

## Promoting gendered structural change in leadership in higher education: The interaction between formal and informal rules<sup>12</sup>

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**Abstract. Introduction and objectives.** In the higher education and research sector, efforts have been employed in diverse countries to bring about gendered structural change, and most strategies pursue such a goal through the implementation of formal changes in its structures and policies. Leaning on the feminist institutionalism theory, the aim of this article is to discuss the importance of understanding how the formal *and* the informal institutional norms interact between each other in initiatives seeking gender equality in leadership and decision-making in the specific context of higher education institutions. **Methodology.** A qualitative approach has been followed. Interviews with members of the Board of Directors of a higher education and research institution in northern Spain have been conducted and analysed, aiming at identifying the barriers to the access of women to leadership positions and possible measures to overcome them. **Results.** The analysis confirmed the impact caused by the gendered dynamics present at both individual and institutional levels to GE initiatives. While the importance of formal institutional commitments to gender equality has been recognised, the analysis recalls the attention to the fact that informal settings shape the applicability of formal policies, with continuous references to the traditionally unequal distribution of power and attribution of value to women and men. **Discussion and added value.** Although much theoretical knowledge has been produced in the field of gender and institutions, especially concerning the gendered bases of institutions, the field still lacks within-process studies on the aspects influencing the obtained outcomes of developed initiatives pursuing gender equality in institutional leadership. The study developed in this paper allows for replication in different contexts, hence contributing to the refinement of the existing knowledge on the dynamics of change in gender-oriented initiatives.

**Keywords:** gender equality; leadership; structural change; feminist institutionalism

### [es] La promoción del cambio estructural de género en el liderazgo en la educación superior: la interacción de las normas formales e informales

**Resumen. Introducción y objetivos.** En el sector de la educación superior y la investigación, se han realizado esfuerzos en diversos países para lograr un cambio estructural de género, y la mayoría de las estrategias persiguen ese objetivo mediante la implementación de cambios formales en sus estructuras y políticas. El objetivo de este artículo es discutir la importancia de entender cómo las normas formales e informales que constituyen una institución –precisamente en las instituciones de educación superior– interactúan entre sí e impactan los resultados de un proceso de cambio institucional de género, en particular relacionados con las personas en posiciones de liderazgo. **Metodología.** Se ha seguido un enfoque cualitativo. Se han realizado y analizado entrevistas con miembros del consejo de dirección de una institución de educación superior e investigación en el norte de España, identificando los aspectos más relevantes que interactúan a la hora de dar forma y aplicar iniciativas de igualdad de género que provocan un cambio estructural en el ámbito del liderazgo. **Resultados.** El análisis confirmó el impacto causado por las dinámicas de género presentes tanto a nivel individual como institucional a las iniciativas de igualdad de género. Si bien se ha reconocido la importancia de los compromisos institucionales formales con la igualdad de género, el análisis recuerda la atención al hecho de que los entornos informales dan forma a la aplicabilidad de las políticas formales, con referencias continuas a la distribución tradicionalmente desigual del poder y la atribución de valor a mujeres y hombres. **Discusión y valor añadido.** Aunque se han producido muchos conocimientos teóricos en el campo del género y las instituciones, especialmente en lo que respecta a las bases de género de las instituciones, el campo todavía carece de estudios dentro del proceso sobre los aspectos que influyen en los resultados obtenidos de las iniciativas desarrolladas que persiguen la igualdad de género en el liderazgo institucional. El estudio desarrollado en este documento permite la replicación en diferentes contextos, contribuyendo así al perfeccionamiento de los conocimientos existentes sobre la dinámica del cambio en las iniciativas orientadas al género.

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**Palabras clave:** igualdad de género; liderazgo; cambio estructural; institucionalismo feminista.

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## 1. Introduction

While the status of women has improved in the last 50 years and gender equality (GE) has been a standout issue in the political sphere, gender biases in which male domination is a rule persist both individually and institutionally. Even in the most sophisticated social and political systems, GE has not been achieved in any sector (Waylen, 2013, p. 212) – research and education comprised – and “the institutional dominance of particular forms of masculinity has taken us from seeing gender operating only at an individual level, to viewing it as a regime” (Chappell & Waylen, 2013, p. 602).

Although EU countries rank as global leaders in GE, the European Commission (EC) acknowledges that progress is slow and gender gaps persist in all sectors. At the EU level, women represent only 22% of heads of institutions in HEI and 20% in the leadership of boards of research (EC, 2019). In Spain, women occupy only 21% of full-professor positions, while this percentage decreases to 8% when it comes to rectorate positions (Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación y Universidades, 2017).

