Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal

Working towards gender equality in higher education and research: a critical review of unintended consequences

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Abstract

Purpose – The critical review paper explores contributions on gender equality initiatives (GEIs) in higher education and research to understand how the unintended consequences of GEIs, and their implications, are discussed in the literature. While it is known that the application of GEIs might cause unintended effects, much of the literature often sidelines this aspect.

Design/methodology/approach – Review paper, adopting a critical literature review approach.

Findings – This review demonstrates that GEIs may have unintended consequences such as: perverse incentives, homogenisation of approaches, sidelining intersectionality, placing new pressures on women and the persistence of privileged subjects. These have negative implications for individuals (women and minorities) and equality work. Some instances of positive spillovers (beyond expected outcomes) were identified.

Research limitations/implications – The review calls for re-thinking the design of studies exploring the impact of GEIs in higher education and research. There is a latent need for additional evidence on the organisational conditions, societal norms and legislative context shaping the impact of GEIs.

Practical implications – This research highlights the unintended consequences of GEIs as an intersectional risk factor for consideration by practitioners and scholars alike. Practitioners are invited to raise awareness on the potential unintended consequences of GEIs and devise strategies to anticipate and manage these.

Originality/value – The literature privileges focusing on the expected and positive impact of GEIs. The study of unintended consequences significantly contributes to contemporary understandings of the organisational conditions underlying the success of GEIs, which in turn, holds the potential to foster more robust understandings of how GEIs may be improved.

Keywords Academia, Critical review, Diversity, Gender equality, Gender equality initiatives (GEIs), Higher education, Inclusion

Paper type Literature review

Introduction

The last 30 years have seen a breadth of initiatives to foster gender equality in higher education and research. Gender equality initiatives (herein referred to as GEIs) have primarily targeted

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vertical gender segregation, i.e. the growing underrepresentation of women as the status of a position increases. Vertical segregation is the most visible facet of complex patterns of inequality related to promotion, workload allocation, salary, networking, grants and recognition (Bol *et al.*, 2022; Gehmlich and Krause, 2024; Harris *et al.*, 2024; O'Meara *et al.*, 2017; Steinþórsdóttir *et al.*, 2021). Despite various efforts, vertical segregation continues to exist (EC, 2025; OECD, 2022) and biases and double standards persist (Shorey *et al.*, 2025; Ng *et al.*, 2025; Westoby *et al.*, 2021). These issues reflect the gendered nature of academic organisations as persistent sites of inequality regimes (Acker, 2006), where power is rooted in symbolic capital, i.e. status and recognition (Bourdieu, 1988). This structure is not neutral in terms of gender, class and ethnicity, and penalises those who do not fit the model of the ideal academic (Bleijenbergh *et al.*, 2013; Clavero and Galligan, 2021). In turn, men and women tend to have different perceptions of organisational climates in relation to gender equality; whereby men often view academia as egalitarian, seeing less need for fostering women's careers (Sattari and Sandefur, 2019; Tang and Horta, 2024), women perceive a "chilly climate" (Britton, 2017) with men accessing and inhabiting prestigious positions more easily (Kandiko Howson *et al.*, 2018). Consequently, the impact of GEIs may be limited in the absence of broader organisational and cultural changes (Drew and Canavan, 2020; Rosser and Laursen, 2022).

This critical review contributes to understanding of the limitations, unintended consequences and impact of GEIs in higher education (herein referred to as HE) and research, exploring how these consequences affect organisations and individuals. The paper is built upon the assumption that gender is a performative endeavour (Butler, 1990), which is shared by most of the recent literature on GEIs (Drew and Canavan, 2020; Tardos *et al.*, 2025). Our broader theoretical orientation is socio-constructionist and methodologically interpretivist; this is consistent with our conceptualisation of gender and to the critical nature of the review (Wright and Michailova, 2023). We highlight here some of the key milestones in the development of GEIs to demonstrate that, despite the considerable extant literature, unintended consequences are often overlooked or insufficiently considered. In turn, we propose that for GEIs to be further impactful, improved understanding of the unintended consequences and intersectional considerations, for both scholars and practitioners, are key determinants of their future utility and impact. While the extant literature has predominantly examined the intended outcomes and anticipated benefits of GEIs, our contribution lies in synthesising and critically examining their unintended consequences, which have been comparatively neglected, through an intersectionally sensitive lens.

The evolution of GEIs

A landmark programme fostering gender equality in HE is ADVANCE, launched in 2001 by the U.S. National Science Foundation (Rosser and Laursen, 2022; Rosser, 2017; Rosser *et al.*, 2019). Similarly, the European Union has been funding initiatives from the 6th Framework programme (2002–2006) onwards (Rosa *et al.*, 2020). ADVANCE and EU-funded initiatives work quite similarly: HE institutions can apply to competitive calls for projects aimed at tackling gender inequality. These projects typically take the form of applied research, aimed at the design and application of tailored initiatives in areas such as institutional policies, women's career advancement, leadership development, work-life balance, visibility and networking, and training. As a result, a range of inter-institutional projects to foster gender equality emerged and paved the way for subsequent efforts (Drew and Canavan, 2020; Furst-Holloway and Miner, 2019; Murgia and Poggio, 2019; Sümer, 2020; Tardos *et al.*, 2025; Zippel and Ferree, 2019).

Another relevant example is the Athena SWAN Charter (AS), initially launched in 2005 in the United Kingdom, and now also adopted in Ireland and Australia (Graves *et al.*, 2019; Munir *et al.*, 2013). The Charter initially focused on STEMM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine), where women are particularly underrepresented; it

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awards different levels of recognition (bronze, silver or gold) to academic and research institutions based on their own self-assessment of needs in relation to gender equality and the subsequent preparation of action plans. As this is a voluntary scheme and initial uptake was low, in 2011 the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) announced the plan to request NIHR research funds applicants hold an AS Award. Coming into force in 2016, this brought not only an exponential uptake of the Charter, but also a significant increase in the number of women in mid-leadership positions or as grant applicants; the requirement was lifted in 2020 (Ovseiko *et al.*, 2020), and the efficacy of AS remains a moot point.

Participation in ADVANCE, EU frameworks and AS constitutes a privileged space to foster gender equality. However, HE institutions, independently of being part of one of these frameworks, can decide to promote their own GEIs. Amongst the most widespread GEIs are mentoring and leadership development programmes, often with an exclusive focus (i.e. women-only). Mentoring programmes are widespread in STEMM (Baiduc *et al.*, 2016; Gandhi *et al.*, 2023). Research in medicine, for instance, extensively examines mentoring outcomes (House *et al.*, 2021; Shen *et al.*, 2022). While mentoring generally benefits mentees, its long-term effects and impacts on structural change remain unclear (Meyer *et al.*, 2025). Women-only mentoring avoids reproducing gender power relations; when mentoring is open to everyone, participants belonging to a minority group often experience fewer benefits compared to their white male counterparts (Bahnson *et al.*, 2025; O'Connor, 2020). However, other authors recognise limits in women-only programmes: firstly, in disciplines where women are particularly underrepresented, these programmes risk overburdening the [few] senior women available. Secondly, they may be ineffective at challenging wider gendered organisational culture and stereotypes (Dashper, 2019).

Tensions in GEIs design

GEIs are often marked by tensions in the choice between exclusive vs. inclusive approaches. Leslie (2019), who offers, to our knowledge, the only conceptual contribution to date on unintended consequences of diversity initiatives (including GEIs), stresses that exclusive programmes may be the cause of a perception of threat from other groups, with consequent stereotypes against the targets, which backfire. Perriton's (2022) contribution on leadership development programmes for women agrees on this point. Exclusive approaches might also make women and minorities excessively visible and subject to tokenism (Woods *et al.*, 2025). Inclusive approaches allow overcoming these problems; however, they can inadvertently advantage privileged or overrepresented groups. Antecol *et al.* (2018) document the case of an inclusive "stop the clock policy", which ultimately sought to support women's careers, but resulted in an additional benefit to men.

The choice between inclusive and exclusive approaches is probably one of the most relevant tensions in equality work: we suggest it emerges from a deeper tension in the assumptions characterising GEIs, as explained by Schiebinger (2016): do we aim at "making women fit" for an academic and research career, or do we want to change organisational structures and challenge research practices and epistemologies, in order to make academia more inclusive? Schiebinger (2016) suggests that aiming for improvements in terms of gender representation is not enough; rather, interventions should aim at structural change towards more inclusive organisations, and exclusive approaches are not the best suited to tackle this challenge.

Towards integrated approaches

Evolutions of the aforementioned programmes (ADVANCE, EU and AS) converge towards an awareness that exclusive approaches have limited impact: instead, context-specific, participatory and integrated approaches, which target multiple organisational levels, stakeholders and forms of inequality, are needed (Bailey and Drew, 2020; García-Peñalvo *et al.*, 2019; Oppi and Galizzi, 2025; Rosser and Laursen, 2022; Rosser *et al.*, 2019). For

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example, initially AS was focused on STEMM, but then was extended to all disciplines in 2015, and now also includes professional staff. ADVANCE kept its focus on STEMM but encouraged collaborations with other disciplines (Laursen and De Welde, 2019; Rosser *et al.*, 2019). Further, there have also been changes in order to better consider intersectional inequalities. Intersectionality as a concept was proposed by Crenshaw (2013) to highlight how more social identities (i.e. not only gender but also race and social class) combine and multiply to create different forms and extents of inequality. This means that looking at gender only might not be enough to account for inequality and fight discrimination: for example, racially minoritised women in HE are much more impostorised and discriminated against than white women (Gutiérrez and Cole, 2025). Current developments in intersectionality theory urge scholars to critically investigate how power structures create intersectional inequalities through the reproduction of knowledge, and how an array of social identities (related, e.g. to religion, age, disability, sexuality) play a role in this process (Hill Collins, 2020; Brah and Phoenix, 2023).

