

Smile



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Diversity in Modern Society
Making Inclusion a Central Strategy in Our Universities

A Marathon, more than an Obstacle Race

Dealing with Resistances along the Development of a Brand-New Gender Equality Plan

The Case of the University of Cagliari, Italy



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The Context: The University of Cagliari



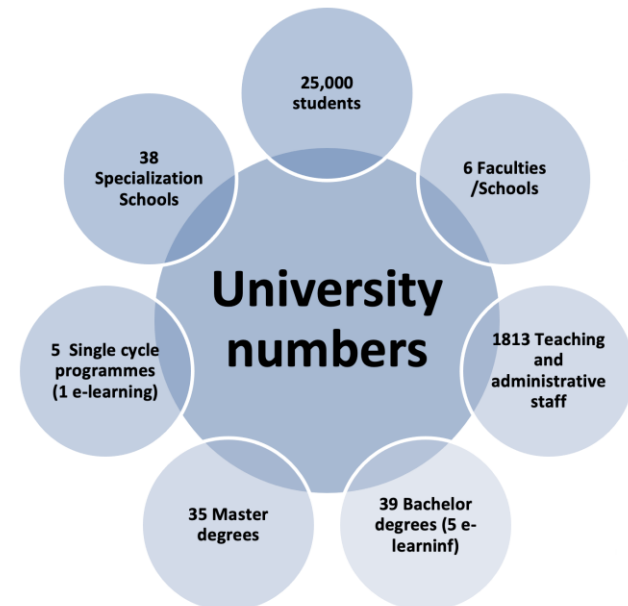
UNICA
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DI CAGLIARI



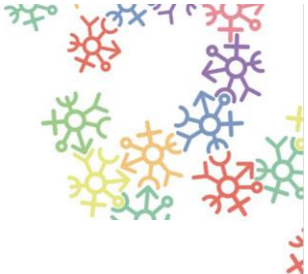
University of Cagliari



Established in 1620 University of Cagliari has 3 campuses Cagliari, Monserrato and Oristano



The Opportunity: The SUPERA PROJECT




From **June 2018**, the University of Cagliari (UniCa) has been one of the partners of an international team involved in a **four-year-project** funded within the frame of the EU **Horizon 2020** research and innovation program, under grant agreement n°787829, called **SUPERA (Supporting the Promotion of Equality in Research and Academia)**.



supera

Supporting the Promotion of Equality
in Research and Academia

 SUPERA project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the grant agreement No. 787829.

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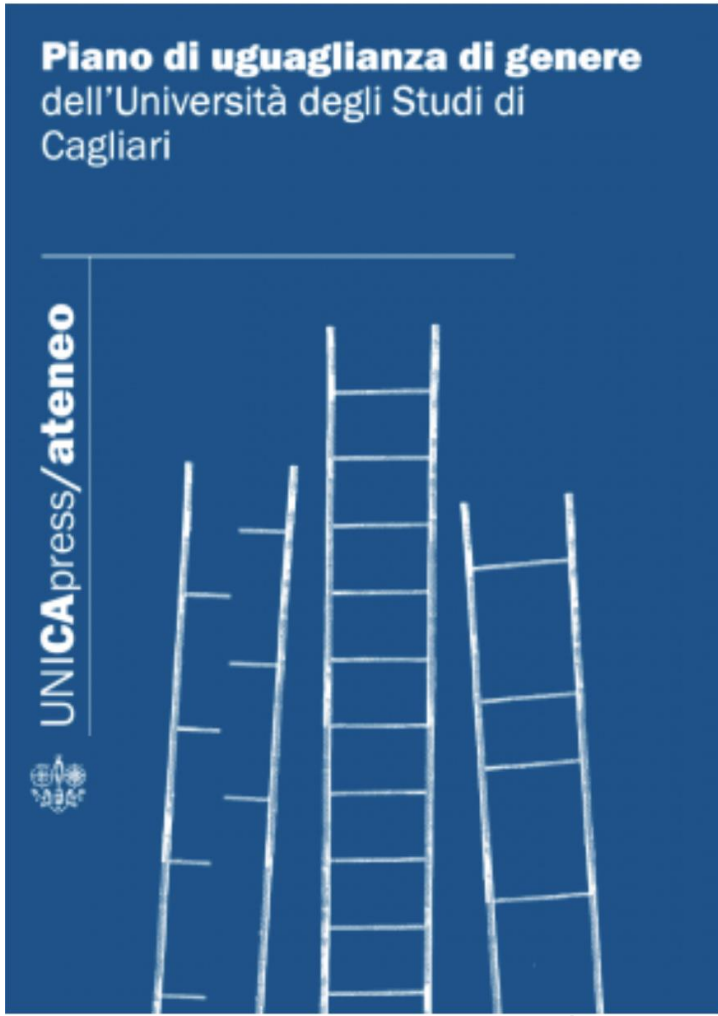
The SUPERA partners



This project was aimed at involving UniCa as a whole, just like the other international partners, in the construction and implementation of its first **Gender Equality Plan**, as a completely new organizational tool.



