

From Compliance to Institutional Transformation: How Gender Equality Legislation Reshapes Universities, Educational Management, and Academic Careers Across Countries

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Abstract. Gender equality legislation has become an important factor in the transformation of universities and education systems. In different countries, legal frameworks require higher education institutions to introduce anti-discrimination procedures, gender equality plans, transparent recruitment and promotion policies, equal pay monitoring, prevention of sexual harassment, inclusive curricula, and accountability mechanisms. These requirements influence universities not only as employers but also as educational institutions responsible for teaching, research, student protection, leadership development, and social responsibility. The objective of this article is to analyse the impact of gender equality legislation on universities and education in different countries, with particular attention to educational management, institutional governance, academic careers, teaching practices, student experience, and university accountability. The study applies a qualitative comparative methodology based on document analysis, literature review, and analytical modelling. The article uses peer-reviewed studies indexed in Scopus and Web of Science, as well as verified institutional sources from the European Commission, European Institute for Gender Equality, UNESCO, U.S. Department of Education, Advance HE, Office for Students, and the Australian Workplace Gender Equality Agency. The comparison covers the European Union, United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Spain, and quota-oriented policy contexts. The results show that gender equality legislation affects universities through several institutional mechanisms: compliance systems, equality units, Gender Equality Plans, reporting obligations, anti-discrimination procedures, recruitment and promotion reforms, gender-sensitive curricula, student protection policies, and monitoring systems. The article demonstrates that legal frameworks can strengthen transparency, accountability, academic career fairness, and inclusive education. However, implementation risks remain, including symbolic compliance, administrative burden, weak monitoring, resistance to change, and limited integration of gender equality into everyday educational management. Gender equality legislation should be understood not only as a legal requirement but also as a tool of institutional transformation and educational quality improvement. Future research should compare measurable outcomes of different legal models, examine intersectional inequalities, assess student experiences, and evaluate the long-term impact of gender equality plans on academic careers and university leadership.

Keywords: gender equality legislation; higher education; universities; educational management; gender equality plans; Title IX; public sector equality duty; academic careers; university leadership; inclusive education; student protection; institutional transformation.

JEL Classification: I23; I24; I28; J16; J78; K38.

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Introduction. Gender equality legislation has become a major driver of institutional change in universities and education systems. In many countries, higher education institutions are no longer expected only to declare equality as a value. They are required to demonstrate compliance through gender equality plans, anti-discrimination procedures, transparent recruitment and promotion systems, equal pay reporting, prevention of sexual harassment, gender-sensitive curricula, and accountability mechanisms.

This shift is especially important for universities because they are both employers and educational institutions. They shape academic careers, distribute research resources, design curricula, educate future professionals, and reproduce or challenge social inequalities. As Benschop and Brouns (2003) argue, universities are not neutral organizations; they are institutional spaces where gender norms are embedded in everyday academic practices. Therefore, gender equality legislation affects universities not only through formal legal obligations but also through management systems, academic culture, leadership structures, teaching content, research priorities, and student support.

The legal landscape differs across countries. In the European Union, gender equality has become strongly connected with research funding and institutional eligibility. Under Horizon Europe, public bodies, research organizations, and higher education institutions from EU Member States and associated countries must have a Gender Equality Plan or equivalent strategy to be eligible for funding, and recommended areas include work-life balance, leadership, recruitment and career progression, gender in research and teaching, and measures against gender-based violence, including sexual harassment. In the United States, Title IX prohibits sex-based discrimination in education programs and activities receiving federal financial assistance. In the United Kingdom, the Equality Act 2010 and the Public Sector Equality Duty require higher education institutions to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations. In Australia, the Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012 created the Workplace Gender Equality Agency and requires relevant employers, including registered higher education providers that are employers, to report gender equality data. In Spain, Organic Law 3/2007 introduced gender equality as a principle for public action and made equality plans compulsory for institutions and companies with more than 50 employees.