Recent empirical literature points to the benefits of integrated approaches to change and discusses initiatives leading to an increase in women's representation at different levels and, in some cases, a more inclusive culture (Bilimoria and Singer, 2019; Leenders *et al.*, 2020; Van Miegroet *et al.*, 2019). In parallel, other works instead show persisting barriers to gender equality (Nichols and Stahl, 2019; Shorey *et al.*, 2025; Westoby *et al.*, 2021), which suggests that the work on GEIs is a steep learning curve and that context-specific tailoring of initiatives is paramount.

Looking for unintended consequences

Literature on GEIs tends to focus on their impact in terms of addressing vertical segregation (e.g. increased number of women in leadership positions, number of women applying for external funds, reduced attrition rates for PhD students), improving career satisfaction and organisational cultures (Hu and Fernandez, 2025; Meyer *et al.*, 2025; Van Miegroet *et al.*, 2019). Knowledge of how GEIs might impact other policies or areas of academic and professional life (related, e.g. to other dimensions of equality, well-being or career development) is scant. Arguably, in the context of the anti-DEI agenda (Ng *et al.*, 2025), gender and other equality initiatives are simultaneously under threat and ever more pressing. GEIs are inherently challenging as they require organisational change: sociological and organisational change literature stresses that resistance and unintended consequences tend to be natural processes characterising change initiatives (Leslie, 2019). Furthermore, processes of introducing new policies and practices (or amending existing ones) may have ripple effects on other organisational policies and practices (Lansu *et al.*, 2020), though such effects are difficult to predict. Moreover, van den Brink and Benschop stress that "the undoing of gender inequality simultaneously entails a doing of something else" (2012, p. 71); specific GEIs might cause new practices or perceptions to emerge, which hinder equality. Amongst the examples, van den Brink and Benschop (2012) discuss new norms on transparency in recruitment, which ultimately led to new forms of favouritism. Blättel-Mink (2009) also highlights that what is reputed to be "good practice" in one context may lead to very different outcomes in another. However, the extant literature rarely discusses problems and unintended consequences of GEIs. Lansu *et al.* (2020) represent one of the few studies that explicitly focus on understanding resistance to GEIs and how this affects change in a university. Moreover, some literature on AS is raising concerns about unintended consequences (Yarrow and Johnston, 2023; Bhopal and Henderson, 2021; Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019).

Research questions

This review seeks to unravel the potential unintended consequences of GEIs. The term "initiatives" is privileged for its greater inclusivity compared to terms like "plan" or "measure". Currently, most literature on GEIs tends to assume a socio-constructionist or

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performative view of gender, mainly drawing on Acker's (1990) concept of "gendered organisation", Martin's (2003) concept of "doing gender" (see also West and Zimmerman, 1987) and Butler (1990) on performativity. We, as authors, adhere to the assumption that gender is a performative endeavour. In this review, we investigate literature which explicitly claims to analyse GEIs, independently of its specific theoretical underpinnings and we attempt to account for differences and tensions in theoretical orientations, when these are especially relevant to our argumentation. The most notable tension relates to the fact that gender is often analysed as a binary construct even by literature adhering to a socio-constructionist and performative view of gender, a problem discussed by Grzelec (2024). We believe that our openness in relation to the theoretical underpinnings of literature on GEIs will be beneficial to better understand the unintended consequences of GEIs and their critical analysis. Thus, the following two questions guide our review:

(1) Is literature on GEIs in higher education and research institutions reporting unintended consequences of GEIs, and how are such consequences discussed?

(2) How are implications of unintended consequences, for individuals and organisations, analysed in the literature?

Methodology

Literature on GEIs and their implications is analysed following the critical review approach. Wright and Michailova (2023) stress that critical reviews are not systematic reviews: they go beyond a description of the literature and the construction of PRISMA workflows, but require authors to unveil their own perspective, engage in in-depth analysis and "exercise critical judgement". Each review might take its own angle on "being critical"; we build upon Mingers (2000), who stresses that being critical is to exercise a critique of rhetoric, tradition, authority and objectivity. GEIs, which often are contested terrain, lend themselves well to such critical exercises. In turn, this review seeks to probe for multiple explanations and understand the influence of power relations and structural inequalities in the phenomena it explores (see Kunisch *et al.*, 2023). Another reason to opt for the critical review approach relates to our own position: we are gender scholars, but also experts taking part [or who have taken part] in concrete efforts for designing equality initiatives. We are not a *tabula rasa*, with our background knowledge and our own privileged approaches in relation to GEIs having an impact (including also our own perceptions and opinions over current literature). In Appendix we give an account of our own positionality. Notably, several works sparked our interest in this critical review and informed our judgement: for example, van den Brink and Benschop (2012) on doing and undoing gender in academia; Leslie (2019) on unintended consequences of diversity initiatives; and the critical review by Özbilgin *et al.* (2011) on the work-life interface. Further, the recent systematic review by Meyer *et al.* (2025) on diversity interventions in STEM also informed our focus, particularly its observation of scarce evidence on unintended effects. Given Leslie's (2019) seminal conceptual contribution on unintended consequences of diversity initiatives (including GEIs), as aforementioned, this reference served as the core seed reference for this critical review paper. The utilisation of a "seed reference" for the purpose of citation tracking (Hirt *et al.*, 2023) ensured systematicity in our review and was also utilised for forward citation tracking (Wohlin, 2014) to enable the identification of later relevant works. Hirt *et al.* (2023) and Wohlin (2014) works are from different disciplines; the methodological rigour and structure are applicable here, and both works emphasise seed references and citation tracking as beneficial in complex reviews.

More broadly, our approach to reviewing the literature resembles a "wayfaring" journey (Cunliffe, 2018) which relies on abduction (Golden-Biddle, 2020) as a privileged way of reasoning. Abduction distinguishes critical reviews from pure systematic reviews (Wright and Michailova, 2023), and wayfaring supports abduction processes. Wayfaring depicts a journey

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where researchers are able to couple their own experience, previous knowledge, competence and acumen, with the ability to be open, to look for unexpected hunches and even evidence or interpretations challenging our own assumptions. For us, in practice, wayfaring meant to couple our own background knowledge with more systematic phases of literature search and analysis, in order to cultivate openness and foster our analytical power.

In our research process: first, we focused on Leslie's (2019) conceptual work on unintended consequences of diversity initiatives, which is published in a top journal (*Academy of Management Review*) and widely cited (>300 citations on Scopus). Thus, as an initial assessment of the problem underpinning our own work, we screened the abstracts of the papers citing Leslie (2019). We identified that most of the results did not discuss the case of HEIs; for us, this was interesting *per se* and constituted a reason to further progress in our search. Thus, we opted for a more inclusive and broader approach, using Web of Science. We used a variety of search strings, as listed in Table 1 below, restricting our search to peer-reviewed materials.

Some queries do not include any disciplinary restrictions (queries 1 and 3, Table 1), but this produced many irrelevant results (particularly contributions where the issue of unintended consequences was mentioned, but with no discussion or clear link to specific GEIs). Thus, for queries 2, 4 and 7 (Table 1) the search was restricted to the disciplines of Sociology, Women's studies, Gender and Sexuality, Management, Business and Economics, and Educational Research. Our initial plan was to look for papers published from 2010; however, the vast majority of the results were published in the past 10 years, so we did not impose any limit in subsequent queries. We also ran searches on mentoring for women academics and leadership development (queries 3 and 4, Table 1), which are the most applied GEIs according to the literature (Meyer *et al.*, 2025; Shen *et al.*, 2022). We explicitly searched for literature on the most prominent GEIs, i.e. NSF ADVANCE, AS and EU projects (queries 5, 6 and 7, Table 1). We replicated the same search in ERIC, a database which focuses on education and higher education, but the search using Web of Science provided more results.

As outlined in Table 1, the screening of the papers went through three systematic phases. This was because a few papers only have unintended consequences of GEIs as their main focus, and some papers do not use the term "unintended consequences", but they may use terms such as "side effects", "criticalities", "problems". In turn, it was necessary to understand the level of engagement in the topic through thorough, careful reading and an overall, holistic assessment of each paper's objectives, background literature and presentation of arguments, findings and implications. Only papers which explicitly recognised criticalities of GEIs and attempted to engage in some analysis (or formulating some recommendations based on these) were retained. Teamwork was essential across these phases: while the first author was in charge of phase 1 (following team agreement over the search terms), the other authors worked together in phases 2 and 3 to reach a consensus on the final dataset. Importantly, the selection work was conducted by closely reading the papers and manually highlighting the relevant segments; in phase 3, at least two authors had to agree on inclusion of the paper in the final dataset.