The Tool: The Gender Equality Plan



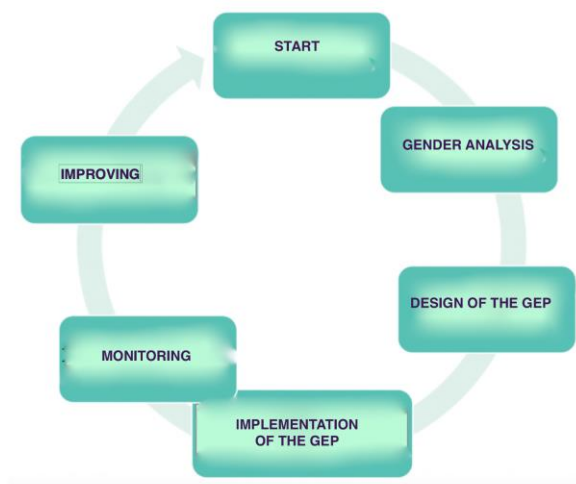
2020

The GEP as:

- UniCa Operational Tool for dealing with gender inequalities in all areas of research, education, and vocational training at the university
- Participatory Planning Tool aimed at involving all members of the University (teaching staff, technical-administrative staff, students) in promoting gender equality

The collective construction of the GEP:
a 4-year project path

2018

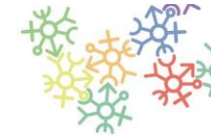


2022

The Tool: The Gender Equality Plan

The actions of the GEP pertain to the 4 Key Areas of SUPERA:

1. Recruitment, career progression, family-work balance policies (horizontal and vertical segregation)
2. Leadership and decisional process (responsibility, transparency, inclusiveness)
3. Gender dimension in research and teaching
4. Prejudices and gender stereotypes, sexism and sexual harassment



Key Area-SUPERA related to 3 Strategic Area of UniCA:

1. Regulation and evaluation: procedures and policies
2. Training and guidance
3. Communication



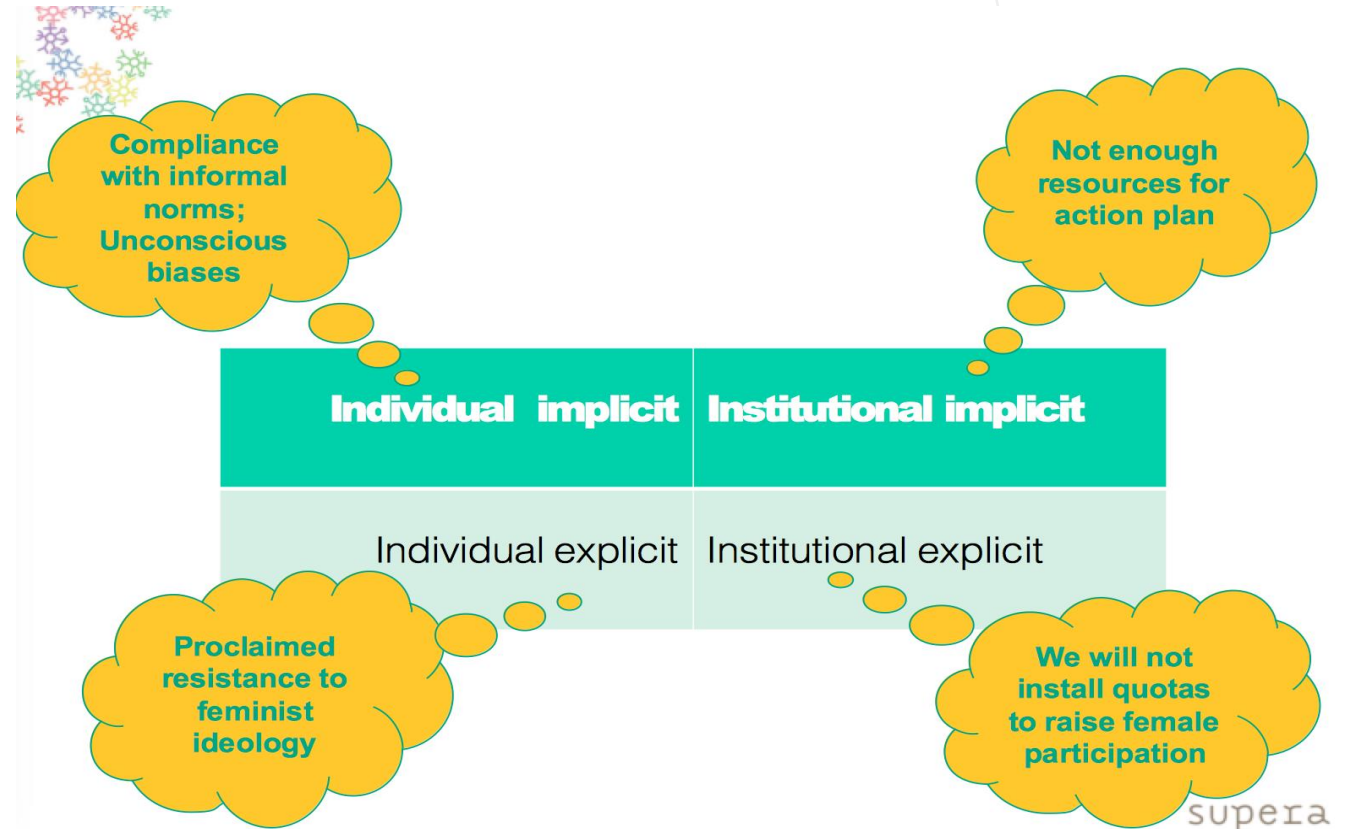
1. **Research** (Production of Scientific Knowledge)
2. **Education** (Provision of inspiring and effective contents/ideas/values)
3. **Third Mission** (Participation in the debate on the topics of Equal Citizenship, Social Justice, Democracy, Human Rights, Local Development)

