

GENDER EQUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

KNOWING THE REALITY
TO IMPROVE IT

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Gender Equality in Higher Education Institutions: Knowing the Reality to improve it
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Introduction

As part of the GE-HEI - Gender Equality in Higher Education Institutions project, this overview aims to provide a synopsis of the results found on the promotion of Gender Equality (henceforth GE) in Portuguese Higher Education.

Project main goals:

- Understand, and inform about, the underlying factors behind the persistence of different gender inequalities in the Portuguese Higher Education system; and
- To develop, through a multi-level analysis, new knowledge, tools, and methodologies for the promotion and mainstreaming of GE in the Higher Education system.

Developed by the Interdisciplinary Centre for Gender Studies (CIEG/ISCSP-ULisboa), in partnership with the Higher Education Assessment and Accreditation Agency (A3ES) and the Institute for Gender, Equality and Difference at the University of Iceland (RIKK), the project was promoted by the Directorate-General for Higher Education (DGES) and funded by the EEA Grants 2014-2021 Gender Equality and Reconciliation Program, whose operating entity was the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality (CIG)¹.

With this Research brief, we hope not only to present the main conclusions found, but also to encourage their further study and discussion, not forgetting the complementary consultation of the other scientific and non-scientific outputs of GE-HEI project, namely: i) Promotion manual¹; ii) Booklet¹; iii) Infographics¹; and iv) Video¹.

Results

01

The numbers of gender (in)equalities in higher education in Portugal and in the european context

In Portugal, half of the academic staff are women, but represent less than 1/3 of the top academic career position². The proportion of women in academic career positions decreases as we move towards the top. This decrease is also seen in the overall figures for the EU27.

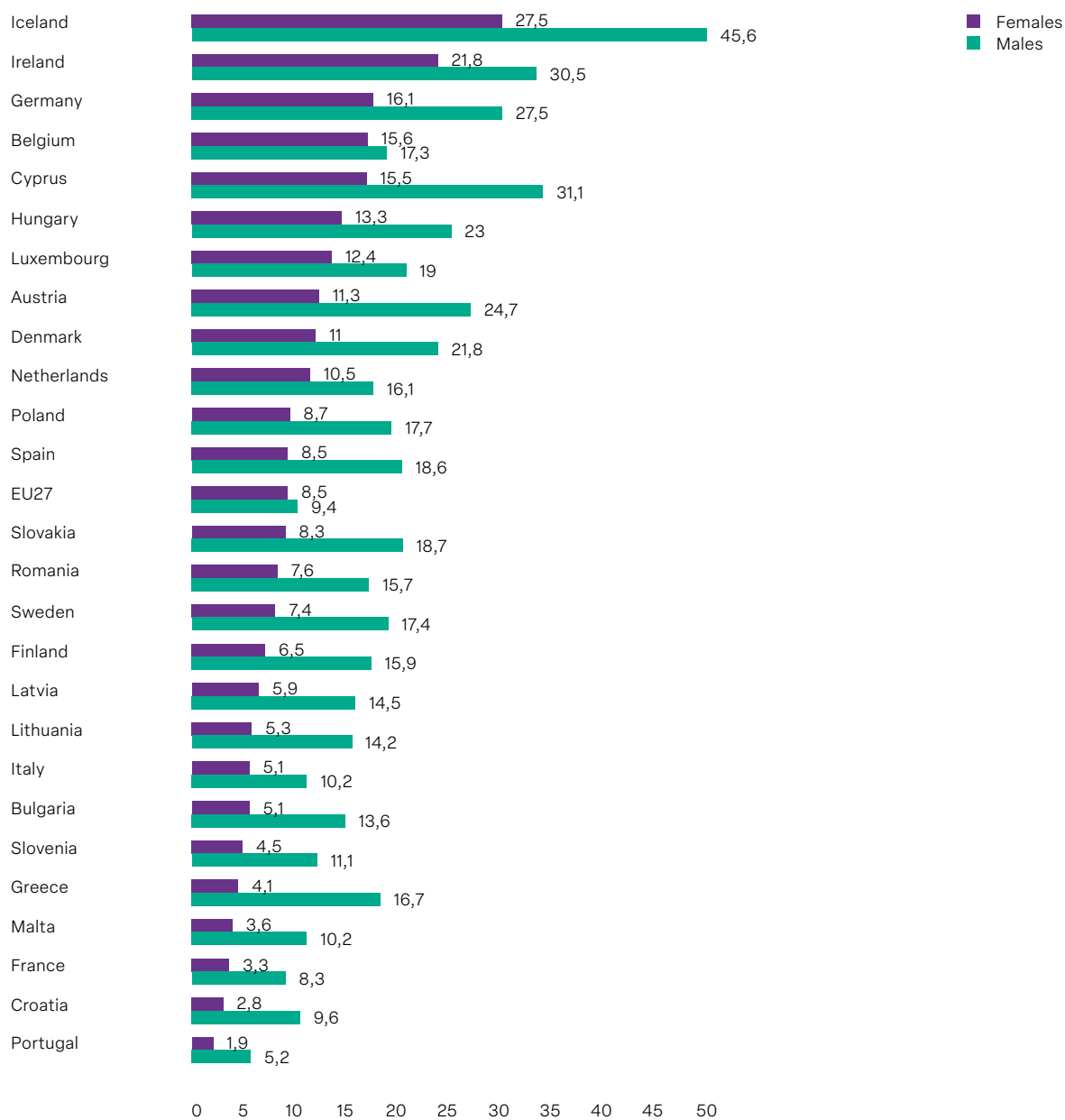
In most countries, women in Grade A (top) represent a lower percentage of academic staff compared to men in the same position. Portugal has the academic hierarchy with the lowest percentage of women and men in the top position of the career ladder:

