Gender equality strategies in smaller, younger, or remote research performing organizations

1. Executive Summary

Gender equality in academia is a cornerstone of innovation, diversity, and societal progress. However, Smaller, Younger, and Remote (SYR) research performing organizations face unique and significant challenges in achieving gender balance due to limited resources, geographical isolation, and entrenched cultural norms. This position paper examines these challenges in depth, drawing insights from the ATHENA project and providing actionable recommendations for fostering gender equity in these institutions.

Smaller and remote universities operate within contexts that exacerbate gender disparities while younger universities might be affected by limited financial and institutional resources which constrain their ability to develop and sustain comprehensive Gender Equality Plans (GEPs). Compounding these challenges, rigid governance systems and centralized decision-making processes often prevent the adoption of innovative, gender-sensitive practices in particular in remote universities.

The ATHENA project has demonstrated the transformative potential of tailored interventions in addressing these barriers. Through the implementation of GEPs, participating institutions from Widening countries and regions have achieved significant milestones despite being relatively small research organizations or located remotely such as in Outermost regions. Dedicated funding mechanisms tailored to the needs of SYR research performing organizations are essential to enabling these institutions to implement and sustain GEPs which address the specific challenges they face. The future of gender equality in these institutions depends not only on their capacity to achieve internal institutional and cultural changes but also on their ability to act as catalysts for change within their communities and beyond. These institutions, by leveraging their adaptability and close ties to local stakeholders, are uniquely positioned to implement context-sensitive solutions that resonate with regional socio-economic dynamics and thus trigger a virtuous cycle. For instance, collaborations with local industries, outreach programs aimed at challenging traditional gender roles, and partnerships with other stakeholders can create a multiplier effect, extending the benefits of gender equality initiatives beyond the university setting.

Ultimately, the implementation of GEPs can transform these institutions into models of inclusivity and equity, addressing not only immediate gender disparities but also contributing to the broader European

agenda for innovation and social cohesion. As demonstrated by the ATHENA project, by addressing systemic barriers and fostering environments where diverse talent can thrive, smaller, younger and remote universities have the potential to redefine their role within the European higher education system, exemplifying the power of equity-driven transformation.

This position paper provides recommendations for addressing the specific challenges that smaller, younger and remote universities face to overcome systemic challenges and empower them in leading the way in creating a more inclusive academic landscape. EU and national policy makers must provide dedicated support to SYR to integrate gender equality into their core missions, achieve internal transformation and inspire systemic change across the entire European higher education ecosystem.

2. Introduction

The European Research Area was established in 2000 with the ambition to create a single, borderless market for research, innovation and technology across the EU. The ERA has highlighted gender equality as a key objective to enhance research excellence, reduce talent loss, and ensure diverse perspectives in innovation processes (Hovdhaugen & Gunnes, 2023; Caprile et al., 2021). Gender equality in R&I is fundamental to foster innovation, diversity, and inclusivity, all of which are essential for addressing complex global challenges. Ensure fair, open, inclusive and gender-equal career paths in research to facilitate systemic institutional and structural change in R&I funding and performing organisations; counteract gender-based violence and sexual harassment; remove inequities regardless of gender, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation; monitor and evaluate national gender equality policies and plans in R&I are the recommended joint actions indicated in the Pact for Research and Innovation to support the value of gender equality and equal opportunities for all.

Universities play a central role in this process, acting as incubators for inclusive practices and fostering future leaders who can drive systemic change (Maisano et al., 2024; Renda et al., 2021). Achieving gender equality in academia requires sustained efforts, particularly in addressing the unique challenges faced by different types of institutions. While larger and well-established universities have the resources to implement comprehensive Gender Equality Plans (GEPs), smaller, younger, and remote (SYR) institutions face a unique set of challenges that often amplify existing gender disparities. These institutions, frequently located in rural or geographically isolated areas, operate with limited financial and human resources, which constrains their ability to address structural inequalities effectively.

Smaller and remote research organizations in Europe encounter a web of interconnected challenges that significantly hinder their ability to achieve gender equality. These challenges, rooted in structural and institutional barriers, compounded by geographical isolation, limited resources, and persistent societal norms, present a complex landscape that requires nuanced and multi-layered solutions. Understanding these barriers is essential to addressing the systemic inequalities that persist in these institutions.