Dealing with Resistances

Since the beginning of the process, during the very first phase of **self-assessment of the state of the art** in our University regarding gender equality policies and practices, the UniCa core team collected **many forms of resistances** within the organization, expressed by **all types of stakeholders**: from the top positions of the **administrative structure**, up to the **teaching and research staff, technical staff**, and the wide audience of **students** attending the various faculties and degree courses.

It is necessary to distinguish between the **institutional level** and the **individual and occasional level**:

while in the first case there have been **no explicit or implicit obstacles** to the efficient development of the work conducted by the UniCa Core Team, revealing a good organizational culture on this matter and the full endorsement and **legitimation expressed by the Rector**, a wide set of **resistances** has been instead expressed at the level of the **single individuals** involved in various forms in those early stages of the project.





Channels of Resistance: Before the GEP 2018

- a) A **documentary analysis** related to the **current rules and policies on gender equality** in the University of Cagliari: the administrative and executive officers contacted to find this kind of materials did not express any form of resistance, rather they've been fully collaborative and effective in transmitting the requested documents.
- b) The **collection of quali-quantitative administrative data** related to the four thematic key-areas of the UniCa-SUPERA Report: also in this case, the staff of the various Departments that we have contacted (with particular reference to the IT and the Human Resources Departments) didn't expressed any kind of resistance, neither explicit nor implicit, showing an excellent collaboration and an enthusiastic attitude to make themselves useful for the completion of the required task regarding the functioning, at present, of UniCa, with respect to the gender dynamics (for example with respect to the data necessary to complete the analysis on the horizontal and vertical segregation mechanisms within the teaching and research staff, the administrative staff and the student body).
- c) The **completion of an (on line) qualitative questionnaire on gender equality (values, attitudes & experiences)** by the teaching and administrative-technical staff and by the student body. This was the only event in which several types of resistances emerged, on an individual level (Response Rate: 29% of the teaching and administrative staff and 13% of the students).

A Taxonomy of Resistances (Ferguson & Mergaert, 2022)

8

A) **Ex-Ante/In Itinere:** resistances expressed both BEFORE and DURING the completion of the questionnaire

- Choice of this tool to detect gender equality issues (use of **concepts and definitions**)
- Suitability of this instrument to deal with **specific sensitive matters**

B) **In Itinere/Ex-Post:** resistances expressed DURING and AFTER the completion of the questionnaire

- Focused in general on **gender equality as a theme and** on its **specific key-contents:**
 - Gender biases in **recruitment, retention, career progression;**
 - **Leadership and decision making**, accountability, transparency, inclusiveness;
 - Gender dimension in **research and knowledge** transfer, in content and curricula;
 - Gender **biases and stereotypes, sexism** and **sexual harassment**

A) Ex-Ante/In Itinere

A1) Resistances related to the survey as a methodological tool

- Choice of Concepts and Definitions (language, methodology, ethical issues, compulsory questions):

*It is not clear what you intend to detect through this questionnaire, given that **there is a clear confusion and indeterminacy in the use of the terms**: at the beginning the concept of "gender equality" is used, then you move on to "discrimination", then to a condition not better defined as a "disadvantage", then to "differences". About all these concepts, very different from each other, there is no explanation of contents and meanings, among which the respondents can orient themselves and choose those to which their answers will refer*

A2) Suitability of this instrument to deal with **specific sensitive matters**

- Lack of Intersectionality

I believe that this questionnaire should not be based only on a gender difference, but on a wider spectrum: sexual orientation, sexual identity, religion, ethnicity. In my opinion, the problem is linked to the prejudice and the fear of the different people, dictated by ignorance (in the literal sense of the term) that at the University, in different sectors, reigns undisputed. Obviously I appreciate the efforts of UniCA aimed at improving freedom of expression in the academic context, perhaps starting from gender equality will make it possible to gain a better equality for any individual regardless of their differences

B) In Itinere/Ex-Post

Resistances related to the gender equality as a theme and its specific key-contents

B1) Ignorance about Facts: Cognitive resistances, that largely refer to the dilemma "What I Know / What I Don't Know / What I Think I Know" around this topic, evoking behaviours like

- Neglecting that gender-based discrimination (still) exists;
- Claiming it's historical or only present in certain institutions but not in the University of Cagliari;
- Minimising the facts;
- Victim-blaming or Fear of Victim-Blaming;
- Joking about the topic through sexist remarks.

B1) Ignorance about Facts

The risk that an excessive attention to gender equality does not give due consideration to the most correct parameter of merit, regardless of gender, which in itself would therefore be a false problem, as there would be no real discrimination at UniCa from this point of view.