© Academic staff include all Higher education teachers and researchers. The classification of academic positions into A, B, C and D grades may vary across countries. Classification used in Portugal: Grade A (Professor/a Catedrático/a, Professor/a Coordenador/a Principal e Investigador/a Coordenador/a); Grade B (Professor/a Associado/a, com e sem agregação, Professor/a Coordenador/a, com e sem agregação, e Investigador/a Principal); Grade C (Professor/a Auxiliar, Professor/a Adjunto/a e Investigador/a Auxiliar); Grade D (Assistentes, Lector/a, Monitor/a, Outros/as).

Source: European Commission (2021). <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/759686>

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Figure 1.
Proportion (%) of grade A staff among all academic staff, by sex, 2018



Source

European Commission, She Figures 2021, Career advancement and participation in decision-making

From a comparative and diachronic perspective, these data show that in Portugal, over the last 20 years, the participation of women teachers in Higher Education (not including researchers) has increased. They rose from 40,8% in 2001/2002 to 46,2% in 2021/2022.

The number of Portuguese female researchers in the sector has also increased in recent years, surpassing that of men in all R&D fields, except Engineering and Technology and Exact Sciences.

But it is also in Portugal, compared to the European context, that there is a higher proportion of women researchers working on “precarious”³ contracts compared to men, and a comparatively high feminization of researchers associated with lower per capita expenditure on R&D.

Women account for about half of the students enrolled in tertiary education in Portugal, with figures above the EU27 average for bachelor’s degrees (54,7%) and PhDs (52,2%) in 2020. Despite these advances, there are patterns of horizontal segregation in the proportion of female students by subject area, with a greater under-representation of female PhDs in ICT, in contrast to Education and Health and welfare.