Smaller, Younger and Remote (SYR) Research Performing Organizations

The size and capacity of universities in Europe often correlate with their age and/or geographical location—frequently as a result of both. Many younger universities have been established more recently to address gaps or to complement the provision of tertiary education in specific regions. As a result, these institutions are not only young but often also small in scale. In addition, there are numerous small

higher education and research-performing organizations (RPOs) that remain limited in size due to their remote location, which can constrain their ability to attract students, staff, and external resources.

These smaller, younger, and remote (SYR) institutions commonly face structural challenges, including limited financial and institutional resources, and are frequently situated in less dynamic and less interconnected research and innovation ecosystems. Unlike long-established universities, which benefit from historical endowments, expansive alumni networks, and longstanding relationships with funding agencies, SYR institutions often lack these advantages. Their reduced financial flexibility is further constrained by competitive funding mechanisms that tend to favor larger and better-resourced organizations.

The European Commission's *She Figures 2021* report underscores how disparities in institutional resources contribute to persistent gender inequalities, particularly in senior decision-making and leadership roles. Addressing the specific barriers faced by SYR institutions is essential to ensuring more equitable progress toward gender equality across the European Research Area.

Structural barriers are among the most pervasive challenges faced by smaller and remote universities. These institutions often operate within rigid governance systems characterized by hierarchical decision-making processes that leave little room for innovative or context-sensitive policies. Resource constraints compound these structural issues, creating additional barriers to meaningful change. Smaller and remote organizations typically operate on limited budgets that prioritize teaching and research infrastructure over equity and inclusion programs. According to Wipf et al. (2015) in *"Barriers and Drivers of Innovation in Higher Education"*, the funding mechanisms available to these institutions often emphasize research excellence and output metrics, leaving little room for initiatives that address gender disparities. For instance, programs such as unconscious bias training, leadership development for women, or robust childcare facilities are frequently viewed as ancillary rather than essential. This financial prioritization disproportionately affects smaller universities, as they struggle to compete for external funding that often favors established and high-profile institutions.

Gender-specific challenges, particularly in recruitment, retention, and career progression, are acutely felt in these contexts. The European Commission *(SHE Figures 2021)* identifies the "leaky pipeline" phenomenon as a critical issue in academia, where women disproportionately exit academic careers at various stages, particularly during key transitions such as postdoctoral roles or tenure-track appointments. This phenomenon is exacerbated in smaller and remote universities, where the absence of institutional support structures—such as mentorship networks, flexible working arrangements, and anti-discrimination policies—places additional burdens on female academics. Moreover, societal expectations around caregiving disproportionately impact women in these settings, limiting their ability to pursue leadership positions or high-impact research opportunities (European Commission, 2021).

As Lašáková et al. (2017) note in *"Challenges and Barriers to Assessing and Recognising Excellence in Professional Higher Education"*, smaller universities frequently lack institutional mechanisms, such as dedicated gender equality offices or committees, to systematically address gender disparities, as well as dedicated funding raising or project management offices, capable to grant funds for research or institutional funds. This absence translates into fragmented or ad hoc approaches to gender equality, where efforts are often dependent on individual champions rather than embedded in institutional strategies. Furthermore, governance structures in these universities are often focused on short-term

operational goals, leaving gender equity initiatives sidelined in favor of immediate academic and financial priorities.

Institutional practices within these universities often reflect broader systemic biases that perpetuate gender inequalities. For example, hiring and promotion processes frequently emphasize quantitative metrics such as publication counts and citation indices, which disproportionately disadvantage women. As noted by Caprile et al. (2021) in *"Going Beyond the Formal Adoption of a Gender Equality Plan"*, these metrics fail to account for structural barriers that limit women's access to prestigious research collaborations or competitive funding opportunities. Additionally, evaluation committees in smaller universities often lack gender balance, further entrenching biases in decision-making processes. These practices not only hinder the career progression of women but also limit their representation in senior leadership roles, with women comprising only 22% of institutional heads in EU universities, a figure that is even lower in geographically isolated regions (Hovdhaugen & Gunnes, 2023).

Geographical isolation further intensifies the financial and structural constraints faced by remote research-performing institutions, making it particularly challenging to attract and retain diverse talent. This is especially relevant for institutions located in rural and mountainous areas, on islands, and most notably, in the EU's Outermost Regions. Recruitment processes in these settings are often shaped by the characteristics of the local labor market and prevailing cultural norms, which may reinforce traditional gender roles and hinder progress toward greater gender equality.