In response to the global attention received by the GE issue in the last years, the European Union (EU) and national States have been refining their own structures, rules, and standards regarding GE. The Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 presents the commitment of providing the same opportunities for all that share the same aspirations and outlines a set of key actions focused, among others, on gender pay gap, work-life balance, and leadership and decision-making (EC, 2020a). Precisely regarding higher education institutions (HEI), GE has been considered by the EC a cross-cutting factor as well as an eligibility criterion to access financial support for research projects in all areas of knowledge<sup>5</sup>. In the Spanish context, in turn, since 2007 the national regulation for effective equality between women and men obliges the implementation of Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) in all HEIs (Organic Law 3/2007, for the effective Equality between Women and Men).

Despite such efforts, the fact that there are currently no more formal impediments for women to follow academic careers does not exclude that male dominance at senior level, leadership and decision-making positions remains. This may be explained by the gendered structures that underlie our cultural and institutional patterns, since the persistent inequalities between the “female” and the “male” are grounded on a historical mixture of apparently gender-neutral rules (Beckwith, 2005, p. 132-133). It is exactly these “gender-neutral” norms and practices that are the toughest aspects to be unveiled when seeking to promote GE, since they are often “naturalized as part of the *status quo*” of how things work (Waylen, 2013, p. 216).

Thus, grounded on the theoretical framework of Feminist Institutionalism (FI) – the so-called new institutionalist approach that aims at questioning the distribution of power and the institutional dynamics from a gender perspective –, this paper analyses the formal and the informal institutional aspects that perpetuate gender inequalities in HEI leadership through the analysis of a concrete case of a Spanish university.

### 1.1. Gendered institutions – Agents of change?

If gender inequality is not only manifested in individual behaviours but also in institutional culture, structures and processes, understanding how institutions are gendered, and how to tackle the issue institutionally is of crucial importance to achieve GE at all levels. Transforming the unequal gender rules arising from the established institutional system is a challenge for both scholars and practitioners: It means questioning social and power relations that are deeply rooted. It is not simply about criticising the *status quo* of things but creating new forms and opportunities for equally distributing power and rights (Brown & Potts, 2005, p. 284).

In the last few years, scholars from the institutionalist field have drawn a major attention to how institutions are gendered. Vivien Lowndes (2014, p. 687) stresses that “institutional rules are gendered as far as they prescribe (or proscribe) ‘acceptable’ masculine and feminine forms of behaviours for men and women”. Louise Chappell (2006, p. 230) goes in line with this idea and remarks that there is a predetermined “logic of appropri-

<sup>5</sup> For more details, see the revised version (16) of the Horizon 2020 *Work Programme 2018-2020, Science with and for Society* (European Commission, Decision C (2020) 6320), from 17 September 2020. Available from <https://bit.ly/2QNPIaD>

ateness” that “suggests that institutions constrain certain types of behaviour while encouraging others”. More precisely, Chappell (2006, p. 230) explains that:

“It is necessary to have an awareness that 1) everyone in an institution has a sex and performs gender; 2) the experience of individuals in institutions varies by both sex and gender; 3) sex and gender interact with other components of identity – for example, race, ethnicity – that also have implications for models of femininity and masculinity; and 4) institutions have distinctively gendered cultures and are involved in processes of producing and reproducing gender.”

If institutions are “collections of interrelated rules and routines that define appropriate actions in terms of relations between roles and situations” (March & Olsen, 1989, p. 161), gendered institutional foundations also hold the power to reinforce inequalities between women and men through their daily functioning and logics. Nevertheless, what has been argued by scholars in the field is that institutional dynamics can not only reinforce inequalities but might also operate as a possible “two-way path”, being a potential means through which to implement positive change towards GE. It is precisely at this point that the FI theoretical framework is helpful for this analysis: Seeking to provide institutional analysis with a gender lens to transform gender rules, FI enriches the study with a critical and deeper understanding of gender relations and its institutional outcomes. More than that, besides acknowledging the reproduction by institutions of gendered power distributions, FI proposes to reason about how to use institutions themselves as a means by which to seek GE (Mackay et al., 2011, p. 582).

## 1.2. From formal to substantial equality

To start thinking of gendered structural transformation in and through HEI, it is helpful to draw attention to the capacity of institutions to undergo processes of transformation. Although this is not an easy task since institutions tend to stability and continuity of their *status quo*, institutions may hold a potential for change in response to new social demands. To understand such processes of transformation, it is essential to identify the elements involved in them, their strengths, and the possible undermining factors/actors that affect the outcomes of strategies towards GE (Chappell, 2006; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010).

As in any other organisation, HEIs’ structures are formed by a complex set of social rules, composed of formal *and* informal aspects that play a significant role in institutional transformation (Waylen, 2013). Although improvements in formal norms such as the approval of statutes, protocols and legislation on GE, are frequently seen in almost all sectors, experts in the field argue that *formal* transformations do not necessarily represent a *substantial* change in practice. According to Waylen, (2013, p. 216), “reforming formal rules may end officially sanctioned gender bias but will not necessarily overcome all institutionalized forms of male bias as informal rules may undermine formal rule change”. Actions such as increasing the number of women in leadership positions *per se* does not ensure that their leadership styles are taken seriously, nor does passing new laws and policies on work-life balance guarantee that women will no longer fall into the “leaky pipeline” effect that prevents them from evolving in their careers due to socially constructed gender rules (Goulden et al., 2011).