At the same time, statistical evidence shows that legal progress has not eliminated inequality. The European Commission's *She Figures 2024* remains the flagship source for monitoring gender equality in research and innovation across Europe. Recent summaries of *She Figures 2024* report that women represent only about 34% of EU researchers, only 22% of ICT doctoral graduates, and only 9% of inventors, while 98% of EU publications lack a gender perspective. UNESCO's 2025 Gender Report also emphasizes

that although women constitute a large share of the teaching workforce globally, a glass ceiling continues to restrict women's access to leadership positions in education.

This article examines how gender equality legislation influences universities and education in different countries. The focus is placed on educational management, institutional governance, academic careers, teaching, research, student protection, and accountability.

Literature Review. The literature on gender equality in higher education shows that legislation can create strong external pressure for change, but its effectiveness depends on institutional implementation. Early organizational studies demonstrated that gender inequality in universities is not only a question of individual choice or merit. Benschop and Brouns (2003) showed that academic organizations reproduce gender through informal norms, expectations, career models, and leadership practices. Their study remains important because it explains why formal equality rules may have limited effects if universities do not change internal cultures and decision-making routines.

Timmers, Willemsen, and Tijdens (2010) examined gender diversity policies in all 14 universities in the Netherlands and identified 19 policy measures implemented between 2000 and 2007. Their findings are particularly relevant for educational management because they show that universities adopt different combinations of measures, and that the quantity of policies alone does not guarantee equal outcomes. This supports the argument that gender equality legislation should be translated into coherent institutional strategies rather than isolated initiatives.

Research on structural change further develops this idea. Kalpazidou Schmidt and Cacace (2019) proposed a dynamic framework for activating gender equality transformation in research organizations, emphasizing that institutional change requires attention to organizational context, enabling factors, resistance, and monitoring. Caprile (2022) similarly argues that universities are large, hierarchical organizations with deeply embedded gendered values and practices, and that gender equality policies require structural rather than symbolic change.

A substantial body of peer-reviewed literature evaluates the Athena SWAN model, which has influenced gender equality policy in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia, and other countries. Ovseiko et al. (2017) found that Athena SWAN encourages and recognizes institutional commitment to advancing women's careers in higher education and research, particularly in representation, progression, career milestones, and working environment. Caffrey et al. (2016) showed that gender equity programs such as Athena SWAN can support institutional change but may also be constrained by organizational context, implementation quality, and unintended consequences. Schmidt et al. (2020) analysed departmental Athena SWAN Silver Action Plans and demonstrated that such schemes can structure

equality work, although the quality of action planning and institutional commitment remains decisive. Xiao et al. (2020) examined the relationship between Athena SWAN awards and gender diversity in leadership and senior academic positions in the United Kingdom.

The literature also discusses gender quotas and mandatory representation tools. Park (2020) studied the impact of gender quotas on women academics in higher education and analysed whether quotas increase women's representation in faculty positions. This line of research is important because some countries rely mainly on anti-discrimination law and institutional plans, while others use stronger numerical requirements or representation targets.

Another important research direction concerns gender equality in teaching and curricula. Torrico (2023) notes that Spanish universities are legally required to introduce gender equality into teaching, but implementation may generate different institutional responses, ranging from meaningful feminist pedagogical innovation to superficial compliance. Condrón et al. (2023) argue that higher education institutions can promote gender equality not only through staff policies but also by integrating equality training into students' academic experience. This expands the understanding of legislation from employment equality to educational transformation.

Recent systematic and comparative studies also show that gender gaps remain persistent in university leadership. Meza-Mejia et al. (2023) report that only 18% of university rectors were women in nine Latin American countries and only 15% were women in 48 European countries, according to cited UNESCO IESALC and Times Higher Education data. Crimmins (2022) highlights the need for critical perspectives on gender equality policies, noting that policy existence does not automatically create equality for staff in international higher education.

Overall, the literature suggests that gender equality legislation affects universities through five main channels: compliance and accountability, organizational governance, academic career progression, teaching and curriculum, and student safety. However, research also shows that legal rules may produce symbolic compliance if not supported by resources, leadership commitment, data systems, and cultural change.

