

Anna Odrowąż-Coates

The Maria Grzegorzewska University¹

E-mail: acoates@aps.edu.pl

ORCID: 0000-0002-2112-8711

Danuta Duch-Krzystoszek

The Maria Grzegorzewska University²

E-mail: dduch@aps.edu.pl

ORCID: 0000-0003-2694-1442

Gender, language, and discourse in academia: Reflections from academic staff on an EU-driven gender equality plan at a Polish university³

Abstract

This mixed-method sociolinguistic study explores the influence of EU-driven Gender Equality Plans on language and discourse within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Poland, with a particular focus on a case study from a university in Warsaw. Using research data from internal survey and focus group discussions, we examine the transformational journey of a medium-sized specialist university of social sciences, education, and special pedagogy. Historically, this institution, predominantly composed by women, saw positions of power traditionally held by men. However, since the implementation of the gender equality plan in 2022, a notable shift has occurred, with more female professors emerging and women occupying positions of authority. It was the right moment to reflect on staff attitudes and experiences related to their work and the language used at work. Despite over 90% of students and 70% of staff being female, the language of documents and administration within the university still reflects patriarchal patterns rooted in Latin-derived Polish. Through discourse analysis and interviews, we uncover the subtle yet significant changes in attitudes towards language practices within the academic community. This

¹ Address: Akademia Pedagogiki Specjalnej im. Marii Grzegorzewskiej, ul. Szczęśliwicka 40, 02-353 Warszawa, Poland

² Address: Akademia Pedagogiki Specjalnej im. Marii Grzegorzewskiej, ul. Szczęśliwicka 40, 02-353 Warszawa, Poland

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research not only contributes to the growing body of literature on gender equality in academia but also sheds light on the complex interplay between language, power structures, and social change. By examining how language reflects and shapes societal norms, we aim to offer insights into the ongoing process of gender mainstreaming within HEIs in Poland and beyond. Ultimately, this study advocates for linguistic inclusivity as a crucial aspect of achieving gender equality in higher education.

Keywords: gender, discrimination, equality, GEP, EU

Introduction

This study is grounded in feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 2004; Heckman, 1997), as both researchers are female, which situates them within a specific epistemological perspective. Nevertheless, the data collected in the field reflects the views of both female and male participants and was approached with sensitivity to potential preconceptions and personal biases, fostering an exploratory, hypothesis-free research environment. It is important to situate this study within the broader body of literature on gender differences among academics, particularly regarding career trajectories, workloads, perceived expectations, and networking practices (cf. Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2024a; Neumann & Terosky, 2007; O'Connor et al., 2015; O'Meara et al., 2017; Ostaszewska et al., 2022; Titkow et al., 2004). This is without even mentioning the substantial literature on the glass ceiling in academia (cf. Aboubichr & Conway, 2023; Acker, 1990, 2009; Naldini et al., 2023; Williams, 2003), including the comprehensive review by Van Helden et al. (2021). The European Commission (EC, 2019) provides evidence that women in academia are underrepresented and may experience systemic disadvantages. Although women constitute 48% of doctoral students and graduates, their representation declines to 46% in postdoctoral positions, 40% among senior researchers, and just 24% at the professorial level. Furthermore, female researchers are 13% more likely than men to hold part-time positions, and a higher proportion of women (8%) than men (5%) work under precarious fixed-term contracts. Notably, only 32% of scientific publications in the EU list a woman as the corresponding author (Tagliacozzo & Di Tullio, 2021). A similar situation is evident in Poland. According to the Women in Science report (RAD-on, 2022), women make up 50% of those holding doctoral degrees, yet account for only 28% of full professors. In 2022, the Glass Ceiling Index in Poland was 1.69 in the humanities and social sciences, and 1.89 in STEM fields. The situation has not markedly improved since the comprehensive work by Kopciewicz and Rzepecka (2009). In response to these disparities, the European Commission introduced a formal requirement for Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) in European universities as a condition for accessing EU research funding. These plans

vary significantly across institutions, reflecting differences in national contexts, institutional priorities, and the maturity of gender equality initiatives. However, their core principles remain centred on gender balance, awareness, and anti-discrimination.

The conceptualisation of gender itself varies across academic discourse. Some scholars associate gender with biology, others with social expectations (cf. Titkow, 2007; Butler, 2008), social roles (Norris & Inglehart, 2008), socially constructed identity (Bem, 2000), or as an external oppressive system (Acker, 1990; Delphy, 2007) used for social stratification and inherently tied to power relations (Connell, 1987). A key component in constructing and experiencing gender is language and linguistic discourse, which assign value (Odrowąż-Coates, 2019) and reflect internalised social imaginaries (Taylor, 2003). Linguistic practices shape how we perceive, understand, enact, and reinforce gender norms. Therefore, close attention to language and linguistic practices in opinion-forming institutions is essential.

Educational institutions – and universities in particular – exert significant influence over how future educated elites will approach gender issues. Consequently, the empirical focus of this article is on language and linguistic practices, explored through the experiences and perspectives of university staff at one of the oldest pedagogical universities in Poland. The study formed part of empirical research conducted as an evaluation of a Gender Equality Plan. The article presents a comparative discussion of various Gender Equality Plans, followed by the empirical findings from the study.

Reflection about purposively selected GEPs

The inspiration for this research was the introduction of the GEPs and the necessity of making some preliminary assessments after 2 years since their introduction. It makes it interesting how much the GEPs differ across the HE institutions, so this short discussion is a reflection on that across purposively selected GEPs. Most GEPs focus on similar core areas, as outlined by Horizon Europe. These include work-life balance, gender balance in leadership and decision-making, gender equality in recruitment and career progression, integration of the gender dimension into research and teaching, and measures against gender-based violence (EURAXESS, 2020; LERU, 2024). To be able to access EU funding the introduction of GEPs as an eligibility criterion under Horizon Europe has led to a more standardised approach. Universities must include a public document outlining the institution's commitment to gender equality, resources allocated, data collection and monitoring processes, and training and capacity-building activities (Bustelo, 2023; EURAXESS, 2020) Some