I personally believe this project and this questionnaire are not very useful and very ideological. In any case, in my humble opinion, in a society leaning towards progress, the greatest importance should be given to merit and competence without the ideological obsession of the politically correct and without protection ex iure for one sex or the other. Gender equality is to be assessed on the basis of what is your value as a person not based on your gender

The risk that an excessive attention on gender equality, and in particular on the rebalancing of women's opportunities with respect to men through positive actions, creates ghettos, and if anything exalt the vulnerability of women as a weaker sex in need of additional help.

Women must be allowed to emerge without any advantage. Otherwise they are considered in the same way as disabled people (I do not intend to offend them)

The issue of gender inequality would be obsolete and no longer occur, especially at UniCa.

In short, the real gender struggles are those of several decades ago. Today we should struggle for other issues, like the right to an epidural or to treatments for certain diseases that affect women or men. Emphasize the difference between men and women even where it does not exist generates hate, atomism, inability to make a common front for far more serious problems in our society. Gender equality has already been largely achieved

B1) Ignorance about Facts

The sexism that is talked about so much would be a false problem, used instrumentally by women to take advantage of it, if anything.

I think it is essential to avoid any form of gender victimization aimed at achieving an agenda, whether it is performed by a female or by a male

In the worst case scenario, this kind of inequalities would occur elsewhere, not at UniCa.

Unfortunately there are still places on the planet where the rights of so many people are trampled on for gender reasons. Fortunately this does not happen or in any case rarely happens where I live. A man and a woman in the western world can do what they want of their lives, but this topic often is over-exposed in the media although I believe that there is no emergency in this regard. I believe that doing seminars on gender differences in a place like the university, where a collective conscience towards the problem already exists, is substantially useless, also because the staff is 80% female.

The problem is minimized or reduced to a joke with vulgar or sexist comments tending to victim-blaming.

Wow, what a waste of time! I thought to find some questions on the difference in pay or mortality rates and instead always the usual stereotypical questions "Have they ever harassed you ????" "Did you receive different treatments just because you have tits???". You are pathetic, give yourself a wake up call, you are pissing me off. Only women complain about discrimination (only a few, stupid women, not as women, but as ignorant people).

B2) Denial of the Problem

These are **axiological and emotional resistances**, that concern the attribution of value to the issue of gender equality, based on the assumption "**It is not important/I do not care**", with answers like:

- Claiming the outcome of gender-based discrimination is the result of a biological predisposition and thereby refuting that these individuals' behaviour is driven by societal expectations about their gender roles;
- Blindness to harm caused by gender stereotypes;
- Blindness to psychological cost of gender-based discrimination;
- General minimisation of the effects and putting them low on any priority list, saying there are more urgent matters to tackle.

B2) Denial of the Problem

The Problem Does Not Exist.

a) An explicit rejection of feminism, considered as a sterile and obsolete ideology without any value; also a refusal of any definition of gender, considered a form of ideological categorization completely useless.

I believe that gender equality in this sad society is a must. But more generally I think it is completely useless, or better: the concept of gender is so weak that it is useless for it to exist. No men and no women. Only people or individuals. In this sense gender equality is useless, because gender should not literally and grammatically exist. In essence, I am overly opposed to feminism, I am absolutely in favor of overcoming the concept of male chauvinism and feminism and therefore favorable to this sort of gender equality, that is the one that rewards those who deserve, without looking at whether you are a man, a woman, a gay, a trans, bi-sexual etc.

b) Other ways of expressing disinterest or an explicit refusal to assume this is a real problem, rather than the astute coverage of differences in achievements that have nothing to do with gender, so women should stop once and for all to complain about it.

Gender equality is a poor and superficial matter, totally in opposition to the meaning that my morality attributes to the concept of equity and equality among individuals. Gender equality diminishes the individuality of human beings and is a concept on which weak and non-critical people take refuge

B2) Denial of the Problem

The Problem Does Not Exist.

c) If gender asymmetry exists, it is a natural consequence of biological differences, because males and females are in themselves complementary and what happens would therefore be a fact that is uselessly challenged just to create problems, that don't exist indeed.

I believe that gender equality in rights and obligations is one of the founding pillars of a civil society. I also believe, however, that extreme "protectionism" in favour of a gender considered to be falsely weak opens the door to false equality. To emphasize, to oblige, to categorize a certain thing on the basis of gender, even if with the most noble aims, is still a deepening of this disparity. I was quite thrilled with the importance being given to "gender equality". Exaggerated for several reasons. The social behaviors are now increasingly diverse and libertine, we find women who have male behaviors and men with female behaviors. I also think it is stupid to ask a male how he would behave in situations of harassment. The male is biologically a sexually active animal more than a woman, this is irrefutable. The male has always been in nature with a high testosterone, especially at certain times of the year. Asking a male to remain calm or to avoid having sexual urges is like asking an animal not to be aggressive. Chemically and biologically speaking it is impossible due to internal hormone levels. Asking therefore to have an absolute sex equality is an absurd request and out of any natural logic.

d) The issue of gender inequality would be totally useless, and therefore cannot be a real problem.

We study computers, those problem does not arise much in reality, but nice try!