The full list of retained works (47) is presented in Table 2. Importantly, we did a final quality check on this corpus to ensure the retained works were from reliable sources and characterised by methodological transparency. We privileged journals ranked Q1 in Scimago but retained three papers from Q2 journals and one from conference proceedings because of high relevance to our topic. Especially for papers coming from journals we were not familiar with, we doublechecked the respective journal portals to assess the rigour of the source. The corpus presents a good level of variety in terms of publication outlets (from generalist journals, such as the *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, to disciplinary journals, such as the *Journal of Surgical Education*), and disciplines (mainly covering gender studies, organisation studies, education), with a vast majority of Q1 journals and a good variety of methodological approaches, including essays, reviews, qualitative and quantitative research, but with a prevalence of qualitative, case-study research. Table 2 details, for each article, the journal, its Scimago ranking, the methodology and the level of engagement with the topic (i.e. 1 point for

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Table 1. Literature review process

	Search strings	Results	Steps 1 (*)	2 (**)	3 (***)
1	"gender intervention" OR "gender equality" OR "gender equality plan" OR "gender equity" (Abstract) and academi* OR "higher education" (Abstract) and Article or Review Article or Proceeding Paper or Early Access or Book Chapters (Document Types) and 2010 or 2011 or 2012 or 2013 or 2014 or 2015 or 2016 or 2017 or 2018 or 2019 or 2020 or 2021 or 2022 or 2023 or 2024 or 2025 (Publication Years)	1703	41	26	9
2	gender (Abstract) and "unintended consequence*" OR "unintended effect*" (Abstract) and Sociology or Women S Studies or Management or Economics (Web of Science Categories) and 6.178 Gender & Sexuality Studies or 6.10 Economics or 6.3 Management or 6.11 Education & Educational Research (Citation Topics Meso)	48	3	1	1
3	"gender" OR "women" (Abstract) and academi* OR "higher education" (Abstract) and mentoring (Abstract) and outcome* OR effect* OR impact (All Fields) and Article or Review Article or Proceeding Paper or Early Access or Book Chapters (Document Types) and 2010 or 2011 or 2012 or 2013 or 2014 or 2015 or 2016 or 2017 or 2018 or 2019 or 2020 or 2021 or 2022 or 2023 or 2024 or 2025 (Publication Years)	461	94	17	11
4	gender (Abstract) and "leadership development" (Abstract) and women (Abstract) and Management or Education Educational Research or Women S Studies or Business (Web of Science Categories) and 6.178 Gender & Sexuality Studies or 6.3 Management or 6.73 Social Psychology or 6.11 Education & Educational Research (Citation Topics Meso) and Management or Education Educational Research or Women S Studies or Business (Web of Science Categories)	65	17	7	4
5	"Athena swan" (Abstract) and Article or Review Article or Proceeding Paper or Early Access or Book Chapters (Document Types)	45	33	25	21
6	"NSF ADVANCE" (Abstract) and gender (Abstract) and universit* OR "higher education" OR "academi*" (Abstract)	18	15	7	4
7	gender (Abstract) and science OR academia (Abstract) and European Commission OR FP7 OR Horizon (Funding Agency) and Education Educational Research or Multidisciplinary Sciences or Management or Social Sciences Interdisciplinary or Women S Studies or Sociology or Psychology Multidisciplinary or Social Issues (Web of Science Categories)	68	18	9	6
Total number of papers		2,407	220	99	54
	47 (after removing overlaps)				

* The first screening aimed at checking consistency with the topic (gender equality initiatives) through a reading of the abstract. Despite the effort in selecting clear keywords, some results did not focus on purposefully designed gender equality initiatives, or these initiatives targeted undergraduates or professionals (other than academics and scientists). This was especially true for search strings 1 and 2

** The second screening aimed at retaining papers with explicit mention of unintended consequences/ implementation issues. The screening was based on keywords search in the text and selective reading. Review papers were retained. An important number of papers that studied gender equality initiatives did not discuss any unintended consequence

*** The third screening aimed at selecting papers with explicit discussion of unintended consequences and attempts to look at their implications or underlying conditions. Papers which only briefly mentioned unintended consequences with no attempt to engage in some analysis were not retained. A final quality check was conducted to ensure only peer-reviewed materials were retained, and to scrutinize for methodological transparency and topic consistency the papers not published in Q1 journals

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Table 2. List of retained contributions for in-depth analysis

Authors	Pub year	Publication outlet and Scimago ranking	Title	Methodology	Depth of analysis of unintended consequences
Armstrong, J; Sullivan, A	2025	BRITISH EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL (Q1)	A critical analysis of Athena Swan as a policy-scoring scheme	Analysis of history and developments of AS	☑☑☐
Bahnson, M; Ross, M; Berdanier, CGP	2025	INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENGINEERING EDUCATION (Q2)	Content Analysis of Postdoctoral Mentorship Plans and Missed Opportunities to Align with Theory and Best Practices	Survey to postdoctoral mentors and mentees (NSF awardees, USA) and qualitative analysis of mentorship plans	☑☐☐
Bhopal, K; Henderson, H	2021	EDUCATIONAL REVIEW (Q1)	Competing inequalities: gender versus race in higher education institutions in the UK	Case study research, mainly based on interviews and focus groups, across six UK universities	☑☑☑
Biehl, B; Schönfeld, K	2023	GENDER WORK AND ORGANIZATION (Q1)	Writing differently with film: An animated video on gender, leadership and language	Critical essay and creation of a video to represent main arguments and inspire future steps	☑☐☐
Bierema, LL; Sim, E; He, WX; Cox, AB	2022	GENDER IN MANAGEMENT (Q1)	Double jeopardy: the paradox and promise of coaching women leaders from a critical feminist perspective	Critical literature review	☑☑☑
Bilimoria, D; Singer, LT	2019	EQUALITY DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION (Q1)	Institutions Developing Excellence in Academic Leadership (IDEAL) A partnership to advance gender equity, diversity, and inclusion in academic STEM	Case study, analysis of the NSF ADVANCE project “IDEAL” during 2009–2012	☑☐☐
Caffrey, L; Wyatt, D; Fudge, N; Mattingley, H; Williamson, C; McKevitt, C	2016	BMJ OPEN (Q1)	Gender equity programmes in academic medicine: a realist evaluation approach to Athena SWAN processes	Case study research, mainly based on interviews, observations of committee meetings and focus groups, across 5 departments from a university medical school in the UK	☑☑☐

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Table 2. Continued

Authors	Pub year	Publication outlet and Scimago ranking	Title	Methodology	Depth of analysis of unintended consequences
Carr, PL; Gunn, C; Raj, A; Kaplan, S; Freund, KM	2017	WOMEN'S HEALTH ISSUES (Q1)	Recruitment, Promotion, and Retention of Women in Academic Medicine: How Institutions Are Addressing Gender Disparities	Interviews with faculty members and senior leaders in 24 medical schools in the USA	☑☐☐
Clavero, S; Galligan, Y	2021	GENDER WORK AND ORGANIZATION (Q1)	Delivering gender justice in academia through gender equality plans? Normative and practical challenges	Qualitative analysis of Gender Equality Plans across 7 European universities	☑☑☐
Corneille, M; Lee, A; Allen, S; Cannady, J; Guess, A	2019	EQUALITY DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION (Q1)	Barriers to the advancement of women of color faculty in STEM: The need for promoting equity using an intersectional framework	Qualitative meta-analysis of literature focused on the challenges facing women of colour faculty, from 2001 till 2017, final sample of 42 studies	☑☐☐
Cutright, TJ; Makki, N; Coats, LT	2025	JOURNAL OF WOMEN AND MINORITIES IN SCIENCE AND ENGINEERING (Q1)	10 steps forward, 15 steps back: the strides and missteps of diversity in engineering	In-depth interviews with 16 participants in a professional development program focused on preparing women and BIPOC PhD students and postdocs for careers in engineering academia (USA)	☑☑☐
de Aguiar, TRS; Haque, S; Bender, KA	2022	GENDER WORK AND ORGANIZATION (Q1)	Athena SWAN gender equality plans and the gendered impact of COVID-19	Thematic analysis of 11 applications from UK Business Schools with an AS award by Jan. 2020 and 7 interviews with senior leaders of the same Schools	☑☑☐
Drew, E	2022	JOURNAL OF GENDER STUDIES (Q1)	Navigating unchartered waters: anchoring Athena SWAN into Irish HEIs	Analysis of adoption and impact of AS in Ireland and analysis of the case of Trinity College Dublin	☑☑☐