differences can be found in implementation and focus. For instance, University of Turin (Italy), focuses heavily on community engagement and the integration of gender equality into urban and social development projects (MindTheGEPs EU). University of Belgrade (Serbia), places a strong emphasis on promoting gender equality within STEM fields, particularly in electrical engineering and computer science (Solera et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). The University of Gdańsk (Poland), emphasises sustainable development and responsible research, aligning gender equality goals with broader institutional missions (Solera et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). At Uppsala University (Sweden) the GEP is part of a broader national gender mainstreaming effort, with revisions every three years to align with national policies (Solera et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). Some universities, like those in the LERU network, advocate for more specific and centralised data collection guidelines to reduce administrative burden and ensure consistency across institutions (LERU 2024). Institutions like the National Research Council of Italy (CNR) have developed detailed gender budgets and infographics to visualise progress and resource allocation (Solera et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). There is a growing recognition of the need to address intersectionality within GEPs. LERU and CE7, for example, recommend incorporating additional diversity dimensions beyond gender, tailored to each institution's context (LERU 2024). Some universities are more advanced in this regard, integrating measures for various minoritised groups into their GEPs (Bustelo, 2023). The level of emphasis on training and capacity-building varies. Leading institutions often have extensive programs to train staff and leadership on gender equality, while others may be at earlier stages of developing such resources (LERU 2024). Universities face challenges in translating policy into practice, especially in integrating intersectionality and maintaining consistent data collection methods across different legal and cultural contexts (Bustelo, 2023). There is a call for more support from the European Commission, including capacity-building resources, to help institutions at different stages of their gender equality journey (LERU 2024).

In general Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) in Polish universities exhibit a variety of approaches and emphases, reflecting the specific needs and contexts of each institution and the examples of notable differences will be presented comparing four largest universities. Consequently, a GEP from a small, narrowly specialised university will be discussed on the backdrop of the larger counterparts. Selected units were the first ones in Poland to prepare and publish GEPs.

The GEP at the University of Gdańsk focuses on structural changes and has been implementing these for several years through projects aimed at responsible research and sustainable development. Key areas include improving the gender balance in decision-making, fostering a supportive work-life balance, and addressing gender-based violence (Solera et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2023c; Turco 2021).

They also place significant emphasis on training and capacity-building to promote gender equality across different levels of the university, integrating these goals with broader societal impacts (Solera et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). The Jagiellonian University's GEP emphasises creating a gender-sensitive culture within the institution. This includes policies aimed at ensuring gender parity in recruitment and promotions, providing gender-awareness training, and implementing measures to prevent and respond to sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence (Solera et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). They also focus on gender-sensitive teaching and research practices, aiming to integrate gender perspectives into the curriculum and research agendas (Solera et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). The GEP at Adam Mickiewicz University includes a strong focus on data collection and monitoring to assess gender disparities within the institution. This data-driven approach informs their policies on hiring, career advancement, and resource allocation to ensure gender equity (MindTheGEPs EU). They also highlight the importance of mentorship programs and networks to support the career development of women in academia, particularly in STEM fields (Solera et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). The University of Warsaw's GEP places a significant emphasis on balancing professional and personal responsibilities. These include flexible working arrangements, parental leave policies, and facilities for childcare, aiming to support both men and women in managing their work-life balance (Solera et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). They also focus on leadership training and opportunities for women, aiming to increase female representation in senior academic and administrative positions (Solera et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2023c).

Overall, while all these universities aim to promote gender equality, the specific strategies and areas of focus differ based on their unique contexts and challenges. Some prioritise structural changes and data monitoring, while others focus more on cultural shifts and support mechanisms. As already mentioned, we will then discuss GEP at a smaller and more feminised university focussed on social care and support. The Gender Equality Plan (GEP) of Maria Grzegorzewska University (APS) aligns with the broader efforts of Polish universities while also having unique aspects that address specific needs and challenges of the institution. APS emphasises increasing awareness of gender equality issues and promoting positive attitudes towards diversity and inclusion among students, faculty, and staff. This is achieved through educational initiatives, workshops, and seminars designed to foster an inclusive environment (APS GEP).

The plan aims to improve gender balance across various institutional levels, including decision-making bodies, committees, and academic positions. APS is working towards achieving a more proportional gender representation, reflecting a commitment to equity in leadership roles (APS, 2022). APS integrates gender

equality topics into its research and teaching curricula. This ensures that gender perspectives are included in academic discourse and that students are educated on gender-related issues as part of their studies (GEP APS 2022). The university has established support structures such as permanent GEP Steering Committee comprising of representative of entire community and the Gender Equality Forum to oversee the implementation of the GEP. This Committee plays a crucial role in initiating pro-equality initiatives and ensuring continuous progress towards the plan's goals (Educatore.) (APS.edu). What is more, through its UNESCO Janusz Korczak Chair in Social Pedagogy, APS is actively involved in international collaborations focusing on social inclusion, children's rights, and gender equality. These collaborations enhance the university's capacity to address gender issues from a global perspective and bring in best practices from other institutions (APS.edu). The GEP of Maria Grzegorzewska University fits well within the broader trends observed in Polish universities. Similar to institutions like Jagiellonian University and the University of Warsaw, APS focuses on:

- promoting gender equality through awareness and education,
- ensuring gender balance in leadership and academic roles,
- integrating gender perspectives into research and teaching.

However, APS's unique emphasis on early childhood education, care pedagogy, and social work distinguishes its approach. The university's historical commitment to social inclusion and advocacy for human rights, inspired by its founder Maria Grzegorzewska, further shapes its specific initiatives and focus areas. It is worth noting that since 2020, APS staff elected a first female Rector for the 100 years of its existence, and the female Rector was re-elected for the second term of office 2024–2028.

Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) in European universities are evolving and making significant strides, yet several critical areas often require further development and enhancement. Most GEPs focus primarily on gender, often neglecting the intersection of gender with other identities such as race, ethnicity, disability, and socioeconomic status. This can result in policies that do not fully address the needs of all marginalised groups. Incorporating intersectional analyses to ensure that policies address the diverse experiences and challenges faced by individuals at the intersections of multiple identities will address this gap (Solera et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2023c).

While many GEPs include data collection, there is often a lack of comprehensive and consistent data on gender disparities across all levels and departments. This limits the ability to identify and address specific issues effectively. It is recommended to establish a standardised and detailed data collection methods, ensuring

regular monitoring and evaluation of gender equality metrics across all areas of the institution (LERU, 2024; MindTheGEPs EU, n.d.).

Moreover, there is often a gap between policy development and practical implementation. Additionally, accountability mechanisms to ensure adherence to the GEPs are sometimes weak or underdeveloped. Development of clear implementation strategies with defined responsibilities, timelines, and accountability measures would resolve this problem. Regular audits and transparent reporting would enhance accountability (Solera et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2023c).

Many GEPs lack sufficient resources for effective implementation. This includes financial resources, human resources, and training programs to build capacity among staff and leadership. It would be most desirable to allocate adequate funding and resources to support GEP initiatives. Providing comprehensive training programs to ensure that all members of the university community understand and can contribute to gender equality efforts would also be helpful (Bustelo, 2023; Solera et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2023c).