These contextual limitations have a marked impact on the recruitment and retention of women in academia—particularly in disciplines traditionally dominated by men, such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Goddard et al. (2013), in *Universities and Smart Specialisation: Challenges, Tensions, and Opportunities for the Innovation Strategies of European Regions*, highlight that the absence of robust regional innovation ecosystems in remote areas significantly undermines the capacity of local universities to attract and maintain diverse academic profiles.

Furthermore, the limited engagement of these institutions with broader national and international academic networks restricts their visibility and access to wider talent pools. This lack of exposure reinforces institutional insularity and perpetuates existing inequalities within the academic workforce.

Fundamental role of smaller, younger and remote universities

Universities and research organizations play a critical role in the modernization of surrounding territories and ecosystems by driving economic development, fostering innovation, promoting sustainability, informing policy, and engaging with local communities. Despite the structural challenges they face, smaller, younger, and remote (SYR) research-performing organizations hold unique potential to act as catalysts for regional transformation.

By embedding gender-sensitive approaches into research agendas, teaching practices, and institutional strategies, SYR institutions can help reorient regional development priorities and stimulate inclusive innovation that reflects diverse perspectives. Strategic collaborations with local industries, public authorities, and other academic institutions can amplify this impact, aligning institutional objectives with regional needs. Initiatives such as mentorship schemes, community outreach programs that challenge gender stereotypes, and partnerships with regional employers can contribute to the creation of a supportive ecosystem that advances gender equality both within and beyond institutional

boundaries. As Maisano et al. (2024) emphasize, leveraging local networks enables smaller universities to become hubs for transformative change, delivering benefits not only to their academic communities but also to the broader social and economic contexts in which they operate.

Notably, younger universities often benefit from more flexible and modern governance structures, which allow for agile decision-making and the swift implementation of innovative policies. This adaptability can be a strategic advantage in responding to contemporary challenges, including those related to gender equality—particularly when these institutions are supported with adequate financial resources and access to robust professional networks.

As noted by Hovdhaugen and Gunnes (2023), small universities in Europe tend to have a higher proportion of women among academic staff, especially in disciplines traditionally linked to caregiving roles, such as education and nursing. However, this broader representation rarely extends to senior leadership positions, where women remain significantly underrepresented. This gap is often linked to a lack of institutional support structures—such as accessible childcare services, mentoring programs, and flexible working arrangements—that are crucial for enabling women to balance professional responsibilities with personal commitments.

Supporting SYR institutions through targeted policy measures and dedicated funding instruments is essential to unlocking their full potential. By addressing their specific structural and contextual challenges, these institutions can play a pivotal role in advancing gender equality and contributing to a more inclusive and equitable European Higher Education and Research Area.

Recommended Strategies to foster gender equality in younger, smaller and remote research organizations

Through its consortium of partners—including four small and remote universities—the ATHENA project has demonstrated the significant benefits of supporting these institutions in the development and implementation of tailored Gender Equality Plans (GEPs). ATHENA adopts a holistic approach that engages the entire university community—young and senior researchers, students, faculty, and administrative staff—while offering comprehensive capacity-building activities. This inclusive strategy has proven effective in fostering institutional transformation and embedding gender equality as a core operational principle within participating organizations.

According to project partners, without dedicated EU funding, the adoption of GEPs would likely not have occurred, or such plans would have been limited to formal compliance with eligibility criteria, lacking real institutional commitment. This observation underscores the critical role of EU financial support and aligns with findings by Wipf et al. (2015), who note that fostering innovation and equity in smaller institutions requires not only structural reforms but also sustained funding and capacity-building tailored to the unique needs of smaller, younger, and remote (SYR) research-performing organizations. These institutions must be recognized for their dual role as providers of education and drivers of regional development.

To accelerate progress toward gender equality in SYR universities, it is imperative that national and European policymakers adopt strategies specifically designed to address the structural and contextual challenges these institutions face. This includes the establishment of targeted funding mechanisms,

robust and enforceable policy frameworks, and the creation of sustainable support structures to promote long-term resilience and continuous improvement.

A key starting point is the development of dedicated funding streams that prioritize resource-limited universities and support the implementation of comprehensive GEPs. These plans should be grounded in thorough gender audits, include mechanisms for continuous monitoring, and be complemented by extensive capacity-building and awareness-raising activities. EU frameworks such as Horizon Europe and Erasmus+ should allocate specific funds for these institutions, working in synergy with cohesion funds such as the ERDF and ESF to support both policy implementation and necessary structural investments—such as childcare facilities, mentoring programs, and gender-sensitivity training for staff.