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Table 2. Continued

Authors	Pub year	Publication outlet and Scimago ranking	Title	Methodology	Depth of analysis of unintended consequences
Gregory-Smith, I	2018	BRITISH JOURNAL OF INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS (Q1)	Positive Action Towards Gender Equality: Evidence from the Athena SWAN Charter in UK Medical Schools	Longitudinal study of the impact of AS on the employment of female clinical academics in UK medical schools, 2004–2013	☑☑☐
Haque, S; de Aguiar, TRS; Bender, KA	2025	GENDER WORK AND ORGANIZATION (Q1)	Managing the Unwanted: An Application of Dispositional Analysis on the Athena SWAN Initiative in UK Business Schools	Thematic analysis of 12 applications from UK Business Schools with an AS award by Jan. 2020 and 10 interviews with senior leaders of the same Schools	☑☑☐
House, A; Dracup, N; Burkinshaw, P; Ward, V; Bryant, LD	2021	BMJ OPEN (Q1)	Mentoring as an intervention to promote gender equality in academic medicine: a systematic review	Systematic review on the impact of mentoring in academic medicine, from 2006 till 2017, final sample of 32 studies	☑☐☐
Johnston, K; Yarrow, E	2024	PUBLIC MANAGEMENT REVIEW (Q1)	Active representation and identity taxation: unintended outcome of representative labour?	In-depth interviews with 35 academics and professionals, who have some role in AS in Ireland and Britain	☑☑☑
Kalpazidou Schmidt, E., Ovseiko, P. V., Henderson, L. R., & Kiparoglou, V	2020	HEALTH RESEARCH POLICY AND SYSTEMS (Q1)	Understanding the Athena SWAN award scheme for gender equality as a complex social intervention in a complex system: analysis of Silver award action plans in a comparative European perspective	Analysis of the design and implementation of 16 departmental Athena SWAN Silver Action Plans in Medical Sciences at the University of Oxford, UK	☑☑☐
Káplár-Kodácsy, K., Dorner, H., & Fillingim, R. B. (2024). E	2024	STUDIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION (Q1)	Exploring the ripple effects of mentoring: reinvesting gained experience of research mentoring in higher education	Semi-structured interviews with 12 experienced mentors, and their 12 graduate mentees, in higher education institute in the USA	☑☐☐

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Table 2. Continued

Authors	Pub year	Publication outlet and Scimago ranking	Title	Methodology	Depth of analysis of unintended consequences
Lambert, WM; Nana, N; Afonja, S; Saeed, A; Amado, AC; Golightly, LM	2025	STUDIES IN GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL EDUCATION (Q2)	Addressing structural mentoring barriers in postdoctoral training: a qualitative study	Qualitative study involving 32 biomedical postdocs from different universities (USA) in 5 focus groups	☑☑☐
Laursen, SL; De Welde, K	2019	EQUALITY DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION (Q1)	The changer and the changed Evolving theories and practices of change in ADVANCE calls for institutional transformation	Qualitative, longitudinal analysis of 9 requests for proposals for the NSF ADVANCE program (2001–2016), and historical analysis of funded ADVANCE	☑☑☐
Leenders, J; Bleijenbergh, IL; Van den Brink, MCL	2020	GENDER WORK AND ORGANIZATION (Q1)	Myriad potential for mentoring: Understanding the process of transformational change through a gender equality intervention	Case study of three cohorts of a mentoring programme for women academics in a Dutch university, drawing on surveys, interviews, focus groups and documentary analysis	☑☑☐
Loumpourdi, M	2023	GENDER IN MANAGEMENT (Q1)	Leadership development programmes: part of the solution or part of the problem of women's under-representation in leadership?	Conceptual paper	☑☑☑
Meyer, J., Julie, B., Estelle, C., Lucy, Y., & and Blackwood, L	2025	STUDIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION (Q1)	Increasing diversity in STEM academia: a scoping review of intervention evaluations	Scoping review of diversity interventions in academic STEM from high-income countries, from 2011 till 2023, final sample 184 articles	☑☐☐

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Table 2. Continued

Authors	Pub year	Publication outlet and Scimago ranking	Title	Methodology	Depth of analysis of unintended consequences
Mousa, M; Boyle, J; Skouteris, H; Mullins, AK; Currie, G; Riach, K; Teede, HJ	2021	ECLINICALMEDICINE (Q1)	Advancing women in healthcare leadership: A systematic review and meta-synthesis of multi-sector evidence on organisational interventions	Systematic review of organisational interventions for advancing women in leadership with at least one measurable outcome, from 2000 till 2021, final sample 91 studies	☑☐☐
Myers, K; George, S; Danell, AS; Morehead, AT	2023	SOCIOLOGICA-INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR SOCIOLOGICAL DEBATE (Q2)	Bringing the Men Back In: Catalyzing Gender Equality at Universities Through Advocates & Allies	Analysis of early data (mainly questionnaires and observations of training sessions) of an ADVANCE training initiative at East Carolina University, USA	☑☐☐
Nash, M; Grant, R; Lee, LM; Martinez-Marrades, A; Winzenberg, T	2021	HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT (Q1)	An exploration of perceptions of gender equity among SAGE Athena SWAN self-assessment team members in a regional Australian university	Interviews with 7 self-assessment team members in the first year of an AS pilot in an Australian university	☑☑☐
Nash, M; Grant, R; Moore, R; Winzenberg, T	2021	PLOS ONE (Q1)	Male allyship in institutional STEMM gender equity initiatives	Same dataset as Nash *et al*. (2021a, b) cited above, focus on men's accounts (N4)	☑☑☐
O'Connor, P	2020	INTERDISCIPLINARY SCIENCE REVIEWS (Q1)	Why is it so difficult to reduce gender inequality in male-dominated higher educational organizations? A feminist institutional perspective	Essay and review of evidence on AS	☑☑☐
Ovseiko, PV; Chapple, A; Edmunds, LD; Ziebland, S	2017	HEALTH RESEARCH POLICY AND SYSTEMS (Q1)	Advancing gender equality through the Athena SWAN Charter for Women in Science: an exploratory study of women's and men's perceptions	Secondary analysis of data from two AS projects in medical science in Oxford (UK). Online semi-structured survey (N59) and narrative interviews with 37 women involved in AS	☑☑☐

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Table 2. Continued

Authors	Pub year	Publication outlet and Scimago ranking	Title	Methodology	Depth of analysis of unintended consequences
Ovseiko, PV; Pololi, LH; Edmunds, LD; Civian, JT; Daly, M; Buchan, AM	2019	INTERDISCIPLINARY SCIENCE REVIEWS (Q1)	Creating a more supportive and inclusive university culture: a mixed-methods interdisciplinary comparative analysis of medical and social sciences at the University of Oxford	Quantitative and qualitative analysis of two C-Change surveys of 4,997 faculty and staff in medical and social sciences at Oxford, UK	☑☐☐
Perriton, L	2022	JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT (Q1)	The problematic persistence of gender reflexivity in women's leadership development	Conceptual paper	☑☑☐
Ruggi, LO; Duvvury, N	2023	CRITICAL SOCIAL POLICY (Q1)	Shattered glass piling at the bottom: The "problem" with gender equality policy for higher education	Analysis of two key documents from the Irish Higher Education Authority on gender equality in higher education	☑☑☑
Saloniki, EC; Halvorsrud, K; Whelan, I; Halim, N; George, R; Orkin, C	2024	MEDICAL HUMANITIES (Q1)	Staff disability data in UK higher education: Evidence from EDI reports	Descriptive cross-sector quantitative study based on UK HEIs, using HESA data and EDI reports as published in universities websites	☑☐☐
Shen, MR; Tzioumis, E; Andersen, E; Wouk, K; McCall, R; Li, W; Girdler, S; Malloy, E	2022	ACADEMIC MEDICINE (Q1)	Impact of Mentoring on Academic Career Success for Women in Medicine: A Systematic Review	Systematic review on mentoring for women in medicine till March 2020, final sample 91 studies	☑☐☐
Stolarski, A; Carlson, S; Oriel, B; O'Neal, P; Whang, E; Kristo, G	2020	JOURNAL OF SURGICAL EDUCATION (Q1)	Mentorship of Surgical Interns: Are We Failing to Meet Their Needs?	Survey to 59 surgical interns to evaluate their internship experience, four academic medical centres in Boston, MA	☑☐☐

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Table 2. Continued

Authors	Pub year	Publication outlet and Scimago ranking	Title	Methodology	Depth of analysis of unintended consequences
Taylor, H; Williamson, S	2024	QUALITATIVE REPORT (Q1)	Co-Design to Evaluate the Impact of Gender Equality Initiatives: Lessons for Practitioners, Evaluators and Researchers	Reflexive analysis of authors' approach to design and evaluation of GEIs under the guise of AS in a large university, Australia	☑☐☐
Thaler, A	2019	PROCEEDINGS OF THE 2ND INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON GENDER RESEARCH (ICGR 2019)	The Academic Feminist Fight Club	Essay (based on coordination of an EU-funded project on gender in science) and proposal for action	☑☑☑
Tzanakou, C	2019	NATURE (Q1)	Unintended consequences of gender-equality plans	Essay and proposal for action	☑☑☑
Tzanakou, C; Clayton-Hathway, K; Humbert, AL	2021	FRONTIERS IN SOCIOLOGY (Q1)	Certifying Gender Equality in Research: Lessons Learnt From Athena SWAN and Total E-Quality Award Schemes	Comparative analysis of AS (UK) and Total E-Quality Award (Germany), based on 20 interviews with stakeholders and documentary analysis	☑☐☐
Tzanakou, C; Infanger, C; Oliveira, L; Staniscuaski, F	2025	EQUALITY DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION (Q1)	A critical reflection on internationalizing gender equality certification: the case of Brazilian academia	Critical assessment of the potential application of AS in Brazil	☑☑☑
Tzanakou, C; Pearce, R	2019	GENDER WORK AND ORGANIZATION (Q1)	Moderate feminism within or against the neoliberal university? The example of Athena SWAN	Semi-structured qualitative interviews (N13) and focus groups (N4) with participants (most of whom involved in AS) from four UK universities, and analysis of AS documents publicly available on websites	☑☑☑