Although some GEPs address gender-based violence (GBV), it is not always given sufficient attention or integrated into broader institutional policies. Developing comprehensive policies and support systems specifically addressing GBV, including prevention programs, support services for victims, and clear reporting mechanisms would mitigate this problem (Bustelo, 2023). While increasing gender representation in leadership is a common goal, efforts often lack a holistic approach to creating inclusive decision-making environments. Fostering inclusive leadership by promoting a culture of shared decision-making and ensuring diverse representation in all decision-making bodies could be the answer to this issue. LERU recommends that universities provide leadership training focused on inclusivity and equity (LERU, 2024; MindTheGEPs EU, n.d.).

What is important to note, sometimes gender equality initiatives overlook the importance of engaging men as allies in promoting gender equality. The aspiration to actively involve men in gender equality initiatives, emphasising their role as allies and advocates should strengthen the equality efforts. Development of programs and workshops specifically aimed at engaging men in understanding and supporting gender equality is the path to be considered (Solera et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). Many GEPs focus on short-term goals without a clear vision for long-term sustainability. Creating long-term plans with sustainable goals and practices would ensure sustainability of the project. It can be achieved by ensuring that gender equality is embedded into the institution's strategic planning and that there are mechanisms for ongoing review and adaptation of GEPs (LERU, 2024). To maximise the effectiveness of GEPs, universities should identify and address these gaps, whilst ensuring that their plans are comprehensive, well-resourced, and

inclusive of all gender-related issues and intersections. Regular review and adaptation of GEPs, informed by thorough data collection and stakeholder engagement, are essential for fostering a genuinely equitable academic environment.

Research Method

To diagnose the situation, in the reporting period from the implementation of the Gender Equality Plan to 24 months after implementation, we used a mixed-method approach, combining survey data with group interviews. As Hanson and colleagues (2005) claim, this approach helps the researchers to understand the problem better, deeper and more cross-sectional. We employed descriptive statistics for the quantitative data sets (cf. Babbie, 2009) and critical discourse analysis for the qualitative ones (as understood by De Melo Resende (2012)). Random sampling procedure was used to draw the research participants, as described in detail below. This unintentionally caused underrepresentation of some age groups and positions, who did not respond to the call due to voluntary character of the study and due to its anonymity it was not possible to chase this up, which may be viewed as a weakness, however, as the study is of exploratory nature, all obtained information is of value to the researchers.

For the quantitative part, an online diagnostic survey was used, consisting of an anonymous questionnaire with some closed Likert scale questions and some open questions, forming a CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interview). This quantitative part of the study was further extended by group interviews (also known as focus interviews). For exploratory, cross-sectional research, 100 numbers were randomly selected. In a separate randomised draw, 52 people were selected for focus group interviews in proportion to the represented size of units and positions. Participation was entirely voluntary and the obtained data was anonymised. In the survey part of the study, it was assumed that for the results to be reliable, at least 10% of the employed population should participate in it ($n=52$). Ultimately, 65 employees (out of over 520 Academy staff) participated in the survey. At least 5% of the population, i.e. 26 people, were to participate in the focus interviews. We managed to obtain the expected numbers in both groups of respondents without the need for second-tier selection. It should be noted that people who were younger in terms of experience and age, invited to participate in the qualitative part of the research, are underrepresented in the study sample, as half of them did not respond to the invitation or provide a credible reason for their absence. One of these people expressed concerns about what she could say and who would listen, which in her opinion, did not ensure sufficient confidentiality and anonymity of the research. It can be assumed that the reason for the low attendance of the youngest employees

in the qualitative part of the research was either a genuine lack of need and interest or indeed lack of trust or even fear, which should be a troubling sign if verified as the main reason. However, these people expressed their willingness to take part in an anonymous survey and therefore were granted access to the survey form as additional contributors. The participants received information about the voluntary nature of participation, the anonymity of the data obtained and the research purpose. Additionally, they were informed that the questions would not concern the intimate, private sphere and that they would only concern observations and experiences from the last two years. Focus group participants were additionally informed that the research related to their participation would focus on the sphere of language and discourse in the workplace. In addition to its diagnostic function, the survey questionnaire reminded participants about available forms of support, so was in a sense raising awareness of GEP and the existing support mechanisms.

Research findings

Survey

When asked whether, in the opinion of the research participants, their workplace provides equal opportunities for development regardless of gender, the vast majority, almost 77 percent (50 people out of 65) answered affirmatively, 15 percent (10 people) said it was difficult to say, and 5 people (7.7%) believed that the institution did not provide equal opportunities (see Figure 1).

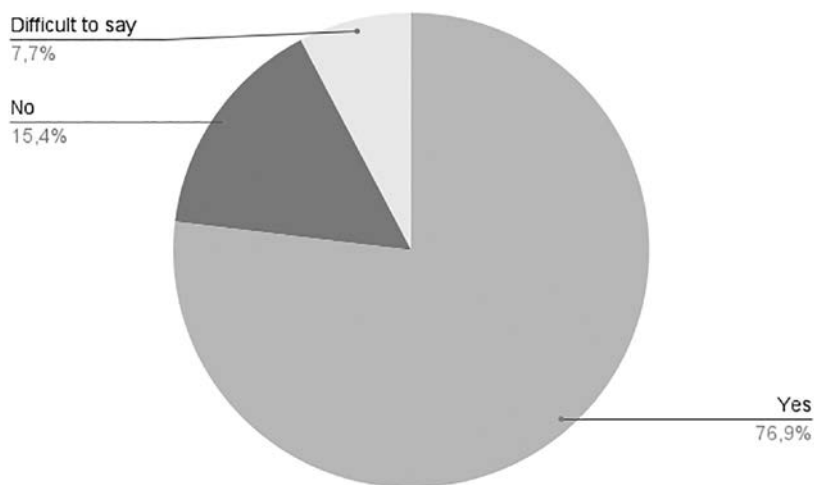


Figure 1. Equal opportunities

Source: Self-generated

The next task for the respondents was to rate, on a scale from 1–5, their level of satisfaction with how their respective gender is treated in their workplace (see Figure 2). Here, seven people had no opinion, three were rather dissatisfied, and the vast majority expressed satisfaction. Half of those who were satisfied were very satisfied and the other half were rather satisfied. One person omitted this question in the questionnaire.