B2) Denial of the Problem

There is a Problem, but the Survey formulates it in a wrong way and starts from inverse biases with respect to gender.

a) The Survey would assume default that the household chores are necessarily asymmetrical to the detriment of the female partner, and never the opposite and this is a wrong and counterproductive way to deal with this issue, because **it blames one sex against another, instead of reasoning in an inclusive and non-dichotomous way.**

*The **continuous use of political correctness by UniCa is counterproductive**, and, in my opinion, get the opposite result, because in fact it only accentuates gender inequality, given that many times women-friendly events and the distortion of language for “gender equality” sake can easily be transformed into "giving more weight to the female gender”*

b) **Not everything that is presented as a symptom of sexism really is**, and even to pay attention to these issues would only amplify hysteria and hypocrisy, ending up missing the point or concealing the cases of sexism in the opposite direction.

I believe there is a limit within which these issues are significant. Let me explain better: it is true, we could carry with us cultural aftermath of a past without gender equality; probably in the workplace wage differences or unequal treatment still persist; this must be fought. But we must know how to separate things!!! Certain other arguments, such as the language, or the criminalization of sexist jokes are sometimes ridiculous.

c) It is not a problem at the workplace, but **rather an individual or familiar one**; furthermore **the real problems of inequality are related to other, more urgent issues** (LGBTQI rights; different distribution of academic power in the Italian territory, individual needs)

B2) Denial of the Problem

There is a Problem, but there are far more serious problems to be tackled as a priority.

a) There is a shift of the focus on other issues, **other structural problems in the University or in society** that would be much more urgent to address than the issue of gender equality.

Gender Equality is an utopia. I find this subject stupid, and I think we shouldn't waste time on these things. The university must improve many things about its whole organization, nor this one!

b) From a subjective experiential point of view it may be that the respondents to the survey have become aware of discrimination dynamics, but also at the individual level the relevant issues are other, and on those we would require greater attention.

This is a cute initiative, but now you must concretely worry about problems like the cleaning of the bathrooms, the absence of toilet paper, the cleanliness and decorum of the classrooms, the conditions of abandonment of the parking lots, the quality of food in the cafeteria, the architectural barriers and the lack of means of transport that weigh on students and staff regardless of their sexual orientation!

B3) Denial of Changeability

These are resistances connected not so much to the recognition of the problem or its importance as to the solutions to counteract it, which are **assumed to be inaccessible and in any case not very useful**, because these dynamics are too deep-rooted and structural for us to think of having an institutional impact. We can distinguish among:

- The perception of “**that’s how things are**”, while under-estimating the institution’s own responsibility;
- Feelings of despair and passivity;
- Fear of reverse discrimination.

B3) Denial of Changeability

a) Expression of a widespread and general lack of confidence in this type of initiatives, both informative and educational, because in any case "things go like this", and discussing the issue of gender equality would be just an empty exercise or a useless loss of time. The proposed solutions are only cosmetic and substantially completely irrelevant (with particular reference to the adoption of a gender-sensitive language).

*In my opinion it is more appropriate to promote meritocracy and gender equality by focusing more on facts than on language. **It is useless to promote a "politically correct" language if reality does not reflect the values that this language takes into account***

b) Fear of discrimination on the opposite direction due to undue privileges for women, following a perverse effect of positive actions or benevolent attitudes towards them to the detriment of men.

Gender equality (as always) is a subject that is treated only from the point of view of the “poor and unfortunate women” in a male-dominated society (nonsense!). The rights of men are always in the background

c) Perceived tension between equality of opportunity based on merit and gender equality policies differentiating between men and women (such as affirmative action or gender sensitive language application).

- In the case of men, the main fear is represented by **reversed discrimination**, given by the favouring of female colleagues having lower competence on the exclusive basis of their gender, following a sort of revanchist logic asking men to experience what women have suffered in the past
- Several women fear the perspective of **being judged and making a career on the basis of their gender**, rather than on their merit and competences, which they wish to defend within an equal treatment framework and a “may the best win” logic.

B4) Underestimation of own capacity

These are resistances expressed in an extremely personal form, bringing back the sense of powerlessness with respect to this problem from a subjective point of view, as if any possible effect of one's own contribution in this regard was denied. Behaviors such the following ones fall into this type of resistance:

- Lack of interest and/or power in the group
- Passive aggressive behaviour (not doing anything)

B4) Underestimation of own capacity

a) **Perception of institutional invasiveness in dealing with a such sensitive issue as discrimination**, which is substantially private, and therefore resistance to explain one's own affairs, especially the most delicate ones, and in general to expose oneself with too clear opinions on this matter (choosing neutral, random and irrelevant answers to the survey to protect themselves and their privacy).

In the section of the questionnaire concerning attitudes I was not able to give truthful answers, because I think that this is a private matter

b) **Perception of the uselessness of personal opinions on these issues, as a symptom of passivity, discouragement and resignation** (“I do not say and I do nothing with respect to something that I cannot change in any case, I limit myself to detecting it and acknowledging it, and I'll try to do my best in order to not find myself in this type of situations).

I must admit that I have already heard of your questionnaire from some of my male colleagues, who are more refractory to any issue concerning gender equality. In general, although I consider the awareness-raising initiatives rather laudable, I fear that ultimately they are not useful in reaching that part of the public that hinders them the most

c) Perception of disorientation with respect to these issues, related to the **lack of information** on what can be done on an individual level (eg by declaring that they don't know which channels are available at UniCa to report cases of harassments acted by teachers, although there is already the possibility of doing so through a specific evaluation form, or by declaring that they don't have any knowledge about the University regulations on the gender equality issues, in case of need to make use of them). The result is **a sense of detachment with respect to the institution**, which translates into generalized distrust and inaction.

