

Gender in research content: Experiences from an Austrian programme

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Abstract

Gender equality policy in science and research pursues three main goals at European as well as national level. The first of these is to increase female participation in male-dominated fields and in leading positions (reduction of vertical and horizontal segregation). The second is to abolish barriers for women in their career development (organisational change). The third is to integrate a gender dimension into research content. To pursue these goals, several measures have been implemented in the last decade in the European Union as well as in Austria. The development of female participation in all fields or in leading positions is determined using quantitative indicators and monitored on a regular basis (e.g. SheFigures). Several studies also focus on organisational and cultural change in research organisations (e.g. case studies conducted within EU-funded projects addressing structural change in research organisations such as INTEGER, STAGES or GENOVATE). Hence, empirical evidence is available for the first two of the three gender equality dimensions in science and research.

The situation differs with regard to the third dimension. A review of gender equality policies in European Research Area (ERA) countries shows that several countries have introduced gender criteria in research funding or supported the consideration of gender in research content through specific programmes (see Lipinsky 2014, EC 2014; EC 2013). Yet although policies are in place, there is hardly any evidence on the effects of the integration of the gender dimension into research content. How is gender operationalised? How are research questions formulated when gender is considered? Do the formulated research questions indicate a change in gendered norms? How is gender expertise integrated into research teams? How do different settings for integrating gender expertise influence the organisation or focus of the research?

The paper refers to a review of projects funded within the programme FEMtech research projects commissioned by the Austrian Ministry for Transport, Innovation and Technology. The analysis is based on research proposals, self-description of projects (e.g. webpages) and qualitative interviews with project leaders and gender experts involved in the projects. These empirical findings will be contrasted with an ideal scenario of the integration of the gender dimension in research projects. This comparison depicts that most research designs do not support the ideal scenario. There are several reasons for deviation – e.g. because gender concepts used are not explicated, because gender expertise is restricted to specific partners or because of a lack of reflection of results or research process. On the other hand good practice cases come up in the analysis. They are characterised by a strong position of the gender expert in the project as well as a clear definition of her/his tasks in the project. Based on these cases recommendations for the further development of the programme are formulated. They focus on the one hand on strengthening the gender dimension in research content and on the other hand on strengthening a reflection of the research process.

Both aspects are identified preconditions for a sustainable integration of gender in research at an individual as well as organisational level.

Introduction

A wide range of measures have been designed, implemented and evaluated in recent years both in Austria and under the framework of European science and research policy to raise the share of women in science and research (for an overview of the current status of the debate see Hofbauer, Wroblewski 2015). In addition, some EU projects (e.g. INTEGER, STAGES or GENOVATE) and other measures seek to expedite institutional change in research institutions (EC 2012). Likewise, national measures support the development of equal opportunities plans in universities and non-university research institutions (for an overview see Tiefenthaler, Good 2011).

The integration of gender into research and teaching content is seen in the current international debate as a core challenge. One reason for this is that it cannot be assumed that a mere increase in the share of women in science and research alone will trigger a corresponding change. In many countries, the gender criteria applied in the research funding context frequently only relate to the participation of women and are not always binding (Hofbauer, Wroblewski 2015).

The FEMtech research projects in Austria specifically address this challenge, and FEMtech is therefore viewed internationally as a showcase programme. In a total of seven calls for tender issued between 2008 and 2013, the Austrian Federal Ministry for Transport, Innovation and Technology (BMVIT) funded projects whose research content also covered socio-economic conditions for women and/or addressed future-oriented research fields and products with a concrete gender dimension. Eligible projects had to have a gender focus point and fall into the industrial or experimental R&D categories. The goal was not only to fund future-oriented research fields and products with a concrete gender dimension but also to raise the quality and fit-for-purpose of the solutions developed. This should, in turn, increase both acceptance of and interest in the gender issue among scientists in R&D projects and the acceptance of products and technologies for women.

The project proposals were appraised by an expert jury set up by the BMVIT. The jury assessed the proposals with regard to their goals and contents, framework, management, cost benefits and contribution to the programme's own goals based on four assessment and award criteria, namely the quality of the project (technical/scientific quality in conjunction with gender aspects and planning), its relevance to the specific programme goals (gender relevance of the research topic and showcase character for future gender-relevant research), the suitability of the project lead and team (technical/scientific qualifications, management abilities and gender competence) and the project's economic potential and use (market potential, economic feasibility of the results). The jury also consulted additional independent expert reviewers in the content assessment process, whereby due consideration was given both to the international state of research as well as to practical relevance and applicability.