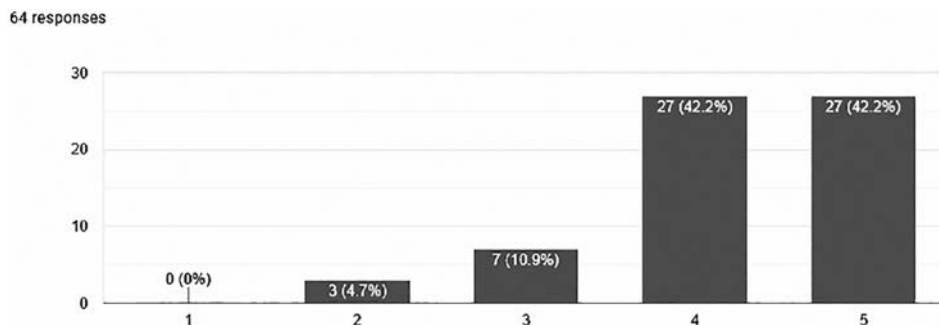


Figure 2. Are you satisfied with the way you are treated as a man or woman by your organisation? (1 completely dissatisfied, 5 – completely satisfied)

Source: Self-generated

Using the open question option, participants were asked to indicate the reasons for their dissatisfaction. One of the respondents pointed to low wages. However, it is difficult to assume that this is a factor directly correlated with gender in the organisation under study, as careful pay gap considerations reveal no gender disparity in pay. Another person pointed out the lack of support for balancing parental and professional roles, although national laws, aligned with the EU regulations clearly apply. It is uncertain if this indicates the lack of knowledge in the area of parental rights or if the expectation of that individual on the university to be more flexible and strive above the standard emerged in their grievance. Here are the quotes from people who left detailed comments specifying the reason for dissatisfaction. It is worth noting that in addition to the rather dissatisfied people, a representative of the rather satisfied people also left a comment.

Selected participant quotations regarding reasons for dissatisfaction:

“The university culture (in general, e.g. at the state level) favours men. This level permeates into my university.”

“Requiring more tasks and involvement from women, whilst accepting (consent) for less involvement, and a much lower number of tasks performed by men.”

“Here are examples of statements towards me: ‘you’re so sour, are you on your period or something’, ‘you have to do it because your children are already big’, people’s reaction to my

superior raising his voice at me in public 'don't worry, he has issues,' in another similar situation, the reaction of the participants 'it's just a joke', the reaction of people to whom I entrusted the issue of another employee slandering me to students 'oh he's going through a midlife crisis now, don't take it personally'."

"Publicly talking about an employee's private achievements without consulting her about this type of 'publicity', causing visible discomfort caused by diverting attention from scientific achievements and redirecting them to the non-academic sphere traditionally associated with femininity and sexuality... I trust that I will not be identified, I am still far from habilitation⁴."

The question was asked whether in the last two years people taking part in the research had encountered any manifestations of discrimination based on gender and then how willing they would be to intervene in this matter. The question was answered by 64 persons. Almost 80% of respondents did not encounter any cases/manifestations of gender discrimination at work in the last two years, one person stated that they had experienced discrimination and 15.6%, i.e. 11 people, observed manifestations of gender discrimination against other people.

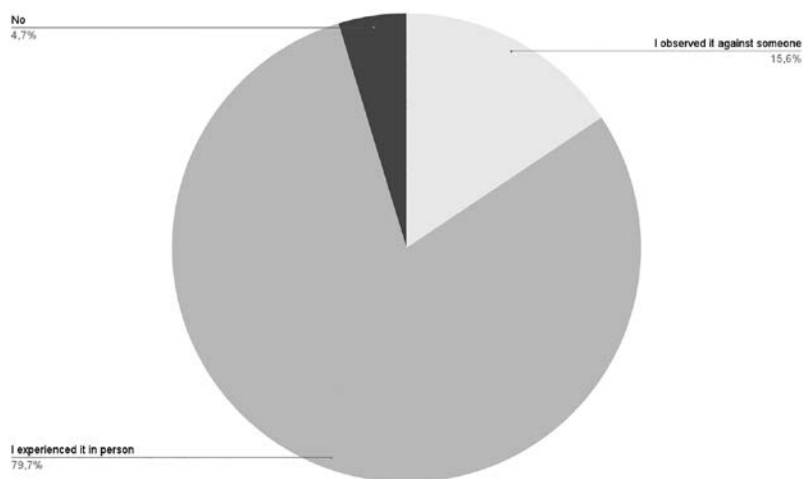


Figure 3. Have you observed or personally experienced any form of discrimination based on gender in the last two years?

Source: Self-generated

Most respondents (n=26) stated that they were very willing to react (40.6%), 39% were rather willing, 17.2% maintained a neutral attitude, two people would rather not react. It is difficult to say why, because the question did not allow for free expression.

⁴ habilitation (Polish: *habilitacja*) – promotion to associate professor

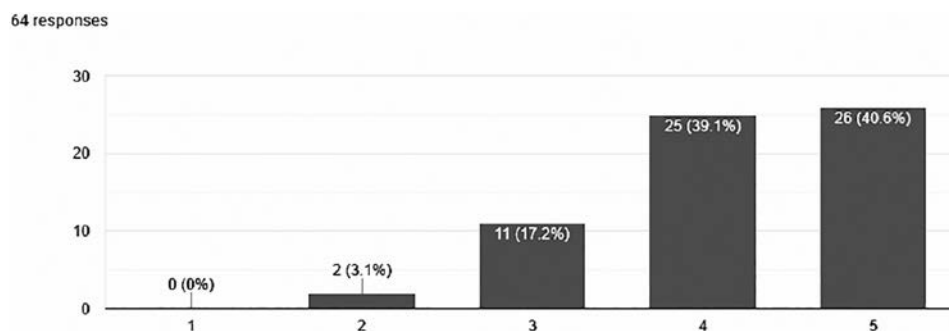


Figure 4. How likely are you to react to observed discrimination based on gender? (1 – extremely unlikely, 5 – completely likely)

Source: Self-generated

Then they were asked about “feminatives” (*feminativum* – feminine alternatives for traditionally-masculine sounding job titles). Opinions regarding the use of feminatives in official documents and the official language at work varied, but the vast majority did not evaluate this procedure negatively (85% of respondents) (see Figure 5).