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Table 2. Continued

Authors	Pub year	Publication outlet and Scimago ranking	Title	Methodology	Depth of analysis of unintended consequences
Van Miegroet, H; Glass, C; Callister, RR; Sullivan, K	2019	EQUALITY DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION (Q1)	Unclogging the pipeline: advancement to full professor in academic STEM	Analysis of faculty demographics and promotion data (2008–2014), and faculty responses to two waves of a climate survey at a mid-size public doctoral university in the USA	☑☐☐
Westoby, C; Dyson, J; Cowdell, F; Buescher, T	2021	GENDER AND EDUCATION (Q1)	What are the barriers and facilitators to success for female academics in UK HEIs? A narrative review	Narrative review of literature on factors influencing women's careers, published from 2009 till 2019, final sample 32 studies	☑☑☐
Wieners, S., & Weber, S. M	2020	MANAGEMENT LEARNING (Q1)	Athena's claim in an academic regime of performativity: Discursive organizing of excellence and gender at the intersection of heterotopia and heteronomia	Case study research, mainly based on interviews and analysis of documents and video statements, across 6 academic and research institutions, Germany	☑☑☐
Woods, J; Cunningham, JA; McAdam, M; Miller, K	2025	INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENTREPRENEURIAL BEHAVIOR & RESEARCH (Q1)	The academic, the entrepreneur, the female in a dress: a micro-level exploration of multiple role identities	Interviews with 15 women academic entrepreneurs across 2 universities in the UK	☑☑☐
Yarrow, E; Johnston, K	2023	GENDER WORK AND ORGANIZATION (Q1)	Athena SWAN: Institutional peacocking in the neoliberal university	In-depth qualitative interviews with 35 AS champions across the UK and Republic of Ireland	☑☑☑

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papers acknowledging unintended consequences in the findings or implications, 2 points for papers bringing a more nuanced analysis when presenting the findings, 3 points for papers having unintended consequences as one of the main foci). This is demarcated in Table 2 by a tick rating.

Afterwards, we shared the articles across the team and focused on the sections discussing unintended consequences to conduct a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) based on initial open-coding. The initial open coding was carried out by each person, highlighting the relevant sections in the text, using the search terms from the strings to inform their coding and provide an element of structure. As such, there were both inductive and deductive codes. As the next step, we cross-compared our preliminary codes to work together on grouping codes abductively and then discussing and finding common themes. This aspect of the process involved merging and grouping the codes, as well as reaching agreement as a team on which groups of codes were most pertinent and in order to enable us to move from description of the literature to structured interpretation and analysis.

Following on from the discussions, six overarching themes emerged, which are discussed below.

We are aware of the limitations of this review, primarily surrounding our inclusion criteria and focus on English language sources, as well as the selected databases. Nevertheless, the analysis of the papers allowed us to achieve saturation in terms of topic, highlighting the importance of intersectional considerations of gender in GEIs, as well as bringing to the fore their unintended consequences, which arguably serve as important points for future policy considerations of the implementation of GEIs. We hope that our findings serve as a fruitful springboard for future research.

Findings

The 47 selected articles varied widely in how they address unintended consequences, with some devoting only a few lines (e.g. Meyer *et al.*, 2025), while others provide much more analysis (e.g. Hu and Fernandez, 2025). We decided as a team to present the six themes raised in these papers by means of key questions: Table 3 signposts each theme to the supporting studies. These questions aimed to provide a comprehensive perspective of the current literature and positions on the topic. Concurrently, they also aim to leave the discussed issues open for further debate, and elicit new questions for future research, recognising that evidence on unintended consequences remains disparate and difficult to integrate.

Perverse incentives?

The fact that design and adoption of GEIs might give rise to some forms of perverse incentives has been discussed in relation to AS, where perverse incentives are often related to neoliberalism. Neoliberalism in HE is recognised as a tendency stemming from market-based reforms, mainly in the United Kingdom and the United States from the 1980s onward, subsequently influencing the broader academic discourse and practice at a global level, albeit with different impacts across different groups of people (Brah, 2002). Neoliberalism has led to academic institutions increasing their focus on profitability and results that can be measured (and promoted). As such, it has attracted a variety of critiques, mainly for reducing students to customers and its negative impact on academic freedom and creativity (Aguirre and Martinez, 2021), but also for the "co-optation" (De Jong and Kimm, 2017) of feminism and gender equality work. In a neoliberal HE system, gender equality itself is marketised in order to have appeal and achieve financial sustainability (de Aguiar *et al.*, 2022). Co-optation of GEIs by neoliberalism means that the gender issues to work on are restricted and disciplined (see the focus on vertical segregation) so that they remain aligned with a neoliberal logic. Thus, focusing on numbers (e.g. higher proportion of women senior leaders, for example) and

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Table 3. Findings from the literature and main supporting works

Themes from the literature	Brief description	Main works
Perverse incentives?	The focus of many GEIs on vertical segregation might lead organizations to "peacocking", i.e. manage to achieve a better gender representation but with no change to their cultures	de Aguiar *et al.* (2022), Kalpazidou Schmidt *et al.* (2020), Haque *et al.* (2025), Ovseiko *et al.* (2017), Tzanakou and Pearce (2019), Yarrow and Johnston (2023)
Homogenization of approaches?	GEIs tends to focus on the same issues (e.g. vertical segregation) and reproduce similar models, in a rush towards the so- called "best practices" which allow achieving demonstrable changes	Armstrong and Sullivan (2025), Bahnson *et al.* (2025), Myers *et al.* (2023), Nash *et al.* (2021a), Tzanakou *et al.* (2025)
Sidelining intersectionality?	GEIs often understand gender as binary and assume women are a homogeneous group; other important characteristics, such as class and ethnicity, risk being overlooked	Bhopal and Henderson (2021), Corneille *et al.* (2019), Cutright *et al.* (2025), Laursen and De Welde (2019), Meyer *et al.* (2025), Ovseiko *et al.* (2019), Tzanakou (2019)
"New" pressures on women vs the "old" myth of merit?	HEIs tend to reproduce a rhetoric of meritocracy, while meritocracy is instead a myth which tends to reproduce the status quo. GEIs often align to this myth and even put new pressures on women, whose performance gets under the spot	Caffrey *et al.* (2016), Drew (2022), Carr *et al.* (2017), Johnston and Yarrow (2024), Kalpazidou Schmidt *et al.* (2020), Mousa (2021), Ovseiko *et al.* (2017), Thaler (2019), Tzanakou *et al.* (2021), Westoby *et al.* (2021), Wieners and Weber (2020), Woods *et al.* (2025)
Persistence of privileged subjects?	GEIs might inadvertently reproduce the privilege of the white middle-class majority	Biehl and Schönfeld (2023), Bierema *et al.* (2022), Clavero and Galligan (2021), Gregory-Smith (2018), House *et al.* (2021), Johnston and Yarrow (2024), Lambert *et al.* (2025), Lompourdi (2023), Nash *et al.* (2021b), O'Connor (2020), Perriton (2022), Ruggi and Duvvury (2023), Stolarski *et al.* (2020), Tzanakou and Pearce (2019), Yarrow and Johnston (2023), Wieners and Weber (2020)
Any positive spillover (beyond expected)?	GEIs might have wider, positive effects on creating a more inclusive organizational culture and a better organizational climate, with ripple effects on individuals beyond the targeted organization	Bilimoria and Singer (2019), Kalpazidou Schmidt *et al.* (2020), Káplár-Kodácsy *et al.* (2024), Leenders *et al.* (2020), Saloniki *et al.* (2024), Sattari and Sandefur (2019), Van Miegroet *et al.* (2019)

strategies to achieve quick results (e.g. actions at the individual level) is preferred, while commitment to concrete, meaningful institutional change is not a priority.

Ovseiko *et al.* (2017), who conducted the first systematic study on the impact of AS in academic medicine, reported that "the linkage to research funding has created perverse incentives to achieve awards rather than fundamental structural and cultural changes" (p. 7). This critique sparked significant debate and has led to the removal of this funding link in the AS framework. Furthermore, scholars have noted that efforts under AS appear to be more about branding and institutional image than real commitment to equality (Yarrow and Johnston, 2023). Haque *et al.* (2025) argue that the focus on quantitative data and cause-effect relationships, typical of AS, might lead institutions to follow symbolic and visible changes rather than

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engaging in in-depth structural change. Tzanakou and Pearce (2019) highlight how AS is entrenched in neoliberal practices and, as such, presents internal contradictions. This view is echoed by Yarrow and Johnston (2023), who explain how AS contributes to "institutional peacocking" rather than transformational change; an additional problem is that this happens at the expense of those who put time and effort into designing AS action plans. Across the studies reviewed, what emerges is that GEIs tied to external accreditation, funding or rankings tend to produce three recurring unintended consequences: goal displacement (the award becomes the end goal rather than equality), symbolic compliance (visible policies are adopted without altering underlying power structures) and labour exploitation (the burden of proving progress falls disproportionately on already marginalised women). Rather than isolated failures of implementation, these appear to be systematic features of how neoliberalism reshapes equality work. The problem, then, is not merely perverse incentives but performative accountability, where the appearance of action substitutes for action itself. This suggests a shift in focus from asking "Do GEIs work?" to asking "Which designs are more resistant to co-optation?" and "How might we build in reflexive checks that expose performativity before it becomes entrenched?"