In the first three years, the maximum funding per project and consortium lay at 200,000 euros and a maximum of 70 % of the project costs (depending on company size and R&D stage). The maximum project duration was three years. From 2011 onwards, maximum funding lay at 300,000 euros and a maximum of 70 % of costs for individual projects and 80 % for cooperation projects. The number of proposals received per call for tender lay between 20 (2011) and 45 (2014), with 6 to 9 projects funded in each call. With the exception of 2011, the annual acceptance rate lay between 20 % and

40 %. The funding volume rose from about 1 million euros in 2008 and 2009 to 1.9 million euros in 2010 and 3 million euros in 2011 before levelling off from 2012 to 2014 at around 2.2 million euros. The available funding was allocated in its entirety in all years except 2011, when the allocation rate for the year lay at 63 %.

The guidelines for the calls for tender provided details of what was understood by gender relevance and gender competence. Gender experts were expected to have demonstrable gender competence in their professional expertise, methodological skills, social competence and self-competence. The guidelines also illustrated what gender competence was understood to mean in the different phases of a research project, specifically with regard to research design, research topic, data acquisition, data analysis and documentation. While gender itself was understood in a social constructivist sense, the example descriptions provided were based solely on biological sex, i.e. a differentiation between women and men. In the later years of the programme, the guidelines also contained example descriptions of gender-relevant research projects.

The projects funded

From 2008 to 2014, a total of 55 research projects were approved under the FEMtech programme. 16 % of these projects were single organisation projects, while 84 % were cooperation projects involving between two and eight organisations. The proposals for 38 % of all the projects funded were submitted by non-university research institutions (21 projects), while 24 % were submitted by universities (13 projects). In contrast, fewer proposals were submitted by companies (9 projects, or 16 %) or universities of applied science (6 projects). The remaining six funded projects were submitted by cooperative research institutions, competence centres or other research bodies.

The largest number of projects funded came from the life sciences and ICT sectors (15 projects each, or 27 %), followed by the energy/environment and mobility sectors (seven projects each). Two projects were from the manufacturing sector and nine came from “other” sectors.

38 of the 55 projects funded had a female project lead. Accordingly, the share of female project leads lay at 69 % and thus clearly above the share of women in non-university or science and technology research (2011: 25 %)¹.

Definition of gender

The tender documents gave no binding definition of gender, i.e. there was scope for the project proposals to provide definitions relevant to their own proposed research. Nonetheless, 38 of the 55 proposals did not provide such a definition. In most of these cases (29 projects), it can be concluded from the text of the proposal that gender was understood in difference theory terms. Their focus lay on differences between women and men which should be considered, for instance, in product development. In the nine other proposals which offered no explicit definition, gender was either referred to in biological and social terms or in a purely social constructivist sense, i.e. it was understood as being socially constructed.

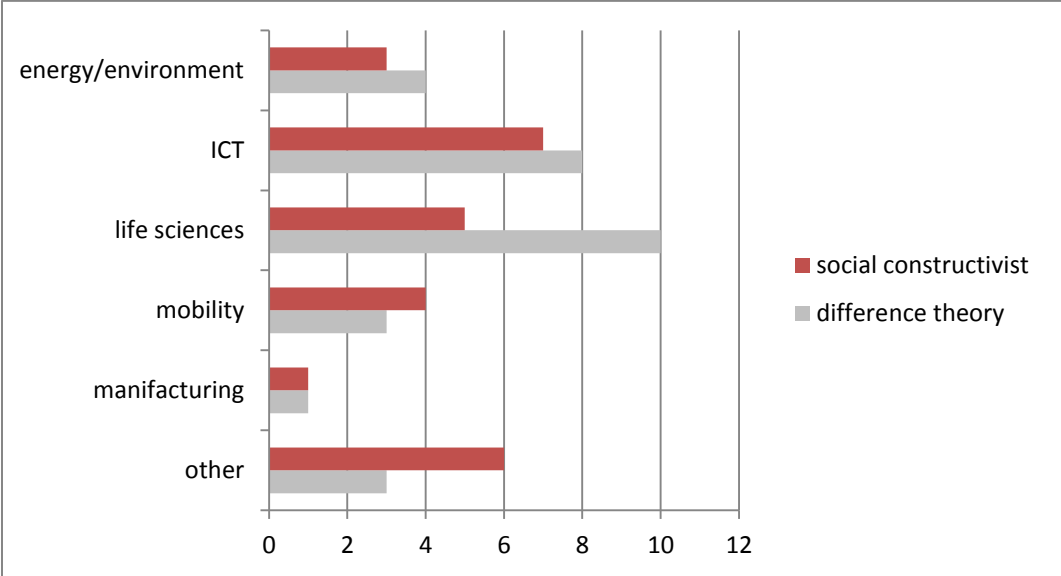
In contrast, 17 projects did provide explicit definitions of gender. In all these cases, sex is (also) understood as being socially constructed (gender), i.e. is explicitly delineated from biological sex. Four projects not only understood gender as being socially constructed but also took other relevant