What about the gender equality issue at Unica: The Reactions After the GEP - 2022

The second survey (2022) proved to be an excellent tool for promoting and disseminating SUPERA Project and related activities, starting from the adoption of a Gender Equality Plan.

Almost 50% of the UniCa staff (67.5% of men and 73% of women) knew about the SUPERA project. However, of these, about 40% had little information about the project activities, but most respondents, among the staff, agree that the project had been useful for achieving gender equality in the university

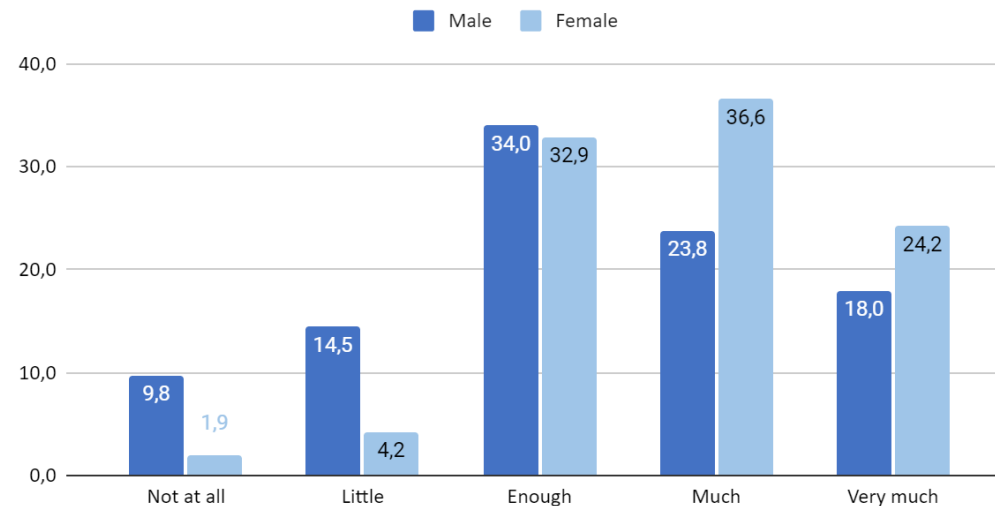
Do you think SUPERA project has been useful for Gender Equality? UniCa staff (%)				
	Research and teaching staff		TA staff	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Not at all - Little	18,4	20,5	15,9	14,1
Enough	34,2	30,8	43,2	37,6
Much - Very much	47,4	48,7	40,9	48,2
Total	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0

What about the gender equality issue at Unica: The Reactions After the GEP - 2022

Almost all of the student respondents, before the survey, knew little information about SUPERA project (16,5%) or did not know the project (16,5%).

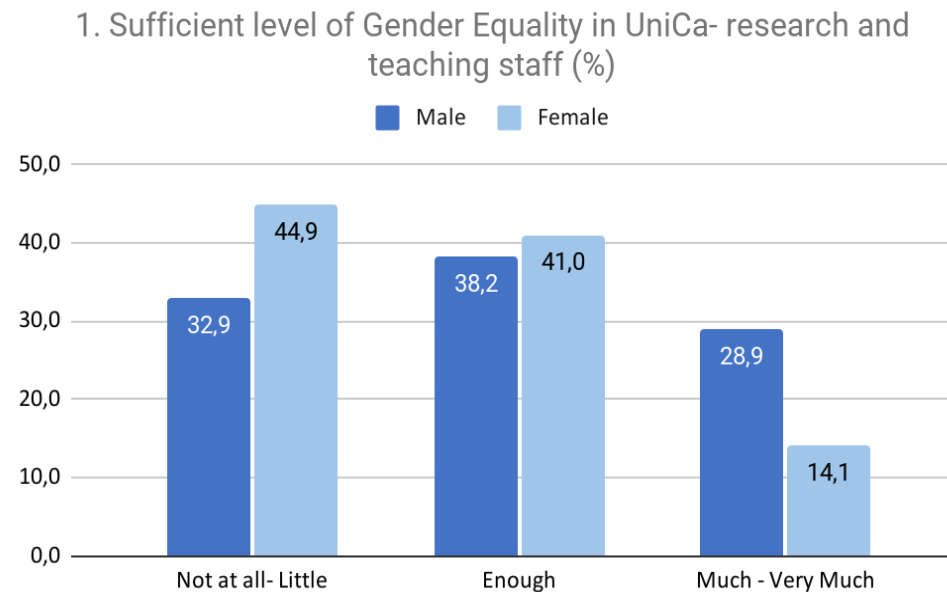
However, once informed through the survey, most students appeared convinced of the importance of the project for gender equality in UniCa, and in particular of the usefulness of the gender equality plan

2. Do you think SUPERA project is useful for Gender Equality? for students (%)



Smile What about the gender equality issue at Unica: The Reactions After the GEP - 2022

By the way, the perception of a sufficient level of gender equality at Unica is still very far to be achieved: the most critical group is the research and teaching staff. In fact, only 14,1% of female respondents appeared convinced that sufficient gender equality had been achieved in Unica. Males were more “optimistic”, almost 30% agreed with this statement.