Despite being a challenge, substantial change is not an impossible goal. On the one hand, the so-called “logic of appropriateness” (Chappell, 2006) is not simple to be disrupted because it is deep-rooted in the actors and structures that perpetuate such gendered norms. On the other, “what is considered appropriate can alter over time” (Chappell, 2006, p. 230). Based on that, FI scholars propose to mind both formal and informal institutional rules when seeking to achieve gendered institutional change (Lowndes, 2014), drawing special attention to how the latter are often apparently gender-neutral in order to “uncover the myriad ways in which gender plays out” (Waylen, 2013, p. 216). In other words, it is not only about implementing and evaluating formal changes, but also acknowledging the “unseen” informal rules that play a significant role in institutional dynamics: Those “socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated and enforced outside of officially channels” (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004, p. 727).

## 1.3. Seeking equality in leadership: A comprehensive path

While the number of female students at higher educational levels has increased significantly and even surpassed that of men in many areas, this growth is not proportional when it comes to the progression of women in their careers towards leadership positions (Van Engen et al., 2001). The explicit and implicit expectations and roles assigned to individuals in leadership and decision-making roles reflect the different evaluation of women and men in academic careers. According to O’Connor (2020), such differential evaluation brings impacts at two different levels: Structurally, it sustains the underrepresentation of women in higher positions; culturally, it legitimates practices and values that discriminate and devalue women. Thus, the presence of women in leadership positions is not only lower but also more fragile than that of men; the mere numerical representation of women does not prevent their legitimacy and stability in such functions from being under constant threat, nor does it presuppose that their leadership style and practices are equally valued (Clavero & Galligan, 2021; Power, 2021; O’Connor, 2020).

The complex set of formal and informal aspects creating and reproducing gendered norms at the institutional level in HEIs dictate the distribution of power, disproportionately affecting women in the institutional sphere (Waylen, 2013). In order to tackle this disproportion, measures seeking to achieve GE in institutional leadership shall not look at the structural layers (e.g. explicitly defined career pathways in the institution; number of women in senior positions; adopted work-life balance policies) as punctual and isolated targets. Instead, the way towards substantial and sustainable equality may progress more comprehensively and interrelate with the fight against the institutional and social cultural background that benefits male career progression in detriment to that of women, undervalues the so-called female leadership styles, and “naturally” subordinates women to men, implicitly attributing and reproducing discriminatory gender roles (O’Connor, 2020).

## 2. Case selection and methodology

Current EC Research and Innovation funding programmes such as Horizon 2020 (H2020) and Horizon Europe have included gender as a crosscutting issue to be mainstreamed in all sectors and areas of knowledge. The ‘Science with and for Society’ Work Programme of H2020 draws special attention to GE initiatives that seek to remove barriers to women’s access to scientific careers and decision-making positions, and to integrate gender into research content (EC, 2020b). This is exactly the case with the process of gendered structural change pursued by the University of Deusto (UDEUSTO) under the GEARING-Roles project. Aimed at causing gendered structural transformation and promoting long-term behavioural change through the implementation of a comprehensive GEP, the project focuses not only on the formal rules that constitute institutions (e.g. internal protocols, legislation, etc.) but also on the informal ones (e.g. customs, individuals’ perceptions, traditions, etc.) that affect the daily practices at the institutional level.

Bearing this in mind, this paper addresses the impact of formal and informal rules on processes of change for GE, and their interaction between each other in processes of change, aimed at better understanding the factors that influence the results of initiatives that seek a more egalitarian and inclusive leadership in HEI. The discussion is conducted based on a qualitative analysis of the specific case of UDEUSTO, institution coordinating the GEARING-Roles Work Package (WP) on Leadership and Decision Making. The election of this case is not only interesting because the institution is in charge of the WP on Leadership and Decision Making in the project, but also because the institutional context in which the UDEUSTO’s GEP is designed and implemented in the university is favourable for a complete and multilateral study. Given the Spanish regulatory framework that imposes HEIs to develop equality units and implement GEPs at the institutional level, the context covered by the UDEUSTO’s GEP is broad and comprises all its faculties, departments and areas of specialisation. This allows for a more complex analysis of the dynamics presented in the context of a process of gendered institutional change.

Methodologically, the qualitative process is developed at UDEUSTO in close collaboration with the GEARING-Roles project and comprises a set of semi-structured interviews with members of the top management of the institution: All members of the Board of Directors (including the Rector, Vice-Rectors, Deans and Secretary General) plus HR manager and Chief Economic Officer. In total, sixteen interviews were conducted between July and September 2019. Focusing on leadership and decision-making processes, interviews were focused on: (a) the barriers encountered by women in their access to top management positions; (b) leadership models; and (c) measures to integrate gender in leadership and decision-making.