¹ <http://www.femtech.at/daten/au%C3%9Feruniversit%C3%A4re-forschung>

inequality aspects into account, providing an intersectional understanding of gender. One other project makes reference to social and psychological gender.

It came as no real surprise that the frequency of the difference-based and social constructivist approaches differed according to research sector. A difference-based approach dominates, for instance, in the life sciences sector (where 10 out of 15 projects differentiate solely by biological sex). Conversely, the projects that were assigned to the category “other” predominantly adopted a social constructivist view of gender (6 out of 9 cases). In the other sectors, each of the two approaches is represented to roughly the same extent.

Figure 1 Approach to gender by research sector



Source: Project proposals, own research and presentation

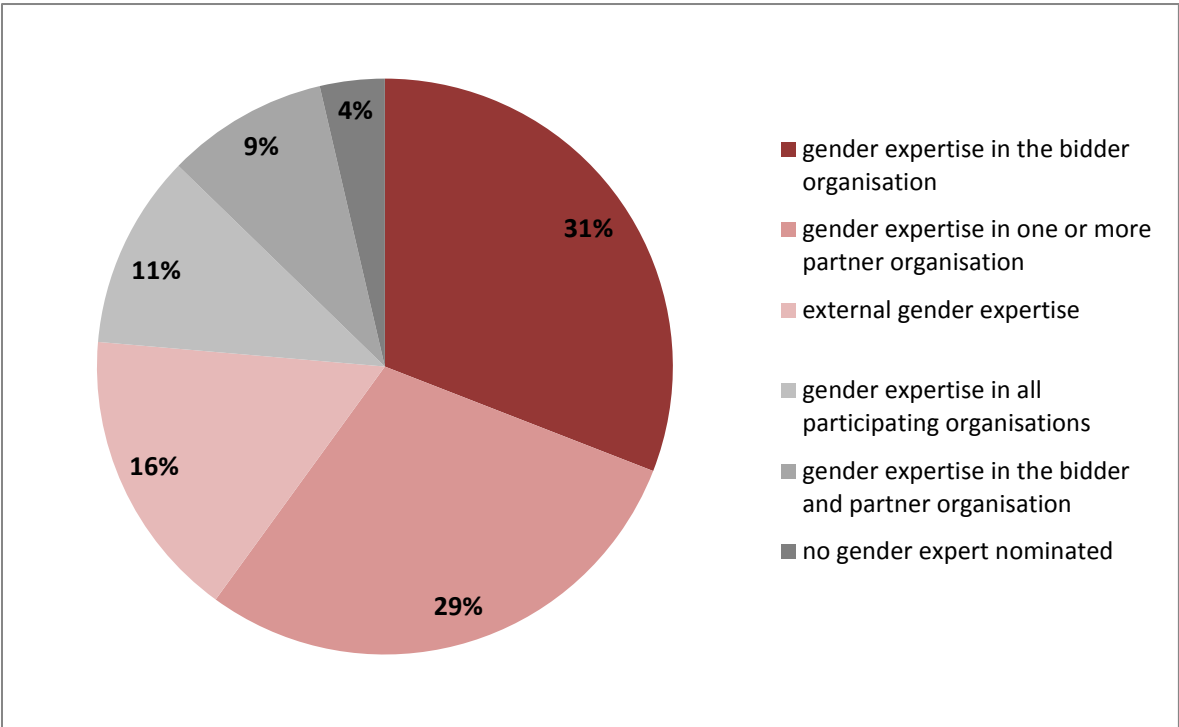
Incorporation of gender expertise into the project team