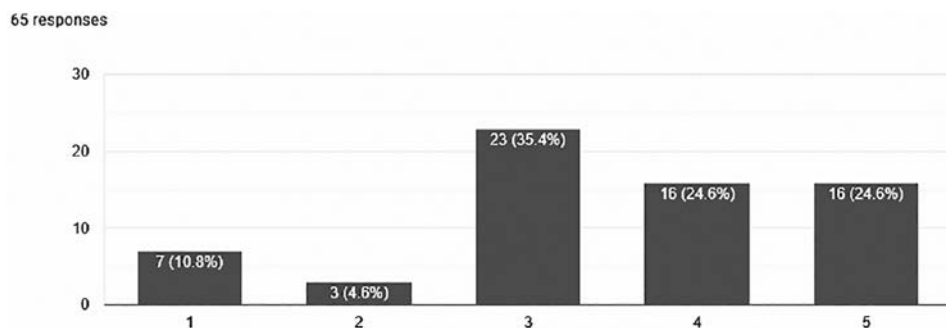


Figure 5. How do you perceive introduction of feminatives into legal documents and official language in your workplace? (1 – completely against it, 5 – completely for it)

Source: Self-generated

At the same time, most of the respondents did not mind the use of masculine variants of job names. 21.5% of people negatively assessed the use of male job titles in cases of women holding these positions (see Figure 6).

Then, a diagnosis of awareness of possible sources of institutional support important in the context of gender and well-being at work was carried out.

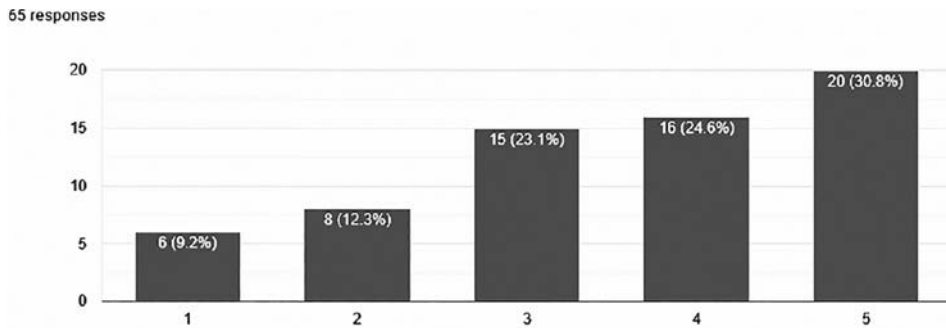


Figure 6. How do you perceive using male versions of job titles?
(1 – I completely disagree with it, 5 – I fully support it)

Source: Self-generated

A surprisingly low number of respondents, only 38.5% were aware of the existence of the Ombudsman for Academic Values and University Ethos, 55.4% of the possibility of using a legal advice office at work, and 64.6% of the possibility of using the services of a mediator. Knowledge of applicable legal acts regarding equal opportunities for employees seems to be unsatisfactory.

The largest number of respondents were aware of the existence of the Procedure for counteracting mobbing and discrimination (87.7%) and the Development Strategy for 2021–2030 (81.5%). Code of Ethics – 76.9%. University Sustainable Development and Social Responsibility Strategy – 69.2%. Gender Equality Plan – only 66.2%, despite ongoing awareness campaigns, related training initiatives and introduction to GEP at several meetings at diverse levels.

In summary, the majority of respondents (77%) believe the institution provides equal opportunities for development regardless of gender, with a small minority expressing doubts or dissatisfaction. Most participants (over 80%) reported being satisfied with how their gender is treated at the university, though a few pointed to issues such as low wages or insufficient support for balancing parental and professional roles, despite the alignment with national and EU regulations. Some dissatisfaction also stemmed from perceived cultural biases favouring men and gendered comments or behaviours in the workplace.

Regarding gender discrimination, 80% of respondents reported not encountering any discrimination, though 15.6% observed it happening to others. The majority (over 60%) expressed a willingness to intervene in such cases. Opinions on using feminatives in official documents were mostly positive, with 85% not negatively assessing the practice.

Awareness of institutional support mechanisms was mixed. While most respondents knew about the Procedure for Counteracting Mobbing and Discrimination (87.7%) and other key strategies like the Development Strategy (81.5%) and the Code of Ethics (76.9%), fewer were aware of the Gender Equality Plan (66.2%), despite efforts to promote it.

In conclusion, while the university has made strides in gender equality, there is room for improvement in awareness, addressing workplace biases, and ensuring that all staff are informed about available support and policies. Study participants could leave any reflections on the implementation of gender equality at their workplace and ideas in this regard. Here they are divided into categories.

Selected participant quotations on perceived positive discrimination:

"The gender disproportion in our field is huge. It is difficult to talk about equal opportunities when the overwhelming majority of the academic community are women. **Men are necessarily treated differently and appear to be more supported due to their low numbers**, for example the so-called 'raisins'⁵ in a group of students."

"**In a feminised university, men are in a more difficult situation, although it is easier for them to develop and progress scientifically**; I would consult with a specific woman whether she wants her position to have a female name."

"In my opinion, it is unfair (to put it mildly) that for addressing a student by the name and surname that appears on the student list, when the student comes up with a different name, I, as a lecturer, am threatened with reprimand for using the so-called psychological violence."

"I believe that an open debate with the participation of the entire community would be beneficial, which would allow for mutual awareness of these issues."

Selected participant quotations revealing attitudes towards feminatives:

"**I propose introducing feminatives into the documentation**. Not only academic teachers work, but also female academic teachers."

"It would be very important to officially **introduce feminine criteria** in defining official positions, e.g. doctor, supervisor, rector, etc."

"My workplace has always been considered and is considered to be a university close to the values related to gender equality, which is best evidenced by the university's rectors in recent years. Apart from the general friendly atmosphere, it seems to me that the most important thing is to emphasise meritocratic management structures, based on the evaluation of work, not based on gender, but on the competences and qualifications of university employees. As for the thread about feminists – in my opinion, it is important **that language empowers people, but within the limits of reason and the capabilities of our language**. In other words, wherever it is possible to use appropriate phrases without changing their meaning or taking away their 'seriousness'."

"At a feminised university, men are in a more difficult situation, although it is easier for them to develop scientifically; **I would consult with a specific woman whether she wants her position to have a female name**."

⁵ Term relating to rarity – not derogatory, neutral (a raisin in a cake is like a rare occurrence).

Selected participant quotations on pro-quality ideas/proposals:

“Possibility of **flexible implementation of professional duties** due to parenthood, kindergartens or schools for employees’ children.”

“Maybe it is worth **disseminating information more widely** about the above-mentioned forms of support and regulations, I learned about some of them by completing this survey.”

“I think it is worth providing both employees and students **with a list of forms of support**, places where they can go to report a complaint, seek help, etc.”

“**Cyclical meetings, discussions, workshops** (not training or lectures) for the academic community showing the complexity of the problem, the multiplicity of perspectives, as well as the moral sensitivity of participants in worldview disputes (on the conservatism–liberalism axis).”