All interviews followed the same structure. In terms of content, general questions about the personal background and previous experiences related to GE and the inclusion of a gender perspective in academia were made, followed by topic-related questions mostly concerning women in leadership and decision-making, which were adapted to the profile of each participant. The session finished with an open question in which the participant could address any issue that had not been sufficiently covered, and/or identify her/his role in driving institutional change.

## 3. Results

Leadership and decision-making are central elements in the discussion on institutional change towards GE since actors occupying such positions often hold a significant influence in institutional processes and a direct impact in individuals’ lives within the organisation (Humbert et al. 2018). The conjunctions around leadership and decision-making are, therefore, of crucial importance to understand how rules and expectations regarding these roles influence/are influenced by gender.

### *Barriers to the access to leadership positions*

Initially, bringing to light the perceptions of members of the top management of the university on the reasons behind the unequal distribution of leadership roles by gender, interviewees were asked about the potential

barriers or challenges faced by women in accessing these positions. A first group of participants declared that “women have more difficulties than men in accessing positions of leadership in society everywhere”. Others – generally male – either affirmed a non-understanding of “where the gap is” or stated that women “do have equal opportunities as men” since “the university seeks the profiles that better fulfil its purposes without taking gender into account”.

Taking the discussion further, **work-life balance** issues were considered by a large fraction of participants as a barrier to the access of women to leadership roles. The workload and time commitment of actors in such roles began to arise in the answers as aspects that clash with family roles and informal codes that are socially attributed to women. Among the mentioned issues, participants mostly pointed out motherhood and domestic responsibilities as the main aspects hindering women from assuming leadership positions, given the difficulties of conciliating personal roles with the huge charge of professional commitment required for that.

“At the end, the difficulty is the role that we assume (...) it is an educational matter, a social issue, a cultural issue (...) so, where a person arrives professionally depends to a large – really large – extent, of his/her [personal] life. Many women do not assume other responsibilities because it implies leaving the care of certain things that anyone else can assume, that is, that there will be no one assuming it.”

The mentioned quote exposes the tension between demands from work and family and how it is disproportionately reflected in women. The work-life balance issue was widely mentioned during interviews as a matter related to the internalised construction of femininity: Connected to family and domestic care. When facing a work system based on the traditional masculine experience (exempt from social care requirements and fully available for work), female candidates to leadership positions who hold family responsibilities have their decisions to assume such functions strongly affected by what is socially expected from them.

“(...) if I know you are asking a 200% dedication to the rector or dean team, that you are asking them for a lot more dedication, I mean not only commitment but time commitment (...) I know you will ask me to be here in the morning, afternoon and evening; you will ask me for a demand that, as a woman and mother, I am not sure I want to give. Equality would be that the situation is exactly the same regardless of whether you are a woman, a man, a mother or a non-mother, it does not affect you.”

All this seems to lead us to the perception that women who surpass the “glass ceiling” and succeed in growing in the academic career are women who either do not hold caring responsibilities or have already overcome them. The same systematic, however, does not happen when applied to men, as reflected in the following statement:

“Wow, what a coincidence that when you look at a team you see: In teams in which there are women, one has no children, the other has older children... Not all of them are like that, but they tend to be a profile of women with all familiar commitments overcome, no? It seems reasonable to me. I think it is reasonable, but the same is not that foreseeable to men.”

Another point raised in the interviews as a hindrance to women’s access to leadership positions was the **institutional culture**. The incidence of institutional “culture” and “tradition” in the processes that lead professionals up to the highest institutional strata was highlighted a factor that can reproduce discriminatory contexts, especially with regard to the tendency institutions hold towards “inertia”, which often maintains the masculinisation of higher positions of authority.

“The inequality itself comes from other sources (...) there are attitudes, habits, ways of thinking, old habits, they are there (...) We could have a female rector tomorrow, the regulation does not prevent it, but if we do not have a female rector, it is not because of the rules. Apart from not being a Jesuit (...) inertia. It has been a long time, many lifetimes, many generations of differentiated [gender] roles.”

“You read the norms and it is not like that [differentiated roles], but that is in our culture, I do not know if the people imagine a non-Jesuit dean (...)”

All these factors cannot be disconnected from the third point claimed by some respondents: The traditionally validated **masculine leadership model** that often links men to power and reproduces the feminine logics of care and sensitivity. During the interviews, an initial group of respondents stated that the differences between the female and male styles can be complementary in leadership and that there are some “common principles” shared by both. Others, although still not necessarily connecting it to discriminatory frameworks, manifested a clearer recognition of the “female leadership style” as empathetic, careful, emotional, negotiable and comprehensive, while describing the male as task-oriented, dynamic and assertive.

“I think that the way of leading is different (...) We have different sensitivities, we are different structures, including psychological; it seems to me that we complement each other, both views can be very complementary (...) I

think that each one contributes from their personalities, abilities, characteristics, we offer different ways to really enrich the service we provide at different levels of the university.”