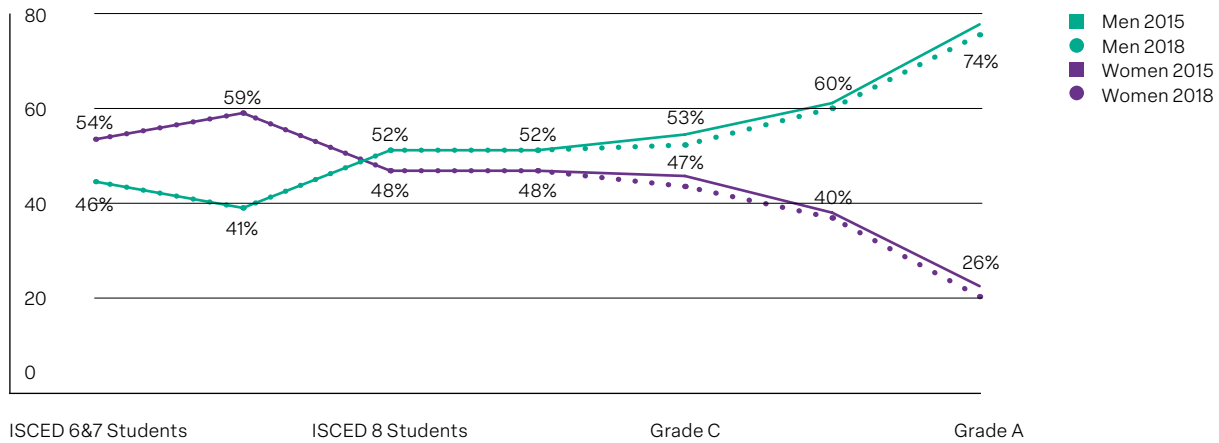
The proportion of women is even higher among graduates, with figures similar to the EU27 at bachelor’s (59,4%) and master’s (58,6%) level and above average at PhD level (52,5%) in 2020.

Portugal follows the European trend of the “Scissors effect”, i.e. the proportion of women who attend and complete tertiary education decreases as they move up the most stable and highest positions in the academic hierarchy. This effect shows the disparities between the educational investments and academic paths of women and men in both Portugal and the EU27:

© Since this figure only takes into account research contracts of up to one year, this data is underestimated. The proportion of people in research in precarious situations is expected to be higher, because there are research contracts longer than one year which are nevertheless just as precarious.

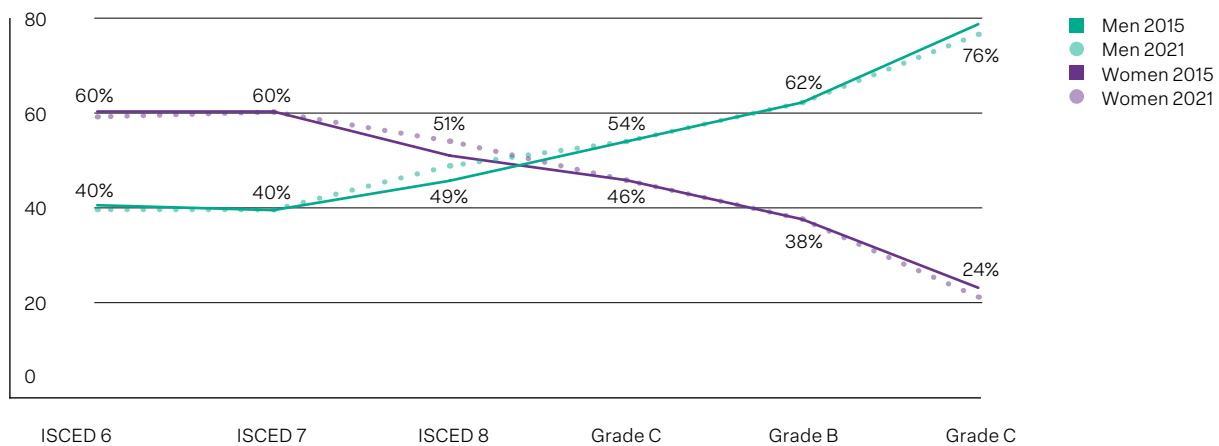
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Figure 2.
Proportion (%) of men and women students, graduates, and academic staff, EU27, 2015-2018



Source
She Figures 2021, Women in Science database, DG Research and Innovation; Eurostat - Education Statistics (online data codes: educ_enrl5, educ_grad5, educ_uae_enrt03, educ_uae_grad02).

Figure 3.
Proportion (%) of men and women, graduates, and academic staff, Portugal (2014/2015 and 2020/2021)



Source
Statistics - Profile of Higher Education Teachers (DGEEC) and Higher Education Graduates (PORDATA), 2023

02

Higher education institutions and change

The numbers point to a reality still marked by gender inequalities, particularly in terms of access to leadership positions and the progression of women in Higher Education.

