and the kinds of resistances experienced vary greatly depending on institutional context.
- There are persistent challenges in identifying whether resistances are individual or institutional, and this merits further discussion on its value as a categorisation.

- It is important to continue tracking the examples, identifying patterns in behaviour that can be discussed in future meetings.

#### **Stage 4**

After the follow-up session, participants should revise their resistances toolkits, taking into account the feedback from peers working in partner institutions. In this way, the toolkits become living documents which respond to the changing circumstances of institutions, as well as integrating the experiences and lessons learned from sister projects.

## Structure of the Resistances Workshop

Categorising and theorising resistances

Activity 1: Categorising Resistances

Common guidelines for dealing with resistances

Caring for the core team

Activity 2: what is your negotiation style?

Tackling resistances to implementation

Activity 3: Resistances Role Plays

Resistances Toolkit

Activity 4: Presenting Resistances Toolkits to Peers Resistances