“I do see the female leadership style as different from the male. For a long time, the recognised leadership style was one that imitated the male profiles. (...) And I think that sometimes leadership styles are too masculine, even when exercised by women (...) The most outstanding part of men tends to be more tasks, more directness, more... and that of women tends to be, I think, more consensus, like general values, more consensus, more about the emotional part.”

An interesting point in the analysis carried out at UDEUSTO concerns the relationship – closer than normal – between the institutional culture and the leadership model. Some respondents recalled that, although the institution’s religious culture and values have traditionally led to male leaders at UDEUSTO, its inherent Ignatian foundation supports a leadership model based on listening, dialogue and caring for people – all of which tend to be linked to the feminine idea of leading. Some respondents indicated that such traits seem to be considered as essential – and even preponderant – at the leadership style of the institution, stereotypically “more feminine” and “inclusive”, with an “approach to the person”, “reflection”, and “negotiation”.

“I think that Jesuits differ in that (...) the emotionality part has so far been considered more of a weakness than a strength. I think that many Jesuits are different in that, and they value it. That means that in the face of this masculinised leadership style, they have a more feminine part (...) I think that in general they work a lot on listening, and I associate that with more feminine values.”

While the idea that the so-called female and male styles can be complementary and form a richer whole may seem a reasonable logic from an ideally diverse and inclusive point of view, when analysing the discourses, it is possible to identify the presence of gender rules that do not actually promote diversity, but rather perpetuate the unequal and non-inclusive higher institutional strata. That is to say, although value could be given to characteristics such as care and sensitivity, those are hardly ever sought for a leadership profile by the interviewees (Timmers et al., 2010). Even in an institution where, for ideological reasons, male leaders may hold “female characteristics”, women are not exempt from suffering discrimination resulting from cultural, social and structural factors (O’Connor, 2020).

In fact, further interviewees emphasised the distance many women feel towards leadership roles, in other words, the way they see and experience such positions as something alien to them. Here, apparently gender-neutral rules and social attributions that often shape attitudes in unperceived manners have an important role; when the so-called “feminine” is automatically excluded from the idea of leadership, women are disproportionately led to whip up doubts and insecurities related to assuming such positions.

“I have seen women dismissing offers (...) because they do not see themselves, in many cases, with strength or the desire to confront specific responsibilities, because they do not see themselves in particular responsibilities, because they do not see themselves in certain roles... I am like that myself (...) you need to have a personal stability, psychological, emotional, and then you need a baggage, a family support, in your couple (...)”

Many factors play a role for this dynamic to happen: The underrepresentation of women in senior positions and the institutional pressure for more female representation often present for the mere compliance with formal requirements, combined with the actual lack of recognition and validation of women occupying such functions, result in the so-called “tokenism effect” (Zimmer, Lynn, 1988). As Power argues, “successful female leaders may be compared unfavourably with their male counterparts or, as ‘unicorns’, rare, unusual and exceptional individuals” (Power, 2021, p. 145). In this context, women implicated in the senior institutional strata tend not only to see themselves as inferior to their male counterparts for no objective reasons, but also as used as “tokens”, symbols of an unreal equality.

“It is hard for me to verbalise that I am [she mentions her position]. For me, I am a teaching and research staff; a teacher (...) I see it as a service (...) but with restraint and difficulty (...) when they proposed it to me, apart from the shock (...) ‘I cannot, I cannot with it, I will not be able to do so’ (...) ‘I will not be able; it is way beyond me’, all those things. That is what I felt.”

“I do not say it as a false modesty, I have said it many times, it does not make sense, I do not see myself as something really... I do not see it as that relevant [her position] (...) I do not see it, not at all, and I am serious.”

Overall, it can be said that while there are no formal barriers for women to access the same opportunities as their male colleagues, the formal sphere does not seem to be sufficient to ensure that this occurs substantially. Structural obstacles, connected to the cultural and unperceived barriers that disproportionately prevent women from accessing senior positions, form the so-called “glass ceiling”, which connects to the internalisation of the ‘feminine-caring’ and ‘masculine-power’ dynamics (Castaño et al., 2017; Timmers et al., 2010).

*Measures for the inclusion of women in leadership and decision-making*

After reasoning on the barriers set out above, respondents were asked about their opinions on possible measures to include women in leadership and decision-making. A general discourse pointed to the fact that the institution has undergone changes in favour of equal opportunities and female leadership in recent years, including the election of women to dean positions at some of its faculties. In turn, when referring to governing bodies with a higher status such as the Board of Directors and the Rectoral Team, answers stressed that the representation of women and men is far from parity. Still, respondents mentioned the efforts that have been made to progress in terms of GE at higher levels and marked that the gender discrepancies “have now been made more explicit” due to the attention drawn GE in the last few years.