To understand these patterns, it is necessary to look at cultural factors and more subtle and implicit mechanisms that persist in academic contexts. It is, therefore, important to consider how people and institutions perceive Gender Equality (GE) in Higher Education in Portugal. This is why we developed a more in-depth research strategy, with four Case Studies⁴ in HEIs and interviews with academic leaders and women, as shown below.

The **Case Studies** conducted (with interviews with institutional managers, teachers, non-teaching staff and students from four Portuguese Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) allowed us to understand the specific institutional, contextual, and circumstantial factors that can help in explaining the level of adherence to policies and practices that promote Gender Equality (GE). The study of the data pertaining to each institution allowed a more detailed analysis of the regularities that were identified in the secondary analysis and the following conclusions stand out:

There is an increased awareness regarding the theme of GE and the need to promote GE in HEIs, which in part results from the enforcement of European Commission policies that value GE. One example of this is the criteria of funding sources, such as Horizon Europe, requiring HEIs to have GE Plans.

Case Study 1, in a Management and Economics School, has identified an institutional culture that consists in responding to the challenges of gender inequality by using an instrumental logic. Promotion of GE is understood to be important mainly as a way to improve international rating, expand resources and contribute to the reputation of the institution. Participants, especially at the leadership level, are aligned with the GE Plan approved by the university and showed high consensus regarding an effective institutional commitment to GE.

© Each Case Study included the analysis of secondary data, information sessions, workshops, focus groups and semi-structured interviews with the heads of the institutions, teachers, non-teaching staff and students of the HEI, with the support of a Focal Point (i.e. a person responsible for mediating between the Project and the respective HEI, who occupied a key and/or strategic position in the institution). To find out more, see the GE-HEI Project Booklet (at <https://gehei.dges.gov.pt/>).

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This HEI reflects the trend identified at national and European level: its teaching staff is predominantly male, with the women making up one third of that staff and only 7% of them being at the top of the teaching career. In turn, women predominate in non-teaching staff but that is not reflected in senior positions, where there is a better balance. In the student body, there is a tendency towards parity in undergraduate degrees, with a greater asymmetry at the level of master's degrees, particularly in stereotypically male areas such as Business and Finance (women represent around one third of the students).

In **Case Study 2**, a School of Engineering and Technology, promotion of GE is globally understood as a recent and “external” problem, raised mainly by the guidelines of the Polytechnic Institute and by national and international requirements. A domino effect of the Polytechnic's decisions, which contributed to increasing the importance of the need to take measures to promote GE. The increasing attention this HEI pays to GE reveals some openness to move forward with concrete steps. However, the responsibility is often transferred to the Polytechnic Institute, especially due to the lack of resources to implement a specific strategy.

This HEI, like other schools in these areas of knowledge at national and European level, has a predominantly male contingent of students and teachers (around 14% and 28% of women in 2020 and 2021, respectively). The “absence” of women in decision-making positions, at the top of the teaching career and in course attendance frequently emerges as a motto to discuss the need for and importance of promoting GE in this HEI.

Case Study 3, in a School of Engineering, has showed a division in the institutional culture: GE emerges as a controversial issue, with demonstrations for and against its promotion. This dynamic clearly translates into greater attention being paid to the topic. This could, given the commitments established and investments initiated by the group in favour of promoting GE, stimulate a more effective implementation of the measures and initiatives that have been planned.

Just as in the case of HEI 2, this HEI follows the national and international trend of having a lower proportion of women students and teachers (with no women at the top of the career ladder). In this Case Study, the “number problem” also emerged as a motto for discussing the need to promote GE.

In **Case Study 4**, a School of Social Sciences and Humanities, promotion of GE translates into a pertinent dimension of the ongoing institutional change, as an axis that will give structure to the strategy and goals established by the institution. In an institutional context that is more aware of gender inequalities and that seeks to respond to the need to transform into a more egalitarian and modern institution, an aspect actively highlighted and demanded by students, some degree of internal resistance to change and conservatism has been identified.

At this HEI, the higher proportion of women students and teachers translates into a trend towards parity at the level of decision-making bodies and top career positions. However, as some participants point out, the ‘existence of more women

does not mean effective equality', particularly because there is no equivalence between the recruitment basis and career progression, and because asymmetries persist at intermediate decision-making levels. Deep down, despite the policies that have been approved to promote GE, the mere existence of more women does not guarantee gender equality or "solve" the problem in this HEI because the "real" conditions women experience are still often unequal.