“**Ombudsman for Equality** – here it would be important that they were not only men, but also women. It is not clear which representative should be contacted now. It would be important to take into greater account the situation of unequal treatment from the direct superior – a solution for these people; and greater protection for male and female students.”

“Workshops, open meetings (internal, external), posters, invitations to films, maybe spread other feminist ideas, the university is definitely dominated by women, the majority of employees in probably every professional group and committee are women, **so maybe it is also worth it in gender equality to include men (i.e. the minority group).**”

“**Education**, especially aimed at older workers. Paying attention to disrespectful statements (e.g. related to appearance).”

“Analysis of positions held and functions performed based on gender – **who is required to really work and who is required to ‘hold’ a position or function.**”

This last quote goes hand in hand with the concept developed by Ryan and Haslam (2005), who claim that women are offered more precarious senior roles, where they are exposed to positions on the ‘glass cliff’, that are so risk bearing or so tiresome, that are not attractive to their men counterparts. Järvinen and Mik-Meyer (2024b) also maintain the gender difference in workload and expectations placed on men and women in the same roles. In our study, there was also a negative reaction to the presented research itself: “Get busy with something else, because in a moment you will create gender equality, militant troops. This is amusing and sad in a female-dominated university.”

Focus interviews

The qualitative part of the research involved 26 people out of 42 invited to participate. Selecting a larger number of people was intended to ensure that the necessary minimum assumed in the research was achieved, ensuring the representation of 5 percent of the staff population. Significantly, men were more willing than women to accept the invitation to participate in the research; the youngest people with short work experience were not interested in participating or firmly refused

to participate. The highest-ranking university management group was represented by three members of academic staff (two women, one man), and five middle/senior managers who were not academic teachers (including one man). The remaining study participants represented a cross-section of positions, seniority, age and gender. It was envisaged that the strict management group would hold talks separately and that a separate mixed administrative group would be selected. The remaining three groups consisted of two groups of academic teachers and 1 mixed academic-administrative group. This solution was thought out in such a way that a relatively free conversation could take place without fear of being judged. During the transcription of the interviews, it was ensured that the interviewees would not be identified individually during the analysis of the collected narrative data. Due to the random selection of the study participants, there is an over-representation of a numerically minority group such as men. In focus interviews, they constituted an average of 35 percent of those present. What seems interesting is that men often volunteered to speak first, analysing the interview transcripts as a percentage, but they did not take over the conversation space in excess of their percentage presence in a given group.

The management group pointed to the phenomenon of general but slow social change in the field of language, referring to pre-war standards and feminine words' endings known from literature, that later disappeared from use. This group drew attention to the need for training aimed mainly at students, but integrated into activities taking place as part of regular classes. They also pointed to the resistance of certain employee groups to gender issues, whose participation in training will not change anything in their behaviour and beliefs. Moreover, it was pointed out that the lecture form of training was inappropriate. Moderated discussions, workshops and exercises were expected.

One of the interview participants noted that the official letters from ministries or other universities' rectors often refer to our female rector as Sir, and not only use the male name of the function but appear to refer to the female rector as one of the men. Participants noted that changes in the perception of positions should come "from above".

One person mentioned the need to equip students, especially those who go to work at school and kindergarten, with the ability to critically look at gender roles, their mental grounding through concepts expressed verbally and the social position of women, also in the context of discourse and language. She pointed out that these groups were particularly vulnerable to stereotyping and working in environments that positioned women in roles traditionally "intended" for women. At the same time, they pass on specific views and patterns of behaviour to the new generations.

The middle management group identified the need for training on equality issues for their superiors, especially for the university management board. One of the men emphasised that everyone, regardless of their place in the university, would benefit from a reminder from time to time, a what he called a “civilising training” that would make them more sensitive to the topic. This group pointed out that some names of professions in the feminine form sound funny and grotesque, and thus deprive them of their rank and prestige.

In three out of five groups, a question was asked whether we were talking about only dichotomous male-female linguistic forms or whether we were also trying to include non-binary people. Concern for the situation of non-binary people was expressed and it was pointed out that not all employees are equally ready for empathy and maintaining high personal culture when confronted with non-binary people if they have a conservative attitude to this issue. Some groups pointed to linguistic formalism applied equally to women and men as a mechanism promoting equal rights, which stands in contrast in the formal names of professions. Linguistic formalism was understood as an expression of respect regardless of gender, but it does not solve the issue of formal addresses to non-binary people, as in Polish language they distinct and polarise across the gender binary.

Most of the respondents indicated openness to changes in the language and declared adaptation to changing standards, while a few pointed out the ridiculousness and inappropriateness of some job titles in their female form.

Examples were also mentioned several times of overlays on the names of non-binary students/people in transition, which allow them to be ‘themselves’ only online, as in the classroom the USOS management system’s version of names is used, and this is also the case in all formal writings. However, it has been repeatedly raised that it depends on women what they would like their functions and positions to be called, whether in a male or female form/version. At the same time, attention was drawn to the economisation of the language and that using both versions every time in the document, disturbs the natural rhythm of the statement, which is too long and therefore unclear. It was pointed out that it is a good practice to put an asterisk next to the first ‘simplifying’ phrase, reducing the form to one ‘dominant’ gender. However, if the dominant gender in a given profession is female but not exclusively, it was pointed out that it would also be inappropriate to leave the female form, as it would make male colleagues feel very odd.

The interlocutors pointed out that feminist issues are not present in all environments and are not accepted in many. It was pointed out that we work in a special environment in which the level of social awareness, ethical sensitivity and critical thinking is particularly high, which means that we shape social change and

it should come from universities as opinion-forming circles to create positive social change in the sphere of inclusive and gender equal language.

It was highlighted that when working and being in this specific environment we are a bit detached from a wider society and majority opinion, but on the other hand we are surrounded by like-minded people, so many people pointed out that it is natural for them that the language is changing towards greater inclusiveness and overcoming stereotypes in thinking about it: who can hold/perform what profession or position, based on the gendered name of the post.

In the conversation about language and discourse, it was noted that some interlocutors encountered different treatment of women and men with academic titles and degrees. There are situations where men are introduced using the given titles and women are not, perhaps as a misplaced expression of sympathy for them, familiarity and addressing them by name. This applies especially to younger employees. The respondents also referred to examples of raising their voices by superiors or lecturers towards students. Someone else pointed out that we are emotional beings, but it was also pointed out that the university does not allow this type of behaviour that constitutes mobbing. However, it was also indicated by a small number of women that there is a low readiness to oppose this type of event, there is silent consent, perhaps due to fear of one's own position, turning a blind eye. Victims of such behaviour most often receive silent support from the community, but at the same time, the 'perpetrators' are 'explained/excused' by their age and health condition, and are soothed instead of being stigmatised and confronted. One of the professors commented on this issue: "Someone will always approach the issue in this way, ... confrontation and also the changes in language can certainly serve to break down certain barriers or stereotypes; there can certainly be no consent for the rudeness of any character. Nobody can tolerate this."