Despite this initial positive approach, as responses deepened into specific measures to promote GE in leadership, different responses emerged, especially with regard to quotas for female leaders. Precisely, a considerable fraction of respondents presented a reaction of rejection and resistance towards them. Declarations revolved around “I do not share the idea at all”, “I do not like them” and “I don’t really agree”. The justifications for such a rejection ranged from the risk that the women benefited from quotas would suffer from the “tokenism effect” to other arguments related to the idea of meritocracy: “I would not like to be a quota (...) I want the selection criteria to be my capacity (...) I do not want to be here because I am a woman, but because I am good (...)”.

Moreover, some participants recalled the possibility that quotas could pose problems in the future, in the sense that they could cause a “reverse situation”, especially in some specific sectors – that is, causing men to become underrepresented in some fields where quota systems are implemented. To all this is added the assumption that quotas are unnecessary either because GE will come as part of a regular social evolutionary process or through other initiatives, such as mandatory parental leave.

“I believe that it is a natural process that comes with time. I think that comes more naturally (...) It is clear: If there are more and more women as heads of department, vice deans or such, they are the ones that will later face the responsibility of being male or female deans or whatever, this would be natural.”

“I am more in favour of natural processes; I mean, I think it is going to come anyway, as long as men take over the responsibility for more daily tasks. (...) I think that inasmuch as there is more parity in daily life, the woman is going to reach everything else. Partly, I think in the same way that if a man takes parental leave – obliged, not optional but as an obligation – equality will arrive.”

Further discourses, on the other hand, while still doubtful in their opinions about quotas, argue that they may be a necessary weapon – and perhaps the best at this time – against this gender injustice situation in management bodies. Such doubts interspersed with the desire for improvements in GE at higher institutional levels.

“I do not share at all the idea of quotas. It enrages me so much when someone calls me like ‘hey, we are thinking about someone, can you recommend us a woman for...’ (...) The other thing is that you say, ‘okay, maybe she would have never achieved it otherwise, so it is better to let some women get in and stand up’, if that is the strategy (...) if it is well used, for me it would not seem something bad, but well used, in equal conditions from the point of view of power.”

“As a matter of principle, I do not like them, however, I recognise that, if reality is stubbornly what it is, we will have to do something for equality to be effective (...) it is logic that the criterion has to be the worth, the performance, but it is true that it places you in front of your own contradiction. If there is no brake and the result is always this one... are men cleverer? Obviously, the answer is no. If you have more women colleagues than men colleagues, why...? Therefore, I am not going to say beforehand that the quote system repels me, but it is hard for me to assume it, I would be ready to agree that the university says, ‘the fifty percent of your managing board has to be composed of women’. It is true that it is not only professional competence, but it is also another way to look at it.”

Although not all female participants were adherent to quotas, the most favourable opinions regarding the measure came from women. Their declarations illustrated the continued need to act in order to redress institutional inertia and respond to the willingness and potential of women to take on senior roles. While some respondents recalled the importance of raising awareness on the need for a gender-equal distribution and, if necessary, through number-related measures such as quotas, others affirmed that although quotas initiatives are often a controversial topic, they are needed at this time given the unequal gender reality of higher institutional contexts.

“In the end, the issue about quotas is very important. I know that it sounds awful to many men, but because it forces you, even if you do not want to. I understand that there are great and super capable men, but also women (...) when the scale is so unbalanced from the baseline, I think this [quotas] is a quick way (...)”

In addition to quotas, another measure present in the respondents’ discourses was that of mentoring and counselling of women. The greater adherence of this type of initiatives in relation to the previous one was clearly demonstrated in the interviews: Mentoring and counselling were identified as potential means to work

on what has been identified as “women’s internal barriers” with regard to leadership roles. The discussion brought to light important aspects regarding these so-called internal barriers, such as the fact that they might emerge from the social care attributions that are placed on women. Precisely, respondents marked that mentoring and counselling can empower women to disrupt the existing breakdown between the feminine and the principle of power and help to promote work-life balance.

“Especially for issues as the ones I mentioned before, to relieve responsibility from the woman who, when deciding whether to accept a position, is also taking into account non-professional questions, to accompany her in that process (...) in this country, families are sustained by women and grandparents. If not, people would have fewer children. That is, I believe that this is poorly distributed, the reconciliation.”

“I like that one more (...) I like much more to give strength to a woman and tell her: ‘You can do it’, ‘this is your path’.”

“It can be good and create awareness of what professional life is like and what home, familiar, social life are like... Of how to make life outside the university to influence or not [the professional sphere].”

Moving away from the idea of tackling inequalities through working to fix women individually, some interviews have brought to light the need for a more comprehensive and structural change in institutional and social systematics to achieve a more gender-equal reality. The need to challenge the internalised “family schemes” and the socially attributed gender roles on the whole is taken further in the discussion when respondents pose questions such as why women are underrepresented in the highest institutional strata, despite constituting the majority of middle management at the university.