In addition, regional policy funds could be mobilized to establish Gender Equality Offices (GEOs) at the regional level. These centralized hubs could enable institutions to pool resources and expertise, facilitating access to best practices, tailored training, and monitoring tools—thus compensating for limited internal capacities. Importantly, funding conditions should remain flexible to allow institutions to adapt initiatives to their local contexts, ensuring effectiveness and sustainability.

Beyond financial instruments, policy frameworks must provide clear, measurable, and enforceable guidelines to support the advancement of gender equality in SYR institutions. While existing instruments such as the European Research Area (ERA) policy agenda offer broad objectives, smaller institutions require more detailed operational support. Incentives for compliance—such as preferential access to collaborative projects and additional funding for institutions demonstrating measurable progress—could further encourage engagement. Establishing benchmarking systems with specific targets, such as increased representation of women in senior leadership and STEM fields, would also help align institutional efforts with national and EU-level priorities.

Achieving meaningful progress, however, demands coordinated action across all governance levels. While EU and national policymakers can design funding schemes and frameworks, regional authorities should be encouraged to integrate gender equality goals into Smart Specialisation Strategies, as advocated by Goddard et al. (2013) in *Universities and Smart Specialisation*. This alignment of institutional and regional priorities can create mutually reinforcing outcomes for both universities and their surrounding communities.

Finally, collaboration through regional and international networks can help these institutions overcome isolation, a factor that often amplifies their structural challenges. Engagement with local governments, industries, and academic consortia—such as those supported through the European Universities Initiative—can enable resource-sharing, the development of joint strategies, and access to external expertise.

By addressing these interconnected barriers through targeted, well-coordinated actions, smaller and remote universities can play a vital role in advancing gender equality and shaping a more inclusive and equitable European Higher Education and Research Area.

6. Conclusions

The future of gender equality in smaller and remote universities holds immense transformative potential which cannot be understated. As smaller and remote universities often serve as key pillars of their local communities, their success in fostering gender equality sets a powerful precedent for societal change.

SYR institutions have demonstrated through initiatives like the ATHENA project that meaningful progress can be achieved when systemic barriers are addressed with tailored, context-sensitive strategies. The implementation of Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) emerges as a cornerstone for driving institutional change in smaller and remote universities. GEPs provide a structured framework to identify, address, and monitor gender disparities, ensuring that interventions are not only well-targeted but also sustainable. In conclusion, the ATHENA project has demonstrated that even in resource-constrained environments, significant progress can be made toward gender equality through tailored strategies, capacity building, and collaborative partnerships. By leveraging these approaches, the participating universities have not only addressed systemic barriers within their institutions but also set a precedent for other resource-limited universities seeking to foster inclusivity and equity.

Nevertheless, the road to achieving gender equality in these contexts is not without its challenges. Limited resources, resistance to cultural change, and geographic isolation remain significant hurdles. It is here that sustained policy support becomes crucial to ensure that gender equality remains a central priority. European and national policymakers must prioritize funding mechanisms specifically tailored to resource-constrained institutions, ensuring that they have the financial and technical capacity to implement and sustain their GEPs. Additionally, the promotion of collaborative networks, such as those established under the ATHENA project, provides smaller universities with access to shared resources, expertise, and best practices. These networks also facilitate cross-institutional learning, enabling universities to refine their strategies and address emerging challenges effectively.

Looking to the future, smaller and remote universities are uniquely positioned to act as catalysts for gender equality within the European higher education system. Their adaptability and close ties to local communities allow them to implement innovative solutions that resonate with regional socio-economic contexts. However, to unlock this potential fully, a comprehensive and coordinated approach is required. This includes not only robust institutional frameworks but also sustained policy engagement and community partnerships that ensure gender equality initiatives are embedded at every level.

In conclusion, the transformative power of GEPs lies in their ability to reimagine the role of smaller and remote universities as leaders in promoting inclusivity and equity. By addressing systemic barriers and fostering environments where diverse talent can thrive, these institutions can redefine what it means to be a driver of change in research. The lessons learned from ATHENA and similar initiatives provide a roadmap for the future, demonstrating that even under resource constraints, significant progress is possible when commitment, innovation, and collaboration converge. Through these efforts, smaller and remote universities have the opportunity to not only achieve gender equality within their own walls but also to inspire systemic change across the entire academic landscape, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable Europe.

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