The four Case Studies allowed concluding that institutional change to guarantee GE was fostered in different ways and was partly driven by the external context. But the effects of that change depended to a large extent on the respective 'institutional cultures', particularly the number of women existing and the predominant scientific areas.

We found that students, teaching staff and non-teaching staff alike often had difficulty identifying the more day-to-day and less visible aspects of gender inequalities that still persist in the academic context. These obstacles are associated with what in the literature is called "unconscious bias" or "implicit bias", which emerges as one of the most common explanations for the perpetuation of gender inequalities (Herbert, 2013; Gvozdanović and Bailey, 2021). For example, did you know that in a professional recruitment situation when the recruiter is faced with a man and a woman with identical CVs they tend to choose the man? And that "blind" auditions for orchestras increased the probability of gender balance being achieved? Since the end of the 20th century, pioneering studies, such as the one by economists Claudia Goldin and Cecilia Rouse (2000), have demonstrated that when gender identity is removed from CVs, the recruitment of professionals becomes more egalitarian.

Biases exist because, in social interactions, we tend to simplify the way we process information (for an efficient use of our internalized schemas), which leads to the reinforcement and confirmation of learned expectations. What we learn in interpersonal, family, media and other contexts influence the way we think and behave, and academic contexts are not free from these influences. In fact, the accumulated knowledge on this topic (Herbert, 2013; Gvozdanović and Bailey, 2021) converges on the conclusion that inequalities caused by unconscious bias are an institutional problem. It has a solution, but it implies structural change and monitoring.

Further investigation based on the case studies allowed us to conclude that the most common forms of resistance verbalized by participants from these HEIs are associated, on the one hand, with poor knowledge regarding the data that portray inequalities and, on the other hand, with the objective conditions for GE promotion and implementation in HEIs (such as the lowest number of women and HR in HEIs). In other words, the conditions prevailing in the institution for promoting change can be more favourable or less, depending in particular on the perspectives and willingness to act of the leaders themselves, as we will see below.

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03

Trajectories and perspectives

A more refined and in-depth analysis using the semi-structured interviews with leaders and academic women allowed us to conclude that:

The views of HEI leaders differ in terms of perception of gender inequalities within the HEIs; the need to give relevance to the issue; the need to implement measures and the effectiveness of those measures. It was possible to identify three types of standing regarding GE promotion:

- 1 Supporter: those who consider that gender inequalities persist in their HEI and take responsibility for a systematic implementation of measures, as they are all necessary.
- 2 Ambivalent: those who have greater difficulty in identifying factors of gender inequality in their HEI, but have a learning attitude, recognising that some measures are relevant.
- 3 Resistant: those who do not recognise the existence of gender inequalities in their HEI and devalue the issue and the need to act.

Distinguishing between different leadership profiles with respect to GE promotion contributes to a more adequate and sensitive action, one that allows to respond to those who resist and circumvent their arguments [i.e. the “institutional inertia” to change, (Husu, 2013)].

This was clear in the analysis of the trajectories and perceptions of ten Academic Women with notable career paths, in which a contrast was identified between the institutional contexts of traditional HEIs and recent HEIs (Acker, 1990), along with the social, family, and economic background as facilitating factors for these precursor trajectories.

All participants revealed a desire to progress, to gain recognition, but often lacked strategic vision to come to power.

These women assumed positions of power in which they were at times isolated, being the only woman present. This experience often helped to raise their awareness of inequality. If, at the beginning of their careers, they had no expectations of being discriminated, as things progressed, they were faced with situations and contexts of discrimination, in some cases evident, in other cases subtle discrimination (Carvalho & Diogo, 2018; Herbert, 2013; Dias, Sá & Machado-Taylor, 2013).

Quite often, it was precisely at the moment in their careers when they achieved the greatest success that these Academic Women became more aware of the gender inequalities that exist in Higher Education.

Women in the academic settings who have reached top positions possessed what was needed to navigate a system that was against them and to overcome obstacles (explicit and implicit) along their paths.