Many people have signalled that the approach to gender equality is an issue related to being brought up in a specific era, in a specific standard of behaviour. At the same time, it was pointed out that it would take time, maybe one generation, maybe two, to eliminate manifestations of gender discrimination. However, it was argued that people who had contact with and were raised by earlier generations may still be stigmatised by behaviours and statements that disfavour women. It may be unconscious. It seems disturbing to point to 'older' generations as less open to changes in the language. Younger, less experienced employees were more likely to recall examples of situations that were offensive to them. Reference was made to the statement of one of the recognised authorities who introduced his co-worker saying "and these are mares from my stable". However, it was in a longer time perspective than the last two years, over the last 6 years since the witness has been employed. Another interlocutor recalled a recent, more current event during

a meeting of her institute, when a person with significant power at the university referred to the past of a newly employed research and teaching collaborator with high scientific competencies and, without consulting her, provided a fact from her private life from 20 years ago regarding her beauty and sexualising her image. The person reporting this thread said that probably out of fear of negative repercussions for their own career, no one openly reacted to this statement, even though the silent outrage was growing. One of the employees referred to a situation in which a person in a higher position than herself used verbal violence against her, commented on her appearance, and raised her voice to force her to accept additional tasks. Nevertheless, it was a person of the same sex. People participating in the research were of the opinion that at the policy level and in the general awareness of the employees, there is no consent and no place for any forms of discrimination or intentional belittling. Reference was made to personal culture, social norms, ethical codes, and well-developed and known codes of conduct. References were also made to human nature, individual characteristics, to emotionally charged situations, and the conclusions from these discussions were that the formalism of the language and the high culture of the language serve them as well as maintaining respect for each person individually, regardless of position, role, title and gender. The importance of the message and the choice of words is illustrated by the following statement: "I remember one situation when a report was being prepared at the university and one of the men in the group said, and I quote, 'The girls will prepare it,' and I am not talking about the underaged students, but about my colleagues, post-docs and professors."

It was also noted that sometimes lecturers speak disparagingly about their colleagues outside the academia or in statements addressed to students. This should never have happened. This not only undermines the competence of the other person who cannot defend themselves but also reflects negatively on the opinion maker and has a negative impact on the image of the university. Quote: "Academic teachers should be aware that their words are the words of people significant to students and in contact between employees."

Not everyone shared the opinion that language formality brings relations at work to a more respectful level. Here is a quote: "If that means it's some kind of stiffening. By creating distance, I don't think it's beneficial to creating a community as such, no. High culture for sure." And another:

"... a trap, that is, this high language culture and the feeling that we have it, puts us to sleep a bit, and this formalisation, on the one hand, has the same effect as xxx says, but on the other it also makes this language quite stiff and resistant to change. Therefore, it is attached to certain traditional formulas, which makes it difficult, for example, to introduce 'feminatives' into the language, including academic roles. This of course depends on the environment. I think we all

observe this to some extent. The problem is that, we are so deeply immersed in language that we often do not notice that it actually determines, to some extent, our view of reality.”

It was pointed out that few men work and study at this university and it was wondered whether, therefore, formal acts should be addressed to women in the feminine form, with an asterisk in the footer indicating that it is also in the masculine form. However, it was concluded based on the discussion that this is not the moment, that it is inconsistent with legal acts issued at higher ministerial levels, that the economisation of the language for clarity of communication is a greater priority, and that male or female endings do not cover everyone, i.e. non-binary people. An interesting thread was the reference to the general historical roots of endings regarding forms used in the plural: “In Polish grammar we have masculine, personal and non-masculine personal genders in the language in the plural. ... Then women are lumped in there with the same category as, I don’t know, chairs and dogs and everything else that just isn’t a man in our language.”

Exclusive terms associated with the concept of “not a man” are mentioned here – employees who are not academic teachers are referred to as persons who are not being academic teachers vs. academic teachers. By negating/excluding the preposition “not being”, we can associate these employees as second-class employees.

It is needless to say that Polish language rooted in Latin offers limited possibilities for neutralising gender in naming positions and in majority of cases possible alternatives to male and female distinction sound artificial and do not come naturally.

Selected significant quotes from the focus group interviews:

“Such training could have somehow contributed to **improving our image and influencing these mutual relations positively, including mutual respect** for each other.”

“Training cannot be mandatory, everyone should express their opinion individually whether they need it or not.”

“It’s more of a **question for women whether they feel discriminated against** because of language or not.”

“It’s just a matter of **getting used to the form** we’ve had for so many years.”

“However, we will still have to **fight against those brought up in this generation.**”

To sum up, the research confirmed that there is a need to discuss language and discourse, to raise awareness and remind people how important words are. This is not about stigmatisation, but only about creating a more friendly work environment in which everyone feels good, important, appreciated and respected, regardless of gender. The respondents pointed to forms other than traditional lecture training and pointed out the need to discuss and raise equality issues in the

university space for all groups operating in this small HE institution in Warsaw. It was encouraging that, regardless of the position and stakeholder group represented, the respondents indicated that at the institutional level there is no consent to unequal treatment and that disturbing situations are incidental and individual in nature. The consensus on this matter between people representing different genders and positions is also encouraging.

Discussion

Some professions, traditionally aligned with female characteristics and socially expected social roles, especially in care sector and in education, continued to attract more female interest. Implementing a Gender Equality Plan (GEP) in a university where the majority of students (93%) and staff (74%) are female, which is the case at the Maria Grzegorzewska University, presents unique challenges and opportunities. Despite the apparent gender imbalance with women outnumbering men, gender equality issues can still persist and require careful consideration. In such context GEP should take into consideration that although women dominate numerically, it is essential to ensure that the male minority does not face exclusion or discrimination. The GEP should include measures to support male students and staff, fostering an inclusive environment for all genders. Implementation of mentorship and support networks for male students and staff to help them integrate and succeed within the university community may be considered as a possibility, even though statistics show grater rates of success in career advancement amongst this minority group. Even in a predominantly female institution, leadership roles and decision-making positions may still be male-dominated. The GEP should aim to ensure equitable representation in these areas, conduct regular audits to ensure that pay equity is maintained across all genders, addressing any disparities that might exist despite the numerical dominance of women. Increasing the focus on work-life balance and recognising that caregiving responsibilities and work-life balance issues can affect everyone, regardless of gender is important. Ensuring that both male and female staff have access to comprehensive parental leave policies takes place. Implementation of gender sensitivity training for all staff and students to promote awareness and understanding of gender dynamics, focusing on issues such as unconscious bias and gender stereotypes is in progress. Integration of gender studies into the curriculum to educate students about gender equality, promoting a broader understanding of gender issues has always been the case at the researched university, despite unsupportive political circumstances in the last few years and anti-gender discourses instigated by certain political parties and movements.