“What is happening? In the middle management of the university, which is composed mainly of women, are there not female leaders that can progress in their positions? It is strange (...) What is happening to these female leaders who do not have the conditions that allow them to assume these positions effectively? Maybe the problem lies at the bottom: How are their family schemes? I think something should be done there, because honestly we are losing leadership of great value for the university.”

Progressing in the same line, other discourses stressed the need for a structural change that comes both from the bottom up and top down. Respondents stated that the institution’s management model should be reformed in order to allow the balance between personal and professional life, especially with regard to the long and inflexible working schedules that hinder the inclusion of women with family responsibilities in leadership roles.

“The work hours (...) how everything is prolonged throughout the day. It is materially impossible to take on part-time caregiving responsibilities because the system is not assembled (...) first the system is assembled and then you have ‘cuts’ that cannot be adapted to the system, maybe it should be done the other way around (...) first you consider conciliation, and then you build the system (...) The biggest problem for me is the organisation and governance model of the institutions (...) all activities related to the highest management of the university are scheduled during the afternoon, so it is impossible. How can it be changed? I repeat, doing it the other way around, it does not seem so difficult to me.”

“Of course, if the institution allows you to reconcile, it allows you certain things, it is giving you the possibility of assuming other responsibilities. I always say, if an institution is led by a woman, it is probable that the schedule starts to be different (...) You only need to see all the great companies led by women; the first thing they have done was change the schedule.”

Further, some demonstrations stressed that the discrepancies between women and men in leadership are not likely to be reversed by the mere formal appointment of women in election processes for leadership positions, but rather that a more comprehensive diagnosis of reality is needed to transform such processes into equal and inclusive opportunities.

“I mean, I believe it is much easier to have men running and saying yes than women doing so. Therefore, that is the difficult point, to reverse that, reverse what we have to do. I think women are not asked ‘why not’; what do you think that conditions women to say ‘no’ when they are offered a management position? (...) And even if it is tried to place female candidates, there is no attempt to change things so that they say ‘yes’. That is the problem we may have.”

The quotes above represent the often-unnoticed male dominance that still controls “the rules of the game” when it comes to career progression at higher career levels in HEI – and not only. Thus, although the practical obstacles faced by women when trying to balance work and personal life play a role in the maintenance of the unequal reality, those are only a fraction of what forms the social barriers hindering their access to the high institutional strata. Work-life balance, associated with institutional culture and socially attributed gender roles



are, in fact, interconnected between each other, forming the symbolic wall that maintains the traditional order and connects men to production and power, and women to care and submission.

#### 4. Revisiting theory

As with other institutional spheres, the leadership and decision-making framework is structured by gendered dynamics since “the power relations that sustain political processes are produced and reproduced through gender” (Mackay et al., 2010, p. 583). The analysis carried out has confirmed the presence of these gendered dynamics in the case of a higher education and research institution at both individual and institutional levels.

The analysed discourses exposed the existing connection between all the elements that hinder the access of women to high institutional strata, thus confirming the previously discussed interrelation between the formal and informal factors that play a gendered role in the context of institutional leadership. Although three main “categories” of hindering factors could be identified in the interviews – namely work-life balance, institutional culture, and masculinised leadership model – their bases have shown to be mixed in an often-unperceived manner, leading to a common discussion: The historically unequal distribution of power at all institutional and social levels (Waylen, 2013).

Precisely regarding work-life balance issues, which affect women disproportionately as domestic and care tasks are mainly delivered by them, the majority of female interviewees who claimed to have projected themselves into leadership roles made it clear that they anticipated negative implications for their personal lives before deciding to assume higher positions, such as relationship issues and insufficient time for family. This is an issue widely mentioned in the literature on women and leadership from the most different backgrounds (Lutter & Schröder, 2019; Ezzedeen et al., 2015; Killeen et al., 2006).

While some scholars link it to a more individual approach, for instance making a point to negotiation theory (McGrath, 1984) – that is, claiming that work-life balance represents an individual issue of confrontation between both partners when deciding how to distribute responsibilities among them –, others recall the need for a more comprehensive view. The intra-household bargaining literature captured the negotiations occurring between members of a household unit and concluded that the relative capacity of each party to make decisions about domestic responsibilities is often influenced by extra-household norms, such as institutional or social support (Mason and Smith, 2003).

Deepening the discussion, if currently women still have more domestic and familiar responsibilities than men (Holt and Lewis, 2011; Moreno-Colom, 2015), this cannot be dissociated from “their lesser access to power and authority in society” (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 49). These gendered personal roles have been linked by primary literature with the prevention of women from expressing their leadership aspirations (Clavero & Galligan, 2021; Kossek & Lautsch, 2012).

Although some may still indicate that feelings such as inferiority or “tokenism”, often manifested by women regarding their experiences in leadership, do not represent contemporary reality – again attributing them to the responsibility of women themselves about how they experience the professional world – the reality shows a significant discrepancy between career paths and the efforts made by men and those employed by women to achieve the same senior status (O’Connor, 2020). Not surprisingly, women demonstrated to be the ones who put more emphasis on the difficulty of balancing work and personal life and take it as a definitive element when thinking of assuming a management position.

