



EUROPEAN POLICYBRIEF



Communities of PrACTice for Accelerating Gender Equality and Institutional Change in Research and Innovation across Europe

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INTRODUCTION

The European Commission (2021) and the Council of the European Union (2021) are committed to promoting gender equality in research and innovation. In Horizon Europe, having a gender equality plan (GEP) in place has become an eligibility criterion for many legal entities in Member States and Associated Countries. ACT has been funded within Horizon 2020 (Science with and for Society programme) with the aim of promoting Communities of Practice to advance knowledge, collaborative learning and institutional change on gender equality in the European Research Area. The project aimed at addressing common needs and improving assessment on gender equality in Higher Education and Research and Innovation regarding three fields: gender balance in career progression, gender balance in decision-making positions, and integrating the gender dimension into research content and teaching.

The ACT project has set-up and supported an international network of Communities of Practice (CoPs) as agents to develop gender equality actions at research performing and research funding organizations in the European Research Area. Eight CoPs have been established spanning roughly 144 organizations in Europe and Latin America (see <https://www.act-on-gender.eu/cops>). These eight communities have worked on different thematic gender equality issues and established different spheres of geographic influence:

- LifeSciCoP, led by Fundació Centre de Regulació Genòmica (CRG), Spain includes organizations working towards greater gender equality in the life sciences
- GENERA, led by Deutsches Elektronen-Synchrotron (DESY) & Umweltbundesamt (UBA), Germany, includes organizations working towards greater gender equality in physics and STEM disciplines
- GenBUDGET, led by Haskoli Islands (UoI), Iceland, includes organizations which have a relatively long trajectory in gender equality interested in using gender budgeting as a means to further advance gender equality
- FORGEN, led by Science Foundation Ireland (SFI), Ireland, is a Community of Practice of research and innovation funding agencies
- Strategies, led by Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), France, includes organizations concerned with the promotion of sustainable gender equality efforts in Higher Education, Research and Innovation
- Alt+G, led by Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Slovenia, has a clear geographic focus and includes organizations from Slovenia working towards establishing alternative infrastructures for greater gender equality
- GEinCEE, led by Uniwersytet Jagielloński (UJ), Poland, includes organizations mainly from Central and Eastern Europe working towards greater gender equality in this particular geographic context
- LAC, led by Regional UNESCO Chair Women, Science and Technology in Latin America – FLACSO, Argentina, includes 14 major universities of the Latin American continent from Argentina, Peru, Uruguay, Mexico, Colombia, Costa Rica, Chile, and Brazil.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

A rich literature has emerged around the concept of Community of Practice since it was introduced for the first time by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) in their book on “Situated Learning”. Although the three determining features of CoPs, namely a “joint enterprise” (shared interest, or domain), “mutual engagement” (community) and development of a “shared repertoire” of resources & practice, have been explored from a diverse set of perspectives including business settings or higher education, gender scholars and practitioners have so far been relatively absent from this engagement with CoPs. While the European Commission (EC) has put great emphasis on structural change (European Commission 2011) in relation to Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) as the leading instrument for achieving gender equality, beyond this, particular methodologies for its implementation have not been specified. The ACT project therefore constituted a major opportunity to consider CoPs as an instrument for accelerating gender equality and institutional change in research and innovation across Europe.

Across the eight Communities of Practice in the ACT project several experiences and insights can be summarized as follows (see also the results of the evaluation of the ACT CoP experiences under

<https://www.act-on-gender.eu/nes/act-evaluation-results>).

First, it is important to note that the ACT CoPs were constituted as inter-organizational collaborations comprising of 1-2 persons from each member organizations. While CoPs can and do exist within a single organization such as for example a large university, the cross-organizational networks established through the ACT CoPs offered certain advantages and challenges.

Members of the ACT CoPs have unanimously underlined the opportunity to overcome one's isolation and connect with others in similar, often marginalised positions within academic institutions. The strength to connect and discuss common challenges and exchange possible solutions is thereby even more valued in situations and countries where gender equality is not a policy concern and public resources for gender equality work are absent or minimal. Forming part of an EC funded project such as ACT in the form of a member organization lends credibility, prestige and visibility to its participants, whose impact should not be under-estimated.