Moreover, there is a burning need for strengthening support systems and reporting mechanisms for victims of gender-based violence and harassment, these are accessible to all genders. Equally important to both genders is the development of prevention programs aimed at fostering a safe and respectful campus environment, that addresses intersectionality by considering how gender intersects with other identities such as race, ethnicity, disability, and socioeconomic status. This ensures a more comprehensive approach to equity and inclusion. Development of policies that are inclusive of all identities is necessary as it recognises the diverse experiences of students and staff, providing inclusive environment of work and study. Collecting detailed data on gender distribution across different levels and departments helps in identifying areas that require intervention and measuring the effectiveness of implemented policies. Conducting regular reviews of the GEP is important to ensure it remains relevant and effective, making adjustments based on feedback and changing circumstances. Engagement with diverse groups of stakeholders in the development and implementation of the GEP, including students, academic staff, administrative staff, and external experts is of paramount importance. For the GEP to be alive, it seems necessary to establish mechanisms for continuous feedback from the university community to inform and refine gender equality initiatives.

In line with Ostaszewska et al.'s (2022) report, revealing gender gap in work distribution and emotional and domestic workload placed on female academicians during the pandemic, even in a university with a significant female majority, a well-rounded GEP is crucial. It ensures that gender equality is maintained across all aspects of the institution, supports minority groups, addresses hidden inequities, and promotes a culture of inclusivity and respect for all. Regular evaluation and adaptation of the GEP ensure it meets the evolving needs of the university community. A case study of a predominantly female institution based in Poland shows that even with a high percentage of female students and staff, their GEP focuses on broader issues of inclusivity, support for all genders, and integrating gender equality into their broader social and educational missions (APS.edu).

Conclusion

Despite some differences, GEPs in the Polish context inspire a greater focus on gender in university governance and greater transparency in collecting, analysing and sharing data related to gender equality. The GEPs trigger and support more awareness and support positive changes. Amongst these, a discussion on the use of the Polish language takes place. It permeates the consciousness of university

staff, as indicated in the discussions and comments obtained in the empirical part of the study. This phenomenon falls into the concept of the soft power of language, which carries with it an unspoken, indirect, even hidden potential of power, as it is not consciously recognised but is certainly there and shapes the social Imaginarium (Odrowąż-Coates, 2018, 2019). A significant space was taken by the discussants in focus groups on the issue of using feminatives – female forms of job titles and formal addresses, not common in Polish language both due to its Latin roots and the social norms and habits. These discussions resembled the national debate in political and educational circles, indicating readiness or lack of support for changes in language. Although similar debates took place ten years ago in English speaking countries and in Scandinavia (Odrowąż-Coates, 2015), in Poland the issue is relatively new (Kaczmarczyk, 2020; Pawłowska, 2019). Research participants expressed the opinion that the change should come from above (the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Science), starting with addressing letters and official documents in alternative forms depending on the gender of the recipient and acknowledging female forms of professions and work grades in formal documents. At the same time, some participants, representing both genders, pointed out that some female versions may sound strange, funny or as if they had lower value to the male equivalents. They were highly aware that this opinion may be based on the bias of what one is used to from their childhood. The upbringing and reinforced ‘old habits’ came up as the reason for some discriminatory behaviours, mainly centred around addressing female employees by much older colleagues. In the online survey 85% of employees claimed to welcome feminatives (*feminativum*) in official communication, and only 21.5% did not mind male job titles when assigned to a female in such professional position. The interlocutors were convinced that their environment was different to that of the general public and therefore more aware, and not necessarily represent the opinions of the majority. Nevertheless, some research participants felt that women and men in academia are treated differently, in most cases to the advantage of men. Most participants were open to more debates and training about gender equality for all members of the community, with particular emphasis on management boards and older generations... The intergenerational issues were raised several times, including suppositions that if older generations pass on certain pattern of language, behaviour and attitudes they will stick to people they are in contact with, who look up to them as authority figures and may unconsciously repeat the undesirable behaviours. They also felt that it is critical to equip students with a critical outlook on gender issues. Some interlocutors pointed out that the official language in academia may serve as a tool of high culture and equal respect, yet others felt it builds barriers and prevents creation of a strong, cohesive community. It was observed that often the official forms are

used when addressing men but more informal, familiarised forms are used when addressing women in the same positions. It is hard to say if this is because they are more approachable and prefer to be closer to other colleagues, or whether it is the environment, which positions them in this situation. Some research participants enquired about the lack of focus on non-binary students and that more support should be given to them, as most GEP actions appear to be prepared along a gender binary. What was encouraging most people claimed that there is no place for any form of discrimination in the workplace and that questionable situations are a very individual and rare occurrence. They saw the formalisation of communication and therefore language as a representation of high culture and equity. Where all persons regardless of position or role are treated with due respect. The discussion resembles Wittgenstein's saying that the limits of one's language are the limits of how one perceives the world (Odrowąż-Coates, 2019).

A relatively low awareness of support mechanisms and official acts related to gender equality, ethics, the use of legal advice, and the service of the mediator or the ombudsman, was worrying. It was pointed out that there is a need for the ombudsman to be more approachable, preferably a younger female, whilst the position has been held by a senior, male professor. The reason for this was that the ombudsman had to have an immaculate ethical record and appear in the community as fair, trustworthy, non-conflicted and a figure of authority, with no fear of any repercussions for himself. From the managerial point of view, there was a worry, that a younger and/or female representative may face more difficulty, balancing her own career progression with representing and defending other colleagues. It appears that more effort has to be taken to make sure all members of community have good access to information about GEP and all available forms of support. Somehow, it also feels that there is a certain air of criticism for older generations and it is not possible in this simple, small study to investigate its true nature, if it can be substantiated by solid evidence rather than individual opinion and what could be the comprehensive justification.

In summary, the empirical study revealed that GEP may fuel obtaining critical information from the staff to inform policymakers and to revise the implementation and impact of GEP. Parallel studies of the students' perception of gender equality at the same university are taking place as well but they are not part of this article.

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