Aims. The aim of this article is to analyse the impact of gender equality legislation on universities and education in different countries, with particular attention to educational management, institutional governance, academic careers, teaching, research, and student protection.

The objectives of the article are:

1. To systematize the main legal and policy instruments regulating gender equality in higher education across selected countries.
2. To identify the mechanisms through which legislation affects university governance and educational management.

3. To compare the impact of gender equality legislation in the European Union, United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Spain, and selected Asian contexts.
4. To examine statistical evidence on gender inequality in academia and education.
5. To develop a conceptual model explaining how gender equality legislation is transformed into institutional change.
6. To identify implementation risks, including symbolic compliance, administrative burden, resistance, and weak monitoring.
7. To propose practical recommendations for universities and educational managers.

Methodology. The study applies a qualitative comparative methodology based on document analysis, literature review, and analytical modelling. The article uses peer-reviewed academic literature on gender equality in higher education and research, including studies published in journals indexed in major international databases such as Scopus and Web of Science. The literature review focuses on institutional change, gender equality plans, Athena SWAN, gender quotas, academic career progression, leadership, teaching innovation, and equality training.

The empirical part is based on verified international sources, including the European Commission, European Institute for Gender Equality, UNESCO, the U.S. Department of Education, the UK higher education equality framework, the Australian Workplace Gender Equality Agency, and national gender equality policy documents. Statistical evidence is used to identify persistent gaps in researchers' representation, doctoral fields, leadership, invention, and gender-sensitive research content.

The country comparison includes six regulatory models:

1. European Union: funding-linked Gender Equality Plans under Horizon Europe.
2. United States: anti-discrimination and student protection through Title IX.
3. United Kingdom: equality duty and institutional accountability under the Equality Act 2010.
4. Australia: employer reporting and gender equality compliance under the Workplace Gender Equality Act.
5. Spain: legally required equality plans and integration of gender equality into universities.
6. South Korea and quota-oriented contexts: representation-based policy instruments in academic careers.

The article develops a conceptual model showing how gender equality legislation influences universities through legal obligation, institutional translation, managerial implementation, educational outcomes, and accountability feedback.

Results. Gender equality legislation affects universities differently depending on the legal system. Some countries rely on anti-discrimination

law, others on public equality duties, mandatory reporting, gender equality plans, funding eligibility, or quotas. Table 1 compares selected countries and regulatory models.

Table 1. Gender equality legislation and university-level implications across selected countries

Country or region	Main legal or policy instrument	Direct implication for universities	Main educational-management effect
European Union	Horizon Europe Gender Equality Plan requirement	Public bodies, research organizations, and higher education institutions must have GEPs to access funding	Links equality planning with research governance and funding eligibility
United States	Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972	Prohibits sex-based discrimination in federally funded education programs and activities	Strengthens student protection, complaint procedures, and institutional compliance systems
United Kingdom	Equality Act 2010 and Public Sector Equality Duty	HEIs must eliminate discrimination, advance equality, and foster good relations	Requires equality impact thinking in governance, employment, student services, and policies
Australia	Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012	Registered higher education providers that are employers are covered by reporting obligations	Encourages gender pay, workforce, leadership, and employment data reporting
Spain	Organic Law 3/2007 and equality-plan obligations	Gender equality becomes a principle of public action; equality plans are compulsory for larger institutions	Supports equality units, equality plans, and gender mainstreaming in university management
South Korea and quota-oriented systems	Gender quotas and representation policies	Measures may target women's representation in faculty and academic positions	Directly addresses numerical underrepresentation but requires cultural and structural support

Source: developed by the author based on EIGE, U.S. Department of Education, Advance HE, Office for Students, WGEA, and peer-reviewed research by Park (2020).

Table 1 shows that gender equality legislation influences universities through different regulatory logics. The EU model is strongly connected with access to research funding. The U.S. model is centred on anti-discrimination and student protection. The UK model emphasizes public-sector equality obligations. The Australian model relies heavily on workforce reporting. Spain combines legal equality principles with institutional equality plans. Quota-oriented systems directly target representation.