Homogenisation of approaches?

GEIs often tend to reproduce very similar models. There is a trend of prioritising certain issues (e.g. vertical gender segregation) over others and even promoting isomorphic interventions (see the case of mentoring and leadership development programs) on the basis of "good practices". The risk of homogenisation of approaches is at odds with the need to tailor GEIs to their specific context in order to be effective; but also, it may lead to groupthink [thus hindering the transformative potential of GEIs] and, in the worst cases, impose limits on academic freedom (Armstrong and Sullivan, 2025). Concurrently, there is a focus on numbers and targets. On the one hand, this might be understandable from the perspective of funding agencies or rewarding bodies; on the other hand, when generalised, this might discourage institutions from experimenting with new approaches or taking the necessary time to analyse their own data and people's needs to devise targeted, context-specific GEIs.

The focus on "good practice" is problematic when designing GEIs because it is unlikely to bring institutional change: such change requires tailor-made, context-specific interventions. Bahnson *et al.* (2025) note that the lack of tailoring in mentoring programmes significantly hinders their potential. Also, the promotion of some concepts, which are considered to be well-established, may be problematic: concepts such as "women role models", or "men allies", might not suit all institutions and may even alienate certain groups. Nash *et al.* (2021a) explain how the concept of "man ally" might itself become problematic and create tensions in bringing in those who benefit most from the status quo (Myers *et al.*, 2023).

The internationalisation of GEIs represents an interesting yet ambivalent case. Tzanakou *et al.* (2025) report the experience of a joint UK–Brazil project leading to the application of AS in the South American country. The authors note how certifications such as AS always import assumptions rooted in specific cultural and historical contexts; additionally, they found an underlying colonial discourse in the initiative. Thus, they caution against the internationalisation of GEIs because this is deeply problematic. Similarly, O'Mullane (2023), reporting on AS Ireland, discusses how research participants expressed a preference for more contextually grounded programs. This pattern can be understood as an isomorphic homogenisation trap. Recognising this shifts the critical question from "Which GEI works?" to: "For whom, and under what conditions, is a given GEI appropriate, and when should we refuse to adopt a dominant model altogether?"

Sidelining intersectionality?

Most of the extant literature on GEIs often presents two interconnected problems: the conceptualisation of gender as a binary, with women and men viewed as two homogeneous groups, and low awareness towards intersectionality (Beeckmans *et al.*, 2026; Nichols and

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Stahl, 2019; Tzanakou, 2019). This arguably stymies the efficacy of GEIs and holds the potential to further contribute to unintended consequences. For example, the binary view of gender not only excludes non-binary identities but often assumes heteronormativity and conceals deeper reflections around the role of sexuality and sexual identities (Köllen and Rumens, 2021; Nichols and Stahl, 2019). Increased attention towards intersectionality would help address this problem; however, it is shown that even well-experimented GEIs, such as mentoring, often risk reproducing the status quo by perpetuating traditional gender roles (Beck *et al.*, 2022; Hoskin and Whiley, 2023; Meyer *et al.*, 2025), while these roles are not neutral in terms of social class, race and ethnicity (Brah and Phoenix, 2023).

Corneille *et al.* (2019) suggested incorporating intersectional frameworks into GEIs, a recommendation which should also be considered by policymakers, because their review of women faculty of colour experiences found high/er teaching and service loads, ambiguous standards for tenure and a lack of culturally responsive mentorship. However, progress has been painfully slow. Notably, scientists themselves seem to have a poor understanding of intersectionality (Fines-Neuschild and Tajmel, 2024; Peterson and Jordansson, 2017). Furthermore, AS and EU-funded schemes, for years, did not put intersectionality high on their agendas (Bhopal and Henderson, 2021), and assumed a binary vision of gender (Grzelec, 2024; Kalpazidou Schmidt *et al.*, 2020; Meschitti, 2025).

More recently, there have been intentions to better encompass intersectionality, with interesting cases of career development initiatives geared towards minorities. For instance, Cutright *et al.* (2025) study a mentoring program including women and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour), demonstrating that careful, intersectionally sensitive design is necessary for such initiatives to benefit target groups. Over the past years, the ADVANCE programme has also evolved to better include intersectionality (Rosser and Laursen, 2022). Nevertheless, a recent study on ADVANCE Institutional Transformation grants found no evidence of an increased proportion of minoritised women (Hu and Fernandez, 2025). The recent political changes and tumultuous DEI landscape are impacting ADVANCE significantly, threatening to slow the commitment towards a more inclusive agenda (Kelsey *et al.*, 2025). A scoping review on intersectionality and equality in HE, published while we were working on this paper, highlights that there is still a lot to be done in order to build policies that challenge "interlocking oppressive structures" (Beeckmans *et al.*, 2026, p. 899). What emerges from the literature, and in turn, our analysis and interpretation, can be understood as intersectional erasure by design: when GEIs adopt a single-axis, gender-only framework, three effects tend to follow. First, invisibility: the binary vision of gender, while perpetuating traditional gender roles, conceals intersectional differences. Specific barriers faced by disabled women, but also homosexual or trans women (or more broadly women who do not feel represented by the heteronormative discourse) go largely undocumented and rather the focus is largely on women as a homogenous group, albeit there is some focus on race and gender together (Nichols and Stahl, 2019; Remnant *et al.*, 2024). Second, misallocation: resources flow to interventions that benefit less disadvantaged women (e.g. white, middle-class women) (Gutiérrez and Cole, 2025). Third, false reassurance, whereby institutions claim to have achieved gender equality, or focus disproportionately on institutional image rather than real commitment to equality (Yarrow and Johnston, 2023), while other inequalities continue to widen (Ruggi and Duvvury, 2023). Recognising this erasure shifts the critical question from "Does this GEI include intersectionality?" to "How does its design produce or prevent intersectional outcomes and whose interests does that serve?"

"New" pressures on women vs the "old" myth of merit?

Considerable literature underlines that working for gender equality represents a challenging job, which creates significant pressures on women. Such pressures manifest themselves in terms of increased workload, and then, more subtly, in terms of women's academic identity, making them more vulnerable to tokenism and critiques regarding their own "merits".

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Considering workload, it is worth highlighting that often women are tasked with leading on GEIs. Designing GEIs is frequently considered "service", which is not rewarding in terms of career advancement, but also might be part of "voluntary work". This is especially evident in AS, as its self-assessment teams are typically composed of women and rely on voluntary, unpaid labour. While highly problematic, this reliance on voluntary work in AS remains unresolved (Caffrey *et al.*, 2016; Johnston and Yarrow, 2024; O'Mullane, 2023; Ovseiko *et al.*, 2017; Tzanakou *et al.*, 2021). GEIs also increase women's workload by requiring greater representation on panels and committees (Drew, 2022). Mentoring, by far one of the most widespread GEIs, relies heavily on voluntary work (Carr *et al.*, 2017). In contrast, the approaches undertaken by the European Union and ADVANCE provide competitive funding, explicitly aiming to avoid the aforementioned risks and reward those working for equality; experiences with ADVANCE funding have been especially successful, notably even in boosting the research productivity of the involved academics (Gates *et al.*, 2025).

The workload issue could perhaps be managed through sensible allocation of resources, but the most problematic aspect relates to tokenism and bringing to the fore the discourse of merit, which is central in academic and research careers. Initiatives focused on "supporting individuals", such as mentoring or leadership development programmes, might represent a double-edged sword, especially when they are women-only. The individual-level focus not only does not solve inequalities (unless integrated within broader programmes aiming at institutional change), but it may also contribute to assumptions that women should be helped so as to "make it" through the glass ceiling. This shifts the burden onto women, who must fit into specific career models to show that they are "excellent". Even worse, when women "make it" through the glass ceiling, in the presence of this kind of individual-level and women-only initiatives, they might be subject to tokenism and additional biases. Women, who are often aware of these mechanisms, might respond by rejecting GEIs themselves. Woods *et al.* (2025) studied initiatives to support women's academic entrepreneurship, which not only create new pressures (such as the expectation to become a role model), but also a heightened awareness of being judged more severely and the fear of making mistakes. Woods *et al.* (2025, p. 1788) report that the participants' awareness of their weak status was so strong that it led to some women intentionally avoiding involvement in initiatives like AS, since this might be seen as "admitting I am weaker, because I'm female because I need your help in some programme that you've specifically put on for females".