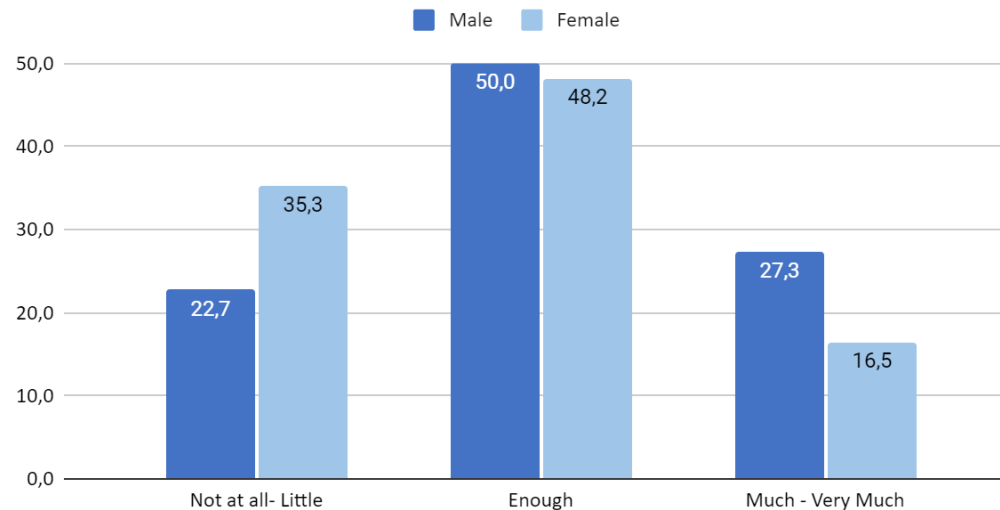


Smile What about the gender equality issue at Unica: The Reactions After the GEP - 2022

The group of technical and administrative staff was less critical.

Almost half, well balanced between men (50%) and women (48,1%), agreed that there was sufficient gender equality in UniCa. Even in this case, however, the female respondents who thought that equal conditions are achieved are very few (16,5% vs 27,3%).

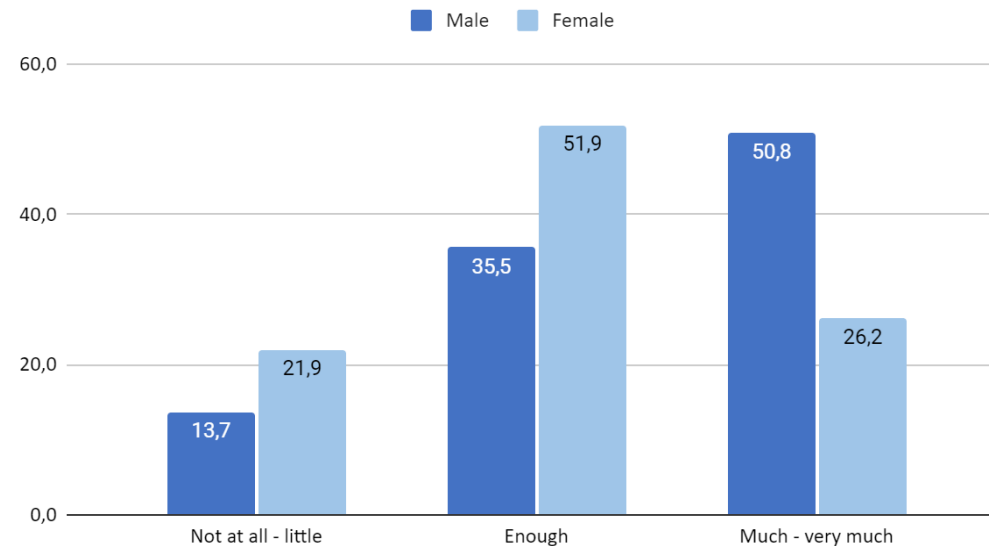
2. Sufficient level of Gender Equality in UniCa- technical and administrative staff (%)



Smile What about the gender equality issue at Unica: The Reactions After the GEP - 2022

Among the group of students, more than 50% of male respondents were in fact totally convinced with the statement, with a difference of 24 percentage points compared to females. However, half of the female interviewees agreed that enough had been done.

3. Sufficient level of Gender Equality in UniCa- students (%)



Some final remarks: it's a marathon, than an obstacle race!

The **collection of resistances**, before the GEP, and the **assessment of gender equality awareness**, after the GEP, have been both extremely **useful**.

It would be “suspicious” that a **structural change** of this magnitude did not generate any friction, while being able to count on the institutional support assured by the University's governing bodies, starting from the endorsement expressed by both the former and the current Rector, to qualify UniCa as a strategic actor for promoting the European founding principle of inclusivity, in its dual role:

- a) as an **educational environment** where to be socialized to fight inequalities and to apply the principles of equal citizenship;
- b) as a **workplace** where diversity can result into the risk of inequalities in the distribution of positions and the career progression.

Some final remarks: Is this approach a good practice?

Yes, it is.