These differences matter for educational management. When equality is linked to funding, universities are more likely to formalize equality plans and monitoring systems. When equality is linked to anti-discrimination law, universities develop complaint procedures and compliance offices. When equality is linked to reporting, universities invest in data systems. When equality is linked to quotas, universities focus on representation indicators.

Statistical evidence of persistent inequality. Legislation has increased institutional attention to equality, but statistical evidence shows that inequality remains visible in academic careers, leadership, STEM fields, and research content.

Table 2. Selected statistical indicators of gender inequality in universities and research

Indicator	Reported evidence	Interpretation for universities
Women among EU researchers	Approximately 34%	Women remain underrepresented in research careers
Women among ICT doctoral graduates in Europe	Approximately 22%	STEM and ICT pipelines remain strongly gendered
Women among inventors in Europe	Approximately 9%	Gender inequality extends from education to innovation and patents
EU publications lacking a gender perspective	Approximately 98%	Gender dimension is weakly integrated into research content
Women rectors in nine Latin American countries	Approximately 18%	Women remain underrepresented in top university leadership
Women rectors in 48 European countries	Approximately 15%	Leadership inequality persists even in highly regulated systems

Source: compiled by the author based on European Commission *She Figures 2024* summaries, UNESCO-related higher education leadership evidence, and Meza-Mejia et al. (2023).

The data in Table 2 show that gender equality legislation has not eliminated structural inequalities. Women’s participation may be stronger at student or early-career stages, but gaps increase in senior academic positions, leadership, research recognition, and innovation. This supports the “leaky pipeline” argument in higher education management: formal access to education does not automatically lead to equal academic careers.

Mechanisms of legislative impact on universities. Gender equality legislation influences universities through a sequence of institutional mechanisms. It first establishes legal obligations, then requires universities to translate these obligations into internal policies, then changes management practices, and finally affects educational and organizational outcomes.

Figure 1 shows that legislation does not affect universities automatically. The impact depends on how legal requirements are translated into institutional structures and everyday educational management. For example, a university may formally adopt a Gender Equality Plan, but the plan will have limited impact if it lacks measurable targets, responsible units, data, budget, leadership support, and monitoring.