The conclusions drawn from this action research project show that, although Portugal started late in tackling gender inequalities in higher education, it is already taking steps to balance the existing gaps. Precisely because imbalances persist, it is important to consider the clues drawn up and grounded on the Project results.

04

Clues for the promotion of gender equality in portuguese higher education

The growing attention of national public policies to the promotion of Gender Equality (GE) in Higher Education can be seen in the Council of Ministers Resolution 186/2021 of 29 December and the Laws 73/2017 of August 16th, 26/2019 of March 28th and 61/2023 of november 9th.

GE has also been reinforced, at international level, following the European Strategy for Gender Equality (2020-2025), as a pillar in the Horizon Europe program and as a direct contribution to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5. Currently, the existence of GE Plans in HEIs is even an eligibility criterion for funding from the Horizon Europe program.

The persistence of inequalities in Higher Education requires a constant, long-term commitment to institutional change. Portugal started late in promoting these policies, which were developed in other international contexts at least a decade ago. It is therefore crucial to affirm the commitment to Gender Equality in Higher Education Institutions, benefiting from the lessons learnt and exemplary initiatives from other countries.

Drawing on the lessons learnt from the promotion of GE in Portuguese HEIs and from a systematic analysis of international recommendations, it is well known that institutional transformation requires lasting investments both in the intervention strategies and in the goals and initiatives. Including the formalization of explicit commitments at the various institutional levels, tools for diagnosing and monitoring gender inequalities in HEIs, the creation of GE teams and/or offices, etc.

Approaching GE as an area of knowledge that requires learning, “inviting” people to discuss GE issues and understanding their perspectives, dismantling stereotypes, and informing about the existing reality, all contribute to increasing receptivity and actively empowering the academic community for institutional change. The pedagogical approach results in greater familiarity with the topic and effective recognition of the obstacles. It has greater potential than an imposing and/or accusatory attitude for a consistent and sustained transformation of HEIs, which are particularly characterized by being contexts of erudition and, as such, of “permanent doubt”.

At the same time, there have been important leaps that have helped to bridge the gaps identified at global level, made possible in part by the GE-HEI project. In particular, the finding of gender imbalances in the A3Es External Evaluation Committees (directors and teams) and the Study Program Coordination Committees (directors and teams) of Portuguese HEIs, which resulted in the introduction of changes by A3Es⁵, a partner in the GE- HEI project.

© Namely: i) the inclusion of GE criteria in the appointment of External Evaluation Commissions; ii) the definition of GE as one of the criteria for assessing the quality of institutions, which is already evident in the institutional evaluation guidelines; and iii) the introduction of GE as a relevant area in the A3Es Strategic Program (2021-2024).

With the aim of recognizing and encouraging the promotion of GE in Portuguese HEIs, an Award for HEIs with exemplary Gender Equality practices and a Seal of Commitment were also created, the first edition of which is scheduled for 2024. To sum up, the GE-HEI project also suggested ways forward to generate basic and fundamental conditions for both institutional change and sustainability of the GE promotion in Portuguese HEIs, specifically in the areas of: i) gender diagnosis and equality plans; ii) governance structures; iii) performance evaluation; iv) encouraging scientific production; and v) training and awareness-raising.

In line with the proposals put forward in the GE-HEI project's Handbook for participatory processes to Promote GE in Higher Education, changing HEIs implies adopting concrete strategies and measures in multiple areas, which may include, among others, the following:

- ii access and progression in the careers of teaching and research staff, non-teaching staff and access to management and governance positions in the institutions;
 - iii familiar, personal and professional life balance;
 - iv preventing and combating moral and sexual harassment in scientific and academic contexts;
 - v field of knowledge, for example: introduction of curricular content, skills training, dissemination of the results of research projects (in the various areas of knowledge) with an impact on the promotion of gender equality;
 - vi combating horizontal segregation in student recruitment, with a view to balance the under-represented sex;
- community outreach initiatives to promote Gender Equality.

Some important steps have already been taken to advance the promotion of GE in HEIs in Portugal. It is important to deepen knowledge, improve the development of tools to tackle existing inequalities, raise awareness of the issue and effectively integrate the goal of promoting gender equality into the Portuguese higher education system.

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