This methodological approach, which accompanied the long path for introducing the GEP at UNICA, could be transferred and adapted to other universities committed in redefining in a more inclusive way their organizational architecture and their action plan, because it is based on a two-step assessment of the resistance expressed by all the populations involved (teaching and technical-administrative staff, top governance and students):

1. at **the beginning of the process**, to bring out the critical issues more sedimented, that define the **starting situation** on the basis of which to structure the most urgent political measures, which will then flow into the actions included in the GEP;
2. at **the end of the process**, after the first phase of the implementation of this document, to understand **whether those same actions are proving effective**, in the medium term, in overcoming that resistance and resolving those critical issues or, on the contrary, have not proven sufficiently targeted to be successful, to the point of requiring further modifications.

Some final remarks: Is this approach a good practice?

In this sense, the impact of the double survey in the case of the University of Cagliari has made it possible to highlight how much the fourth GEP key-area, that of **contrasting gender stereotypes and creating awareness about the relevance of the pervasive dimensions of gender based violence** within the the university, still needed to be addressed with more strong, and more decisive innovations, focused on the provision of **mandatory training and capacity-building courses** in the field of prevention and recognition of toxic behavior for young researchers and PhD students in the early stages of their careers, and on **the introduction of a new figure ad hoc: that of the “trusted advisor”**, for the treatment and prosecution of reported cases.

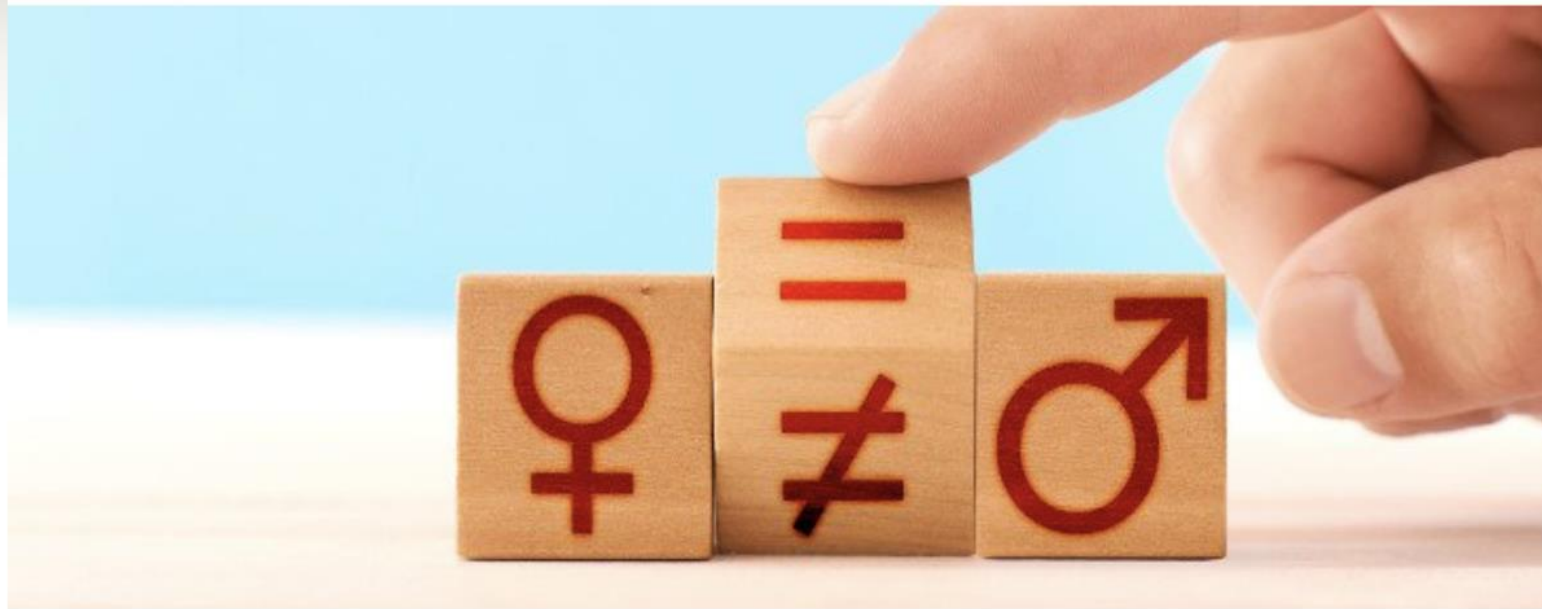
Some final remarks: So, What happens now?

At the University of Cagliari, the Gender Equality Plan has been codified starting from 2022 as a **general and transversal framework for the entire new strategic plan of the University**, in all its policy directions - from human resources management to the definition of guidelines for research funding, to the guarantee of organizational well-being - and has made it the basis of its identity in terms of social sustainability, so much so that it is defined as the permanent basis of the Action Plan that the university is committed to implementing in the next years as part of its application for the European **"Human Resources Strategy for Researchers"** certification, starting from 2023.

In this sense, the **periodic detection of persistent resistance, and the evaluation of their change**, with regard to their contents and diffusion, constitutes a precious thermometer for the self-assessment of the path undertaken towards a fairer, more accessible and more equal university, thanks precisely to its deeply participatory nature, from a bottom-up perspective.

Because GEP **is a process**: not an end point, but a trigger point for a **sustainable, lasting, widespread, shared structural and systemic** gender-sensitive change in Academia

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THANKS A LOT FOR YOUR ATTENTION!