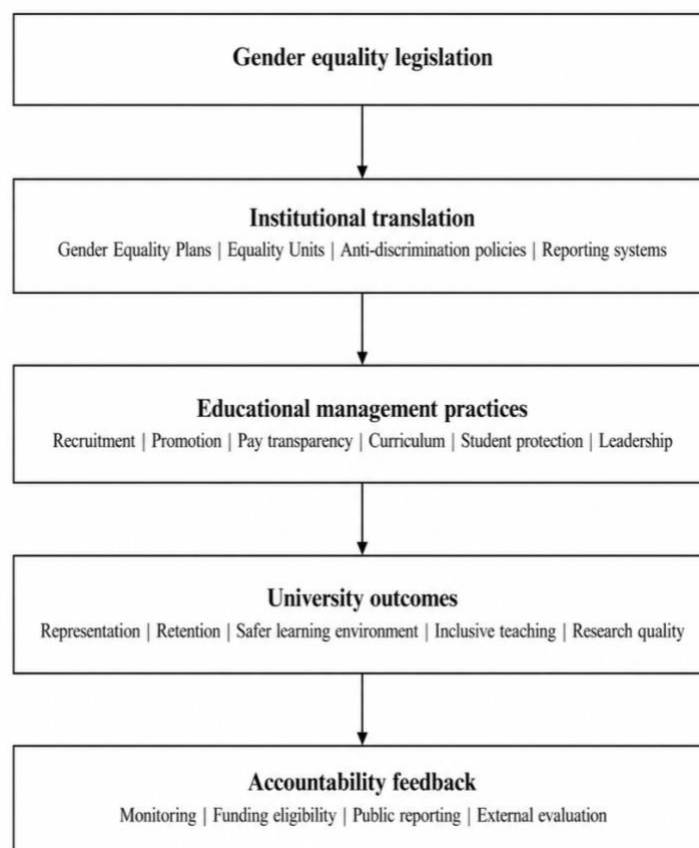


Figure 1. Legislative impact pathway in universities

Source: developed by the author

Effects on educational management. The first major effect of gender equality legislation is administrative and managerial. Universities must create or strengthen equality units, reporting procedures, complaint systems, gender-sensitive recruitment policies, monitoring indicators, and leadership accountability. In the EU, the Horizon Europe GEP requirement pushes universities to institutionalize equality planning because funding eligibility depends on compliance. In the UK, the Public Sector Equality Duty requires higher education institutions to consider equality in public functions, which affects governance, student services, employment, and institutional policy. In Australia, reporting obligations under the Workplace Gender Equality Act require higher education providers to collect and submit workplace gender equality data.

These legal mechanisms change educational management in four ways. First, equality becomes a governance issue rather than only a human resources concern. Second, universities must produce evidence, not only declarations. Third, equality work becomes linked with quality assurance, risk management, and external reputation. Fourth, university leaders become responsible for measurable progress.

Effects on academic careers and leadership. Gender equality legislation influences academic careers by targeting recruitment, promotion,

pay, leadership, and work-life balance. However, the literature shows that career inequality is difficult to eliminate because it is embedded in informal evaluation norms, publication expectations, mobility requirements, grant competition, and leadership stereotypes.

Athena SWAN research demonstrates that structured institutional programs can support gender equality, but outcomes depend on implementation quality. Caffrey et al. (2016) found that equity programs may be enabled or constrained by departmental context, leadership, and local culture. Xiao et al. (2020) analysed Athena SWAN awards in relation to gender diversity among leaders and senior academics, showing the importance of evaluating whether recognition schemes produce measurable leadership outcomes.

Quota-oriented policies may produce faster changes in representation, but they also require institutional legitimacy and long-term cultural change. Park (2020) shows that gender quotas in higher education can influence women's representation in academic positions, but quotas alone cannot address all causes of inequality if organizational cultures remain unchanged.

Effects on teaching, curriculum, and student experience. Gender equality legislation also affects education through teaching and student protection. In Spain, legal requirements have encouraged universities to introduce gender equality into teaching, although Torrico (2023) warns that some innovation projects may become superficial if they respond to policy incentives without deeper pedagogical commitment.

In the United States, Title IX has a strong influence on student protection because it prohibits sex-based discrimination in federally funded education programs and activities. This affects university policies on sexual harassment, grievance procedures, athletics, pregnancy discrimination, and access to educational programs. In broader educational management, such legislation pushes universities to create safer learning environments, clarify complaint procedures, train staff, and document institutional responses.

Gender equality training also becomes important. Condrón et al. (2023) argue that higher education institutions can be powerful agents for gender equality and that change should start early in students' academic experience. This implies that gender equality legislation should not be reduced to staff compliance. It should influence curricula, learning outcomes, student services, and campus culture.

Benefits and risks of legislative influence. Legislative influence can play a crucial role in shaping policies that affect society, the economy, and governance. On one hand, it allows stakeholders to advocate for necessary reforms, promote transparency, and ensure that diverse perspectives are considered in decision-making processes. On the other hand, excessive or unbalanced influence may lead to biased outcomes, favoring specific groups over the public interest. Understanding both the advantages and potential drawbacks is essential for maintaining a fair and effective legislative system.

Table 3. Benefits and risks of gender equality legislation for universities

Dimension	Positive impact	Implementation risk
Governance	Creates accountability, equality units, and institutional plans	Symbolic compliance without real change
Funding	Links equality performance to access to research funding	Administrative burden and box-ticking behaviour
Academic careers	Encourages fair recruitment, promotion, and leadership pathways	Informal bias may persist in evaluation and networks
Teaching	Supports gender-sensitive curricula and inclusive pedagogy	Gender content may be added superficially
Student protection	Strengthens anti-harassment and anti-discrimination procedures	Complaint systems may be slow, legalistic, or mistrusted
Data management	Promotes monitoring and evidence-based policy	Data may be incomplete, non-comparable, or unused
Institutional culture	Encourages discussion of power, bias, and inclusion	Resistance may appear among staff or leadership

Source: developed by the author based on Benshop and Brouns (2003), Timmers et al. (2010), Caffrey et al. (2016), Kalpazidou Schmidt and Cacace (2019), and Crimmins (2022).