To better appreciate the implications of the case analysed by Woods *et al.* (2025), it is worth highlighting that, in the academic profession, tokenism intersects with discourses of "merit", which is considered to be the base upon which decisions on career progression and rewards are taken. Importantly, often the call for more gender equality in HE leads academics to raise the argument of merit; gender equality is important, but ultimately merit should prevail. This demonstrates that one of the underlying assumptions around GEIs is that they can somehow foster the careers of academics with no merit (e.g. women). Given this context, it is not surprising that many studies, across the globe, found that men do not perceive any need for GEIs or are even negative towards them or worried they might be discriminated against (Kalpazidou Schmidt *et al.*, 2020; Tang and Horta, 2024). At the same time, women who feel to be in a "token" position are worried their colleagues might question their "merit" (Woods *et al.*, 2025). Sociological and organisational literature reveals that merit is not a neutral measure of ability but is used more to uphold the *status quo* than to reward genuine capability (Amis *et al.*, 2020; Clarke *et al.*, 2024). The belief in merit is so strong that we can talk about "meritocracy", i.e. a social discourse (reinforced by neoliberalism) working through the reproduction of an idealised concept of individual choice and agency, which is promoted as universal, but instead depends on the very same power structures responsible for the unequal distribution of wealth (Littler, 2017). If we focus on the case of academic careers, the evidence shows that women are discriminated against even at parity of scientific productivity (Weisshaar, 2017); it is evident that merit and the related ideal of individual choice are myths rather than solid arguments. However, these myths are deeply ingrained: academics fear that criticising merit may imply

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showing weakness (Bagilhole and Goode, 2001). This fear is reinforced by the ideal of scientific excellence, which is also a contingent construct (Brown *et al.*, 2016) and can lead to exclusion based on sexist, racist and ableist prejudices (Bates and Ng, 2021; Blackmore, 2016; Thornton, 2013; Wieners and Weber, 2020). This pattern can be understood as a double bind spiral: individual-focused or women-only GEIs are adopted; women who engage become tokenised, with their merit implicitly questioned, and to avoid stigma, some women actively withdraw. The GEI is then deemed ineffective, blamed on women's lack of engagement and eventually abandoned, while structural inequality remains untouched. The spiral thus reinforces the very problem it claims to solve. Breaking it would require shifting attention from "fixing women" to redesigning reward systems and the very definition of merit. This shifts the question from "Which kind of resources do we need for GEIs" to "How do the resources mobilised by GEIs (e.g. monetary, non-monetary, symbolic) affect target and non-target groups of GEIs, and how do these resources relate to definitions of merit and excellence?"

The persistence of privileged subjects?

Some research shows that even some well-thought-through initiatives might subtly perpetuate privilege (or provide additional opportunities to subjects who are already in a position of privilege). For example, AS has seen critiques for its limited ability to bring significant changes to the gender power structure (Bhopal and Henderson, 2021; de Aguiar *et al.*, 2022; Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019; Wieners and Weber, 2020; Yarrow and Johnston, 2023). Arguably, AS even reinforces the gendered division of labour and male privilege in academia, because women themselves have to [and are expected to] put effort into it, without gaining any recognition or reward (Johnston and Yarrow, 2024; Nash *et al.*, 2021b).

Similarly, career and leadership development programs have been heavily criticised for the risk of reproducing idealised and gendered norms of what an academic should be (Bierema *et al.*, 2022; Loumpourdi, 2023; Perriton, 2022). Biehl and Schönfeld (2023) focus on women's leadership programs and stress that the concept of leadership itself is problematic, since in current discourses leadership still holds the image of a white, unencumbered, heterosexual man. In turn, such programmes might perpetuate not only male privilege, but also white privilege. Indeed, in the academy we must strive to move beyond white fragility, reflexively (Bates and Ng, 2021).

Even well-experimented framework programs, such as those promoted by ADVANCE and by the EU, which provide funding to develop tailored local solutions, face limitations. Firstly, oftentimes the institutions applying for funds are the ones already better resourced, meaning that the "less privileged" will also be less likely to enjoy the opportunities offered by these funds. Secondly, the academic power structure is strongly built around differentials of power and prestige (also related to race and class), which might be very difficult to challenge since they are part of the professional habitus. It is not by chance that even mentoring tends to reproduce gendered assumptions and expectations (Hoskin and Whiley, 2023). For instance, differentials in terms of the prestige associated with specific mentors and their home institution importantly impact the development and success of mentoring initiatives, amplifying privilege (Stolarski *et al.*, 2020). Thirdly, once funds are expended, the impetus for change may decline and initiatives may be subject to redesign in order to continue them with fewer resources, potentially reducing the transformative potential of some initiatives. Furthermore, the focus on vertical segregation and on the glass ceiling is not neutral and contributes to shaping the debate only on part of the problem. Ruggi and Duvvury (2023, p. 469) argue that such a focus "is a form of 'gender branding' drawing on and reproducing neo-colonial progress-scales while stalling intersectional agendas." Thus, it contributes to the reproduction of archaic structures of [gendered and racialised] privilege, minimising the possibility for deeper societal changes. Overall, the process resembles a privilege amplification loop: GEIs are designed around metrics that advantaged institutions can easily meet, allowing those same institutions to win funding and prestige. As a result, privileged groups – white, male, senior academics from elite

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institutions – continue to lead and define the agenda, while marginalised groups remain excluded. Yet the GEI is celebrated as "successful". The loop thus reinforces the *status quo* while simulating progress. Breaking it would require not just inclusive design, but active redistribution of resources, recognition and decision-making power. Thus, the main issue is not only who is going to benefit from a given GEI, but also: "How did this GEI bring about any change in organisational structure, decision-making, organisational climate?"

Tensions, contradictions and their consequences

The preceding sections have examined the unintended consequences of GEIs, with ambiguous if not negative effects for gender equality. However, it is worth considering that unintended consequences might also be positive (Leslie, 2019). When looking at the effects of GEIs, we often encounter contrasting experiences: some initiatives might be very successful at the individual level (e.g. mentoring) yet ineffective at the structural level; conversely, initiatives might have positive spillovers in some cases, but not in others. For example, studies by Bhopal and Henderson (2021) and Ovseiko *et al.* (2019) find that universities engaged in AS are not necessarily more inclusive in terms of class, ethnicity and gender and sexual orientation; while Saloniki *et al.* (2024) argue that organisations holding an AS award appear more active in tackling disability and race issues. Mentoring is seen by some as potentially bearing gendered power structures (Hoskin and Whiley, 2023; Lambert *et al.*, 2025), while for others it may become an important instrument of change with positive spillovers on organisational climate (Leenders *et al.*, 2020). A recent study on one US institution shows that mentoring often has positive ripple effects in terms of enhancing interpersonal skills, which are then applied in different spheres of one's own professional and personal life (Káplár-Kodácsy *et al.*, 2024). Such different results may depend both on the starting conditions and characteristics of the context, together with the approaches informing the design of the studied initiatives, as stressed by recent works on mentoring (Beck *et al.*, 2022; Mondisa *et al.*, 2021) and leadership development (Ferry, 2025). This implies that the same GEI is not inherently positive or negative; its effects depend on systemic conditions that are rarely measured or reported in the literature. Thus, rather than asking "Does this GEI work?", we might better ask: "What preconditions must be in place for it to avoid harm and generate positive spillovers, and how many and which institutions actually meet those preconditions?"

Discussion

This review critically explores the frequently overlooked topic of unintended consequences of GEIs by synthesising evidence from diverse publications and initiatives. Most of the evidence highlighted problematic consequences for individuals (women and underrepresented groups) and HE institutions: perverse incentives, homogenisation of approaches, sidelining intersectionality, new pressures on women and the persistence of privileged subjects. However, we also found [very few] cases of GEIs leading to a more inclusive environment (beyond expected), with positive spillovers even outside the organisational setting. The analysis of unintended consequences led to further questions emerging, summarised in Table 4, which might inspire both future research and practice. To work towards successful GEIs, we assert that research and practice should go hand-in-hand.

Implications for theory

At a theoretical level, the study of unintended consequences in diversity and equality work has solid foundations in the work of Leslie (2019). However, this work has not fuelled a solid agenda of empirical literature in the case of GEIs. In line with the review's critical stance towards rhetoric, tradition, authority and objectivity, we posit that the existence of a "rhetoric of success", where success is usually "objectively" measured by an increase in numbers is reductionist and flawed. This bias favours the publication of successful results only, which was

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Table 4. Findings from the literature and questions for future work

Themes from the literature	New questions for researchers and practitioners
Perverse incentives?	- Which designs are more resistant to co-optation? - How might we build in reflexive checks that expose performativity before it becomes entrenched?
Homogenization of approaches?	- For whom, and under what conditions, is a given GEI appropriate, and when should we refuse to adopt a dominant model altogether?
Sidelining intersectionality?	- How does GEI design produce or prevent intersectional outcomes and whose interests does that serve?
"New" pressures on women vs the "old" myth of merit?	- How do the resources mobilised by GEIs (e.g. monetary, non-monetary, symbolic) affect target and non-target groups of GEIs? - How do these resources relate to definitions of merit and excellence? - How can GEIs redesign rewards and change understandings of merit?
Persistence of privileged subjects?	- How did GEIs bring about any change in organizational structure, decision-making, organizational climate?
Any positive spillover (beyond expected)?	- What preconditions must be in place for GEIs to avoid harm and generate positive spillovers?

also observed in two recent reviews (Meyer *et al.*, 2025; Mousa *et al.*, 2021). This is evident, for example, in mentoring for women and underrepresented groups, which mostly highlights positive outcomes, while difficulties related to relationship management are largely overlooked. Furthermore, while externally funded initiatives have a range of benefits since they provide scholars and practitioners (mostly women) with resources to work on GEIs, they might also unintentionally fuel a rhetoric of success by bringing a focus on positive and intended effects much more than on the unintended effects, particularly when these are problematic or undesirable. Admitting that GEIs might have unintended consequences may lead to criticisms because of a presumed lack of appropriate planning and monitoring, or even a lack of competence of the (women) who designed the GEIs. The rhetoric of success can also be seen as a response to the need to increase legitimation of GEIs. The "persistence of privileged subjects" and the "myth of merit" can render GEIs conceptually illegitimate before they are even proposed (Tang and Horta, 2024). Focusing on the intended and successful aspects of GEIs, rather than on unintended effects, may contribute to achieving legitimation. In a dominant neoliberal logic particularly, the rhetoric of success, accompanied by a focus on numbers, can become an important strategy to "play the game" (Swan and Fox, 2010), gain legitimation and even survive. Nevertheless, there is a very thin line between a rhetoric of success which helps increase legitimation (to ultimately work towards inclusive organisations), and the risk of fuelling "inequality regimes" (Acker, 2006; McEwen *et al.*, 2026). For this reason, we suggest that the literature should be much more conscious of unintended effects, taking better stock of Leslie's (2019) work, but also contributions from organisational change management literature, as in the case of Lansu *et al.* (2020).