One central goal of the FEMtech programme is the consideration of the gender dimension in the funded research. This raises the question of how and by whom the necessary gender expertise is provided in the respective projects. The funded projects incorporated gender expertise in different forms: in 17 cases, the gender expertise was supplied by the organisation which submitted the project proposal. For 16 of the projects, gender expertise was contributed by representatives of one or more of the partner organisations in the consortium. In one case, it was supplied by a partner organisation and augmented by external expertise. This (female) external expert supported the project team in their efforts to reflect on their own roles in the research project. In nine projects, the gender expertise was supplied not by the project coordinator (bidder) or a partner organisation but by external experts. In six cooperation projects, all participating organisations contributed gender expertise to the project, with additional external expertise also brought on board in two cases. Gender expertise was not mentioned in two proposals, i.e. no person was named in these proposals as being responsible for supplying gender expertise.

Several options to integrate gender expertise into the project team provide gender experts with a stronger position than others. If the project coordinator has gender expertise it allows her/him to anchor the gender dimension as a cross cutting topic in the project. This is also the case if gender expertise is anchored in all participating institutions. On the contrary external experts have a more

difficult position – their potential impact depends on the concrete definition of their role within the project as well as on their acceptance within the project team.

Figure 2 Anchoring of gender expertise in FEMtech research projects



Source: Project proposals, own research and presentation

The role and/or inclusion of gender expertise in the projects depends strongly on the gender competence and/or gender expertise of the project coordinator and on how the gender experts are integrated into the projects. In most cases, the manner in which the gender experts were to be involved in the project and the tasks they were to perform were defined in the proposal phase. Expert interviews conducted in the course of the review reveal two scenarios: in the first scenario, the project lead has gender expertise or at least gender competence, is aware of the need to involve gender experts and thus already includes gender experts in the process of formulating the project proposal. In the second scenario, the gender experts (f/m) only join the project at a later stage and are not involved in formulating the proposal.

In most of the cases in which gender expertise is embedded in the project team, responsibility for its integration into the research is also defined. In other words, one or more persons are named as gender experts and explicitly assigned responsibility for integrating the gender dimension into the project. Aside from the two cases that make no mention of gender expertise in the proposals (see above), four other projects had project team members with gender expertise, yet did not explicitly name any of them as gender expert.

The vast majority of the gender experts is female. Indeed, there was only one project in which the gender expertise was provided solely by a male gender expert. Five other projects had multiple gender experts, one of whom in each case was male. In other words, in around 90 % of the projects which named a gender expert, the gender expertise was provided by women.

If we consider both dimensions – definition of gender and incorporation of gender expertise in the project – specific constellations emerge: in projects with a social constructivist or intersectional understanding of gender, gender expertise is more frequently embedded in the organisation of the project coordinator and/or the project team (i.e. in the coordinating organisation and multiple partner organisations). In contrast, in the 29 projects which differentiate primarily between women and men (i.e. which focus mainly on biological sex), gender expertise is more frequently anchored externally.²

Focus on the gender dimension in the research content

All of the FEMtech projects address a gender-relevant topic and handle gender aspects in an applied context. They differ, however, in whether and to what extent they establish a link to gender theory research and/or to the current state of gender research in their respective research fields.

In some projects, the focus lies on adapting a concrete product for a female target group. This is often an existing product that is primarily used by men or was developed by men for men. Women are an interesting target group in such contexts because they represent additional market potential. Yet from a gender equality perspective, it is frequently also argued that the project should create new job opportunities for women or help to change traditional role concepts. The latter in particular assumes a socially constructed gender structure, i.e. that the use of or interest in certain products cannot, for the most part, be attributed solely to biological factors (e.g. the average size of women and men). It works instead on the hypothesis that the use of the product by women and men is made more difficult or facilitated by different socialisation and/or social norms and values.

Some projects focus on the development of a new product that should accommodate the different circumstances and needs of women and men to an equal extent. They assume that focusing solely on the situation of women or men would produce exclusion mechanisms that should be avoided.

An exception here are life sciences projects with a strong focus on biological differences, such as the efficacy of a particular drug on women and men. But it is also generally assumed in these projects – in line with the premises of gender medicine (e.g. Oertelt-Prigione, Regitz-Zagrosek 2011) – that both gender-specific differences in real life and in our behaviour with regard to information and prevention as well as risk affinity play an additional role.