Table 3 demonstrates that gender equality legislation has a dual effect. It can generate institutional transformation, but it may also produce formal compliance if universities treat equality as an administrative requirement rather than a management and educational quality issue.

Discussion. The findings show that gender equality legislation has changed the way universities are governed and managed. The most important shift is that gender equality has moved from the margins of institutional life to the centre of governance, funding, reporting, and quality assurance. Universities must now demonstrate equality through documents, data, procedures, plans, and outcomes.

However, the comparative analysis also shows that legal frameworks produce different types of institutional behaviour. In the EU, funding-linked Gender Equality Plans encourage universities to formalize equality strategies. In the United States, Title IX focuses attention on discrimination, harassment, and student rights. In the UK, the Equality Act and Public Sector Equality Duty embed equality into institutional governance. In Australia, reporting obligations strengthen workforce data systems. In Spain, equality plans and legal gender mainstreaming influence both governance and teaching. In quota-oriented systems, representation can become a direct policy target.

The main theoretical implication is that legislation works through institutional translation. Law creates pressure, but universities decide how deeply this pressure becomes embedded in management systems. This explains why some institutions use gender equality legislation as a tool for transformation, while others use it mainly for compliance.

The article also confirms that educational management is central to equality outcomes. Gender equality is not achieved only through legal texts. It requires leadership, budgeting, monitoring, transparent promotion,

curriculum reform, complaint procedures, data infrastructure, and staff training. Without these elements, legislation may not reach everyday academic practices.

A further issue is the relationship between equality and academic excellence. Some universities still treat gender equality as separate from research quality and educational quality. However, the evidence suggests that equality influences who becomes a researcher, who receives promotion, whose knowledge is included in curricula, which research questions are asked, and whether students feel safe and respected. Therefore, gender equality legislation should be understood as part of educational quality assurance and institutional development.

At the same time, the risks of symbolic compliance are real. Gender Equality Plans may become formal documents without measurable targets. Equality units may lack authority. Data may be collected but not used. Training may be mandatory but ineffective. Leadership may support equality rhetorically but avoid structural decisions. These risks explain why peer-reviewed studies emphasize the need for contextualized, monitored, and institutionally supported change.

Conclusions. Gender equality legislation has a significant impact on universities and education in different countries. It changes institutional governance, educational management, academic career systems, student protection, teaching, research content, and accountability. The strongest impact appears when legislation is connected with funding eligibility, public reporting, institutional monitoring, leadership responsibility, and measurable targets.

The comparative analysis shows that different countries use different legal mechanisms. The European Union links Gender Equality Plans with research funding. The United States uses Title IX to prohibit sex-based discrimination in federally funded education. The United Kingdom applies equality duties to higher education institutions. Australia relies on workplace gender equality reporting. Spain requires equality plans and gender mainstreaming in universities. Quota-oriented systems directly target representation in academic careers.

The article demonstrates that legislation alone is insufficient. Its effectiveness depends on institutional translation into management practices. Universities need equality plans, responsible units, reliable data, transparent recruitment and promotion, gender-sensitive curricula, complaint procedures, leadership commitment, and regular evaluation.

The main conclusion is that gender equality legislation should be understood not only as a compliance requirement but as a tool of educational management and institutional transformation. For universities, gender equality is connected with academic quality, research excellence, student safety, leadership legitimacy, and social responsibility.

Future research should compare the measurable outcomes of different legal models, especially funding-linked Gender Equality Plans, equality duties, gender reporting, and quotas. Further studies should also examine how legislation affects intersectional inequalities, non-STEM disciplines, student experiences, online education, and gender-based violence prevention in higher education.

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