Implications for practice

GEIs represent a work in progress. While unintended consequences are unpredictable by nature, a holistic view of the literature, as we offer here, shows interesting evidence on the importance of the design phase and supporting participatory approaches. Participatory approaches have the advantage of increasing engagement and building better tailored and contextualised GEIs; however, they might also bring increased tensions amongst different kinds of knowledge of the actors involved in fostering gender equality (Thaler, 2019), with the need to invest extra time and effort. Overarchingly though, tradition in approaches appears strong, characterised by a

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homogenisation of approaches and isomorphism in GEIs, thus demonstrating to practitioners the need for further contextualised and tailored GEI interventions, which are grounded in participatory design. In order to drive a substantive shift in the creation and implementation of GEIs, relevant policy development is needed; it should incorporate a robust design phase encompassing steps where qualitative and quantitative data on staff are gathered and analysed intersectionally to better understand and pinpoint where potential problems lie. This presents a methodological challenge, since it is often difficult to analyse the impact of complex GEIs and assess cause–effect relationships, particularly intersectionally. Scholars suggest rethinking research methodologies and working with more methods and longitudinal designs, so as to gain an in-depth understanding of long-term effects (Drew and Canavan, 2020; Taylor and Williamson, 2024). Armstrong and Sullivan (2025) propose an "open data approach" to overcome the issue of prioritising one dimension of inequality over others and then leave institutions free to develop their own approaches to solve their own context-specific issues, rather than being commanded by external bodies to work on given sets of targets. This is not far from the approach proposed by the EU-funded SAGE project, which starts with a fine-grained analysis of institutional data (Rosa *et al.*, 2020). These approaches to data collection and analysis should also help what Lansu *et al.* (2019) term "systemic gender knowledge", which is necessary to work on transformational change in academia. Campanini Vilhena (2024) proposes "feminist critical friendship", a methodology inspired by an ethics of care approach to study institutional change, while O'Connor (2020) proposes "feminist institutional analysis", which has informed a variety of studies (Tardos *et al.*, 2025). Forming cross-institutional coalitions in order to build effective initiatives and share experiences is underlined by both EU and ADVANCE scholars (Rosser and Laursen, 2022). Overall, advancing gender equality in HE requires the balancing of complex and multi-level tensions, such as: individual-level vs. organisational-level foci; the need for setting indicators and showing results (in terms of numbers and visible initiatives) vs. the need for participatory approaches targeting cultural change; or data collection strictly focused on a defined range of indicators vs interpretive approaches. This is why we might better talk of [contextualised, intersectionally sensitive] acts of balancing which are malleable to differing equality requirements, rather than best practice *per se*. The sidelining of intersectionality carries direct implications for practice and policy, albeit intersectionality conceptually should not serve as "a flashpoint for moral panics" (Bilge, 2025, p. 16). GEIs built on a single-axis, gender-only framing risk "intersectional erasure". Practitioners and policymakers should therefore move beyond binary assumptions of gender and embed intersectionally sensitive design from the outset, as illustrated by tailored mentoring (Cutright *et al.*, 2025) and the evolving ADVANCE agenda (Rosser and Laursen, 2022). In turn, this reframes the critical question from whether a GEI "includes" intersectionality to how its design produces or prevents intersectional outcomes, and whose interests it serves.

Conclusion

Our review offers an integrated view on the unintended and often sidelined consequences of GEIs, which provides a useful and contemporary synthesis of existing understandings of the efficacy of GEIs, offering an opportunity for reflection on current approaches for both scholars and practitioners. We identified the field as vivid and oriented towards experimentation, but where contextualised intersectional sensitivities are lacking. Despite the discussion of unintended consequences and problematic aspects, they are often short and scattered across different contributions and very different publication outlets. An awareness of the challenges of GEIs clearly emerges, together with a willingness to innovate. The risk that GEIs are co-opted by neoliberal discourse remains. Nevertheless, we posit that knowledge of unintended consequences can better sensitise scholars and practitioners alike to the implications of the broader power networks and [intersectional] inequality regimes surrounding GEIs, in order to avoid simplistic approaches, and to counter the dichotomies between the realities and rhetoric surrounding GEIs.

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Appendix

Researchers' positionality

As gender scholars, but also as experts taking part (or who took part) in concrete efforts for designing equality interventions, clearly we are not a *tabula rasa*, and both our background knowledge and our own approaches and views in regard to gender equality interventions have an impact.

Joining our forces also meant to try and open up our own perspectives, and, while approaching the literature, we also tried to be as open as possible in relation to publication outlets, methodologies and interpretation of findings. We all have our own preferred authors, works and standpoints, and the initial choice of the topics also depended on our own experience with equality work initiatives and on discussion with other scholars and research participants. The choice of the critical review method, supported by an abduction process, followed our willingness to account for our own knowledge and experience. At the same time, the inclusion in our review of an element of systematic search helped us to keep our minds open to different perspectives and get to know work and authors outside our own preferred approaches and also outside our own disciplines.

In the following paragraphs, we all give an account of our own positionality, following our own personal narrative style.

Viviana Meschitti

Viviana Meschitti has worked for years on applied research projects aimed at tackling vertical segregation, and on women's mentoring especially, and she considers herself mainly a social constructionist by nature. She started to work on gender equality in academia as a coordinator of a mentoring programme for women in 2004 when she was a postgrad student at a Swiss university. From there stemmed her interest in gender differences along academic careers and her plan to engage in PhD studies. Unfortunately, due to a series of constraints in her own institution (particularly, lack of mentors experienced in gender studies), she was not able to study gender as a main topic in her PhD, but she went back to her original interest afterwards, when looking for a research position after completing the PhD. Her post-doc was financially supported by an EU project on gender in science, and she worked on designing gender equality measures in the framework of Athena SWAN in the United Kingdom during and after her post-doc as well. Thus, her personal experience of EU projects and Athena SWAN influenced her interest in the topic of this paper. In addition, she knows from her own experience the implications of externally funded gender projects, especially when one's own job is at stake and working on top publications becomes difficult for a variety of issues related to the project setup and institutional and financial constraints. She has progressed in her career and now has a tenured position; her research looks at how academics experience gender cultures (from an individual perspective), but she also partnered with other colleagues to better look into gender and promotion patterns. In parallel, she also conducts research in the field of organization studies, not necessarily focusing on gender (this reflects her unusual trajectory where her main research interest was not developed during her PhD).

Emily Yarrow

Emily Yarrow's research over the years has focused on exploring governance and gender inequality in higher education, predominantly in the United Kingdom. Her research has highlighted the tensions and fissures between gender equality interventions such as Athena SWAN, rhetoric and concrete change. More broadly, research centres on management and organizational theory, with a particular focus on women's career development, vertical gender segregation and gendered power dynamics. She also explores how algorithms perpetuate inequality. Her experiences of precarity in [neoliberal] higher education deeply shape her approach to countering organizational inequalities in a range of contexts.

Li Tang

Li Tang's fieldwork in Chinese academia reveals that although the government officially advocates gender equality, many academics deny that gender inequality is a genuine problem, believing it will self-resolve with economic development or that existing policies are sufficient. Consequently, university staff are often reluctant to support additional institutional interventions. This has shaped her conviction that meaningful change is required to be context-sensitive. This positionality may influence the paper, particularly in how it frames the unintended consequences of gender equality interventions

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(e.g. resistance, backlash or superficial compliance) and in its critical reading of why such consequences are often ignored or depoliticised in collective societies like China.

Isabel Boni-Le Goff

The author's fieldwork examines inequality regimes within various elite professions and explores the reconfiguration of inequalities in a context where marginalised groups are gaining greater access to positions of power within organisations of the Global North. She particularly explores how professionals circulate between the academic and corporate spheres in the fields of law and finance, and what these movements imply for careers. Her approach, based in particular on interactionist sociology, emphasises the interplay of meso- and micro-sociological dimensions in the construction of inequalities and the importance of a longitudinal analysis of the effects of professional equality measures. By examining the careers of female managers and lawyers in professional service firms, she has studied the paradoxical effects of certain GEIs such as the implementation of women's networks and the way in which these initiatives promote and legitimize a white professional figure.

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