When women as a target group form the focus of the project, they are, for the most part, not perceived as a homogeneous group. These projects differentiate empirically, for instance, by age group, whereby it is not the actual age itself that is of interest but rather a correlating variable such as technical affinity.

Some of the project proposals described the gender relevance of their research by referring to prior studies in their respective research field or to theoretical analyses or debates. The starting points for others were hypotheses formulated from observations of everyday life, which – without specific countermeasures by gender experts – could easily lead to an – albeit unintentional – confirmation of role stereotypes. Such projects also run the risk of not reflecting the current state of gender research

² Based on the dimensions gender construct and embedding of the gender expertise, 15 already completed projects covering all sectors (energy/environment, ICT, life science, mobility, manufacturing and other) were selected for a more detailed analysis by means of expert interviews with project leaders and/or gender experts.

in their respective sectors, e.g. if a project in the life sciences sector makes no reference whatsoever to gender medicine.

Function of gender experts in the projects

The tasks assumed by or assigned to the gender experts in the projects cover a broad spectrum of activities and are described in brief below.

Incorporation of current field-specific gender research into the project: a central task of the gender experts is to ensure that current field-specific gender research is incorporated into the project – especially when the project lead has no personal gender expertise. This should avoid a situation in which a funded project does not reflect the current state of research. It can also be seen as a prerequisite for the inclusion of the research results in an academic or field-specific expert debate.

Creation of a shared understanding of gender in the project: in an ideal scenario, the clarification of the understanding of gender in the project takes place during the proposal stage, especially in cases when the (female) project lead herself assumes a central role as gender expert and source of ideas. Discussing this at an early stage means that all project partners are sensitised to the topic from the outset. It also means that care is taken during implementation – both of the empirical work and the translation of the results into practice – that the understanding of gender is maintained and not gradually replaced by another, e.g. biologically defined, understanding.

Reflection on the results of the project from a gender perspective: in some projects, it was the task of the gender expert to demonstrate the results from a gender perspective. This helps researchers to consider the relevance of gender-specific differences in their research or interpret the project results in light of existing gender research in their respective field. It also prevents re-stereotyping in the empirical part of the project or the interpretation of the results. It likewise triggers learning processes which remain effective after the project has ended. The gender experts ascribe this learning effect to the fact that the researchers have worked on gender aspects in their own respective research fields and, thus, in their immediate working context and environment.

Reflection on the research process: most of the gender experts saw it as their task to reflect on the research process and thus be able to point to any unintended gender bias in the project at as early a stage as possible. In many cases, this critical reflection is targeted at the project design and in particular at the empirical approach. This function contributes to quality assurance in the project, since it strengthens the explanatory power (validity) of the results and ensures their suitability for publication in recognised journals.

Creation of awareness for measures to promote women and gender equality in the participating organisations: no direct link could be determined between the FEMtech research project and measures to promote women and/or equal opportunities in the participating organisations in any of the projects subjected to more in-depth analysis. The gender experts did however frequently mention that they had regularly brought up the subject of the situation for women in research and the need for measures to promote women and the compatibility of work and family commitments.

Self-image of the gender experts as scientists or advisors: two fundamentally different self-images of the gender emerged, which did not necessarily concur with their intended roles in the project. Some gender experts see themselves as advisors and not as scientists. In some projects, their role is also indeed conceived as that of an external advisor. In others, the gender experts see themselves as

scientists whose mission is to shape and contribute to the concrete implementation of the research project. In some projects, this is indeed their role. Problematic – because it causes dissatisfaction and leaves potential unrealised – is the constellation in which scientists are seen as advisors and thus cannot realise their own expectations. In one case, this situation is the result of a scarcity of resources, while in another it can be attributed to a lack of recognition on the part of the project lead for gender expertise and the work of gender expert.

Added value of the gender dimension in the FEMtech projects

The incorporation of the gender dimension into the FEMtech projects can be associated with three main effects. First, it contributes to embedding gender research in applied research. Second, it creates awareness of the relevance of the gender dimension in research institutions – both with regard to the integration of gender aspects into research content as well as the need for measures to promote women and gender equality in science and research, not only on a general level but also in individual organisations. And, last but not least, it contributes to quality assurance in research.