In support to what is known from the wider CoP literature, Communities of Practice in the ACT project also provided a safe space for their members to collectively reflect and support each other, outside the established hierarchies and priorities of their respective organizations. This is especially important in contexts where gender equality is not an official priority or is even met with outright hostility. Offering such a safe space of support and action proved to be pivotal.

A second central insight that has emerged throughout the work of the ACT CoPs is the fact that cultivating a Community of Practice requires dedication and commitment. Although CoPs thrive through bottom-up initiatives that are often propelled by passionate individuals in an informal way, they don't come for free. Collaborating to establish the day-to-day workings of a CoP and hence the trustful, authentic relations in the long run among its members requires time and resources which are easily under-estimated. This holds especially true in the context of gender equality work which is often carried out by women in addition to their normal academic responsibilities. The ACT CoP facilitators have unanimously underlined the need for adequate support and resources to establish and run CoPs especially in the notoriously underfunded field of gender equality work.

As mentioned, a Community of Practice builds upon mutual engagement and trusting relations among its members. Developing a cohesive community takes time and dedication and as such becomes more challenging the more members need to be integrated. The majority of the ACT CoPs comprised between 10-20 member organizations, with GENERA constituting a relatively large CoP of 37 members.

A third insight that emerged throughout the work of the 8 ACT CoPs concerns the crucial role of using a bottom-up approach to define the agenda of each CoP. Since a Community of Practice is defined by a shared interest among its members, this sense of belonging emerges to the degree that personal and/or professional concerns and needs get reflected and addressed in the collective work. Undoubtedly, the ability to take one's immediate needs and interest as a starting point for CoP collaboration was one of the key motivating factors to invest in this type of work amongst the participants of the ACT CoPs.

CoPs provide the opportunity to subvert the standard approach to policy learning on the European gender equality landscape. As each CoP produces knowledge that responds to their idiosyncratic needs and situation, knowledge is never simply transferred - for example, from countries with a relatively long history of gender equality work to those which have started more recently - but it is transformed,

adapted, and refined in response to local policy frameworks, demands, resources and needs.

ACT Communities of Practice work primarily across organizations as previously mentioned. As such they can provide an effective arena to develop tools for effective organizational GEP work. The Gender Equality Audit and Monitoring (GEAM) tool was developed in collaboration with the GEinCEE CoP and deployed throughout many of its member organizations. The CoP therefore functions as a forum to generate shared knowledge and experiences which then can be used as building blocks during the internal development of an organisation/ institution's gender equality plan. The GEAM gives rise to a practice (generate and interpret survey data, develop corresponding gender equality actions) which emerges through an inter-organizational CoP to be then mainstreamed into organizational gender equality efforts.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the aforementioned central insights that have emerged across the ACT Communities of Practice, we have developed the following policy recommendations:

- Communities of Practice need resources. The more a CoP is made up of members who can only participate on their free time, the more difficult it is for the CoP to achieve its goals. CoP facilitators should be available and be adequately resourced in order to ensure that the basic administrative support is covered.
- Communities of Practice provide effective support for gender equality practitioners across and within organizations. However, a CoP alone is not enough to carry the burden for achieving institutional change. European and national funding for gender equality continues to be important and much needed.
- Communities of Practice thrive through bottom-up initiatives of gender equality practitioners on the ground. However, their work can achieve better impact when supported by adequate national policy frameworks for gender equality which create the legal framework to demand change and act.
- New initiatives need to explore the collaboration among different CoPs, especially in the case of CoPs working within a single organization.