The logic described above allows us to perceive the direct connection existing between issues that could be initially identified as individual (e.g. negotiations between partners to deal with domestic and family responsibilities, and women’s individual experiences and feelings towards the professional world) with cultural, social and institutional norms that are also playing a crucial role in the organisation of the gender roles, thus in how women are valued and recognised in leadership and decision-making contexts (Power, 2021; O’Connor, 2020).

This connection can be easily verified in the interviews through the analysis of the discussion on the specific measures to pursue GE. Although some respondents stated that initiatives such as quotas could be useful as a starting point for women to “stand up” at higher institutional spheres, all interviewees raised, at some point, a concern that measures of such a nature (i.e. formal compromises through regulations, policies, etc.) would not *per se* solve inequalities. Indeed, a panoramic observation of the reasons given for resistance to quotas shows that they are not related to a rejection of a greater objective representation of women in decision-making bodies, but to the fear that this representation will not provide them with substantial equality in practice (e.g. through the non-validation of their way of leading and of their value in such positions).

The same rationale applies to GE measures that are more accepted such as mentoring and counselling. The general reasons exposed by interviewees to be in favour of these initiatives lie in the fact that they would be powerful in encouraging women to break the existing gap between the feminine and power, and in assisting women to deal with “their internal barriers” concerning leadership. What shall be identified in these discourses, however, is the often-existing confusion between what relates to individual characteristics, hence personal

issues, and what is connected to a more rooted and unnoticed systematic or unequal distribution of power and value (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004).

On the one hand, it is seen that formal institutional commitments, such as filling certain percentages of leadership positions with women and promoting mentoring and counselling for female professionals can be of a great value and boost the inclusion of women in high institutional strata (Mun & Brinton, 2015). On the other hand, since the main obstacles currently faced by women in this context are not of a formal nature but backed on the socially and culturally attributed gender roles, measures to pursue substantial GE institutionally shall be combined with rethinking the gendered institutional logics that attribute value to what is considered female and male and distribute power (Timmers et al., 2010; Manfredi, 2017; Fritz & Van Knippenberg, 2017).

## 5. Conclusions

The analysis presented in this paper can only represent a work in progress, as the knowledge developed so far on the interaction between the formal and informal institutional rules in concrete and ongoing processes of gendered institutional change is limited. The purpose of this paper has been to observe the actuation of these rules in a concrete and ongoing process of gendered institutional change, that is, the implementation of GE actions at a Spanish university, precisely in the context of leadership and decision-making.

The application of the feminist institutionalism theory to the analysis of the interviews conducted with leaders of the studied institution confirmed the impact caused by the gendered dynamics present at both individual and institutional levels to GE initiatives. While the importance of formal institutional commitments to GE have been recognised, the analysis recalls the attention to the fact that informal settings shape the applicability of formal policies, with continuous references to the traditionally unequal distribution of power and attribution of value to women and men.

The literature in the field confirms that those informal elements play a huge role in the success or failure of formal measures seeking GE. Formal rules regarding leadership are even more affected by informal norms, as the access to those positions is often characterised by personal wills of the people in charge of the appointments – hence depending on confidence, closeness in traits/behaviours – and the permanence in high institutional strata involves the balance of numerous factors that disproportionately affect women. Having this in mind, a question to be posed is: What does it really mean to include women in leadership and decision-making?

If comprehensive measures are needed to englobe all formal *and* informal elements impacting the outcomes of processes of gendered institutional transformation, then structural change refers to go beyond the idea of punctual actions that tackle isolated spheres and actors. In addition to firming commitments to GE and developing a formal institutional structure that treats women and men equally, the achievement of substantial equality requires institutions to rethink their own logics, values and informal practice. In practice, it depends on multiple-focus strategies for change that include the creation of an institutional environment that allows for GE to advance and the redefinition of an ideal leadership style that is more open and collaborative not only towards women, but that also opens space for men to develop their own varied styles and voices (Power, 2021; Fritz & Van Knippenberg, 2017).

In this path, top leaders play a central role in effecting GE at the organisational level, both through their representativeness and power to shape institutional cultures and practices (Clavero & Galligan, 2021; Humbert et al., 2018; Schein, 2010; Kelan, 2018). As argued by Power, “leadership”, “strategy” and “change” are intertwined and represent the core of institutional transformation, especially because “leadership can reside in the follower and not just in the leader” (Power, 2021, p. 147), so that leading for change does not represent a final role, but a process that activates a chain of changes. In this relationship between leader and follower, none play a minor role; both must be active for the dynamics of negotiation, reframing and reallocation of power to run. Summing up, the way towards GE in leadership in HEIs requires a mixture of bottom-up and top-down initiatives that look at the institutional scenario with a complex lens, addressing the gendered institutional systematics in all its elements and without underestimating the often-unnoticed informal norms that support logics and practices from their very foundations.

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