Anchoring of gender research in applied research

While gender research has now found its way at least to some extent into basic research – particularly in the university setting – in all fields (including, most recently, medicine), this is not yet the case in applied research. There is often a lack of translation of insights for theory-based gender research into concrete applied contexts. A number of the projects funded under the FEMtech programme provide this translation.

Doing so, however, requires that a project involves people who are not only gender competent but also have gender expertise. Gender expertise in this sense is understood as knowledge of gender theories in general and the state of gender research in the respective field of application or as an individual contribution to gender research in that field. This gender-specific expertise is essential in incorporating the current state of research into a concrete research project. Gender experts should also have specific methodological competence that allows them on the one hand to recognise and avoid an unintended gender bias in the empirical approaches and enables them on the other to initiate and support reflection on the research process and its results.

Gender expertise is embedded in different ways in the various FEMtech funded projects. Some projects are soundly based on gender theory and see themselves unequivocally also as a contribution to the implementation of insights from theory on gender relationships and their reproduction in a concrete applied context. In doing so, they themselves likewise contribute to gender research (e.g. when their results are fed into an academic discourse and into teaching).

Greater awareness for the relevance of the gender dimension in research institutions

The FEMtech research projects sensitise their respective communities to the relevance of the gender dimension in day-to-day research work. They raise awareness for the gender relevance of research topics. They also draw attention to subtle exclusion mechanisms in an organisation or an unintended gender bias in a research process. Both these aspects build gender competence in the project team.

In some cases, the FEMtech research project coincided with initial discussions in the respective organisation on the need for measures to promote women or gender equality. This discussion was usually triggered and launched in the organisation by gender researchers prior to the FEMtech project. The project itself – especially if led by a gender researcher – supported the discussion.

Contribution to quality assurance

A central function of the gender experts in the projects was to initiate and support reflection on the research process and results from a gender perspective. The integration of gender expertise is thus defined as quality criterion for research projects. This corresponds to the argumentation of Elizabeth Pollitzer, who views the consideration of the gender dimension as a central quality criterion in “good research” without which scientific quality standards cannot be met (Hofbauer, Wroblewski 2015).

Such an approach was also followed explicitly in some of the FEMtech projects, e.g. those in which it was up to the gender experts to prevent any gender bias in the empirical aspects of the project. In some cases, project leads who themselves had gender expertise consciously brought in gender experts to ascertain whether the research process or results were unintentionally causing re-stereotyping or if the gender relevance of the results was not being adequately perceived.

Conclusions

The experience gained from the FEMtech projects delivers a range of starting points for supporting the gender dimension in applied research as well as for the future development of the programme. The embedding of gender expertise in the project team is a central aspect in the FEMtech projects. Nonetheless, only around a third of the proposals actually define their understanding of gender. The meanings provided in those which do give a definition are based on a social constructivist notion of gender, i.e. one which understands gender as socially constructed and not as biological. In projects that follow a social constructivist understanding of gender, gender expertise is either contributed by the project lead or is embedded across the consortium. In contrast, those projects which primarily differentiate between women and men draw to a far greater extent on external experts.

The analysis also reveals a broad range of roles and ways of involving gender experts in the project. Some of the projects already involve the gender expert in the formulation of the proposal and the research design. Some only involve the gender experts rudimentarily in the proposal phase. The role of the gender expert is not clearly defined from the start in all projects and is instead firmed up and developed over the course of time. The roles of the gender experts range from providing input on the state of gender research in the respective field or actively establishing a joint understanding of gender in the project to reflecting the results or the research process from a gender perspective. Gender experts also assume the function of creating or raising awareness for the embedding of the gender dimension in research projects and research organisations.

The in-depth analysis of selected projects revealed some supporting and inhibiting factors regarding the practical inclusion of the respective gender dimension in the FEMtech projects. The gender competence of the project leaders proved instrumental in the successful incorporation of the gender dimension. In other words, if a project leader has no gender expertise of his/her own, he/she has to be gender competent enough to recognise the gender relevance of the research activities and view its consideration as a quality criterion for the results. Further key promoting factors that emerged include a clear definition of tasks and a “strong” position for the gender experts. For gender expertise to become embedded effectively in the project, the gender expert(s) must enjoy a certain level of acceptance and authority, which they derive from their professional status (e.g. as a professor or member of the board of one of the partner organisations) or through their form of involvement in the project (e.g. as participant in all modules). To be accepted as “full” partners, it is also helpful if gender experts are assigned responsibility for certain parts of the project. The inclusion of the gender dimension is also facilitated if “reflection

spaces” are created which are designed to allow reflection on the research process or its results. This can be achieved in dedicated workshops or also through the joint preparation of a report for which the whole project team discusses and interprets the results. Further supporting factors include professional project management and a stable project team (no fluctuation).