SUSTAINABILITY AND LEGACY

The ACT project has developed several resources to support the work of Communities of Practice for accelerating gender equality and Institutional change in Research and Innovation across Europe. These include:

- The **ACT Co-creation Toolkit** compiles a variety of participatory methods and tools useful for Communities of Practice to successfully operate and develop. Please consult: Thomson, Aleksandra, & Rabsch, Kathrin. (2021). ACT - Community of Practice Co-creation Toolkit (2.0). Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5342489>
- During the project lifetime, the crucial role of **Community of Practice Facilitators** has been underlined. Facilitators are key not only during the initial setup of a Community of Practice but also for their well-functioning/sustainability. Three summary documents have been compiled that highlight the **main needs as well as findings from the ACT CoP Facilitator training**. These include: 1) ACTonBias - Evidence-based Implicit Bias Interventions, 2) What next? Managing the Transition to Independent CoPs, 3) Participatory Modelling - Gender Inequalities in Research Organizations. All training fact sheets are available under the following URL: <https://www.act-on-gender.eu/act-highlights>
- **Gender Equality Audit and Monitoring (GEAM) tool**. The GEAM tool is an integrated environment for carrying out survey-based gender equality audits in academic organizations. It comprises a collection of questions that cover the majority of aspects of gender equality in academic organizations, providing high-quality data for designing and implementing gender equality measures and assessing their impact over time. GEAM surveys for individual organizations are available in 13 languages apart from English and can be quickly setup by requesting an account through the main GEAM site: <https://geam.act-on-gender.eu>
- In order to facilitate the work of gender equality practitioners the ACT project has created a series of **supporting awareness raising and knowledge-providing videos and booklets** covering different topics such as career choices and advancement, academic culture, the myth of meritocracy in science, intersectionality, gender equality in decision making or the gender dimension. An overview of all supporting materials can be found at the following URL: <https://www.act-on-gender.eu/act-videos>
- Four additional policy briefs have been developed by the ACT Communities of Practice:
 - *Gender budgeting to challenge gender biases in decision-making of Research Performing Organisations*. Policy brief produced by the GenBUDGET CoP.
 - *How to support Communities of Practice for driving institutional change towards gender equality*. Policy brief elaborated by Alt+G, LifeSciCop, and Strategies CoP.
 - *Reflections on scaling-up Communities of Practice*. Policy brief created by Kathrin Rabsch and Claartje Vinkenburg in collaboration with ACT CoP Facilitators.
 - *Towards More Equal, Diverse, and Inclusive Research*. Policy brief created by GEinCEE CoP.All policy briefs can be downloaded here: <https://www.act-on-gender.eu/act-highlights>

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PROJECT NAME ACT - Communities of PrACTice for Accelerating Gender Equality and Institutional Change in Research and Innovation across Europe

COORDINATOR Dr. Jörg Müller, Fundació per a la Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Spain

CONSORTIUM The ACT consortium consists of 17 partners: [Fundació per a la Universitat Oberta de Catalunya](#) (project coordinator, Spain), [Portia](#) (UK), [NOTUS](#) (Spain), [Joanneum Research Forschungsgesellschaft MBH](#) (Austria), [Advance HE](#) (formerly [Equality Challenge Unit](#)) (UK), [Loughborough University](#) (UK), [Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales](#) (Costa Rica¹), [Technische Universität Berlin](#) (Germany), [Karolinska Institutet](#) (Sweden), [Science Foundation Ireland](#) (Ireland), [Umweltbundesamt](#) (Germany), [Stiftung Deutsches Elektronen-Synchrotron](#) (Germany), [Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique](#) (France), [Fundació Centre de Regulació Genòmica](#) (Spain), [Uniwersytet Jagiellonski](#) (Poland), [Znanstvenoraziskovalni Center Slovenske Akademije Znanosti in Umetnosti - ZRC SAZU](#) (Slovenia), and [Haskoli Islands](#) (Iceland).

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WEBSITE <https://www.act-on-gender.eu>

FOR MORE INFORMATION Jörg Müller (jmuller@uoc.edu)

¹ The action will be carried out in the department of UNESCO Regional Chair on Women, Science and Technology in Latin America FLACSO, located in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

FURTHER READING

Rachel, Palmen & Jörg Müller (Eds) (forthcoming): A Community of Practice Approach to Improving Gender Equality in Research. London: Routledge.



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