Conversely, the incorporation of the gender dimension is inhibited by a lack of gender competence on the part of the project lead or lack of acceptance of gender expertise by the members of the project team. This frequently goes hand-in-hand with a lack of willingness in the project team to reflect on the research process or the results of the project from a gender perspective. It can also be a problem if the tasks of the gender expert(s) are not sufficiently defined in advance (e.g. in the proposal) or are interpreted differently by the gender experts and the project lead and/or project team.

Recommendations for supporting the gender dimension in applied research

The analysis also shows that gender is by no means yet an integral part of research projects. As one interviewee noted, “it has to be made plain that it is not some exotic topic”. The thus identified need for a targeted promotion of the gender dimension in research programmes does not contradict the long-term goal of consistently including a gender cross-section dimension in all research activities.

A central aspect in this context is the embedding of gender expertise in research projects. There appears to be a need not only to embed the gender dimension in the research content but also to formulate clear responsibility for it. When it comes to the former, the interviews frequently revealed an ambivalence between a “low threshold approach” which should make it easier for companies to look at gender aspects and an “expertise based approach” that calls for the explicit addressing and provision of theoretical foundations for gender aspects. Even if the second approach would rule out some proposals, it should still be given preference to avoid that the funded projects do not correspond to the current state of gender research in their respective field.

Differentiate between gender expertise and gender competence: both the analysis of the proposals and also the interviews revealed that the terms gender competence and gender expertise are frequently used synonymously. No distinction between the two terms is made, for example, in the FEMtech tender documents. A distinction would also contribute in practice to avoiding the automatic attribution of gender competence to women. A *definition* should therefore be provided. *Gender competence* – which, incidentally, all members of a FEMtech project team should have – could be defined as the basic recognition of the gender relevance of the research topic in conjunction with the willingness to address this in the research project with the support of gender experts (willingness to reflect). *Gender expertise* goes much further. Gender experts should have knowledge of different gender theories, of gender mainstreaming as political strategy and of gender construction processes. They should also know the state of gender research in the respective field of research and have the methodological competences to bring this knowledge into concrete research activities. In addition, they should have the competences to initiate and moderate reflection processes in the project team.

Raise the value of gender competence and gender expertise: the FEMtech tender documents suggest involving gender experts right from the proposal phase. The interviews reveal that this is not always the case – with regard both to the content of the research project and the makeup of the team. In future requests for funding, the gender relevance should therefore be argued using gender

expertise. Increased attention should subsequently be paid in the *appraisal procedure* as to whether gender expertise is embedded in the project. Projects which lack gender expertise should be ignored.

Clarify the role and function of gender experts: the interviews revealed a broad spectrum of different possibilities for involving gender experts in FEMtech research projects. The role and function of the gender experts was not always defined in the request for funding and was instead often only firmed up in the course of the project. It can be expected that an early integration of gender experts into the proposal process would also result in a more explicit formation of their role. It is also imperative to clarify whether and how gender experts should (also) support reflection on the research process and its results.

Creation of space for reflection and raising the visibility of learning processes with regard to gender: a central aspect of gender or feminist research is the demand and desire for careful reflection on one's own research and role. This contributes both to the advancement of science as well as to quality assurance. Space for reflection should therefore be created in the projects, e.g. through specific workshops or in the reporting processes. Experiences with the FEMtech research projects show that while reflection spaces were frequently planned, the associated learning processes in the project team were only – if at all – described more by chance in the reports, i.e. they remain invisible. The significance and visibility of these processes could be raised if the gender experts not only designed and moderated but also documented them.

More resources for interdisciplinary projects: Many of the projects funded are *interdisciplinary*, yet do not always make full use of the potential this creates. One reason for this is presumably that projects in interdisciplinary cooperative settings must also plan in time and space for a negotiation process between different disciplinary cultures – even if the team worked in close cooperation during the funding application phase. Research cooperations between, for instance, social sciences and technology must plan, moderate and finance regular *translation processes* throughout the project.

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