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Resistance and counter-resistance to gender equality policies in Spanish universities

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Abstract

Resistance in academia is a pervasive phenomenon. Gender equality was prescribed more than a decade ago in Spain, but the problem remains unsolved. Contributing to feminist institutionalism, this paper identifies both the manifestations of resistance intended to interfere in the implementation of gender equality initiatives in Spanish universities and the strategic responses enacted by gender equality agents to counteract those resistances. To this end, we conducted in-depth interviews with the female directors of Equality Units (EqUs) at six public universities in Madrid. Despite increasing support for gender equality, the research results confirm the existence of a complex web of resistance. EqUs deploy a wide range of strategies to neutralise the refusal to accept or comply with gender equality initiatives, but these are mainly, albeit not exclusively, embodied in *actions of survival*. We argue that although limited, these specialised bodies' capacity for agency has not been obliterated and could be used to put alternative and more proactive counter strategies in place to bring about fundamental change. Overall, the findings yield new insights into the progress of and resistance to gender equality initiatives in universities.

Keywords: Feminist institutionalism; Gender equality policies in universities; Equality Units; Power Resistances; Counter-resistances; Spain; Higher Education

Resumen. *Resistencias y contrarresistencias a las políticas de igualdad de género en las universidades españolas*

La resistencia en las universidades es un fenómeno persistente. La igualdad de género fue prescrita hace más de una década en España, pero el problema sigue sin resolverse. Contribuyendo al feminismo institucional, este artículo identifica tanto las manifestaciones de resistencia destinadas a interferir en la implementación de iniciativas de igualdad de género en las universidades españolas como las respuestas estratégicas desplegadas por los agentes de igualdad de género para contrarrestar esas resistencias. Para ello, realizamos entrevistas en profundidad a las directoras de unidades de igualdad (EqUs) de seis universidades públicas de Madrid. A pesar del creciente apoyo a la igualdad de género, los resultados de la investigación confirman la existencia de una compleja red de resistencias. Las EqUs despliegan una amplia gama de estrategias para neutralizar la negativa a aceptar o cumplir las iniciativas de igualdad de género, pero estas se materializan principalmente, aunque no exclusivamente, en *acciones de supervivencia*. Argumentamos que, aunque limitada, la capacidad de agencia de estos organismos especializados no ha sido eliminada y podría usarse para implementar estrategias alternativas y más proactivas con el fin de lograr un cambio fundamental. En general, los hallazgos arrojan nuevos conocimientos sobre el progreso y la resistencia a las iniciativas de igualdad de género en las universidades.

Palabras clave: feminismo institucional; políticas de igualdad de género en las universidades; unidades de igualdad; resistencias al poder; contrarresistencias; España; educación superior

Summary

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1. Introduction

Gender equality in Spanish universities falls within the larger European framework of equality. The global commitments adopted in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action provided the basis to promote gender mainstreaming, and since 1995 this determination to advance the goal of gender equality has been reaffirmed through the 1999 Treaty of Amsterdam and many action initiatives. The foundations in Spain were laid by the Equality Law (Act 3/2007), the Law on Universities (Act 4/2007) and the Law on Science, Technology and Innovation (Act 14/2011). This legal framework mandated the creation of Equality Units (EqUs) and the development of equality plans with the aim of promoting the participation of the academic community in the development of the principle of equal opportunities between women and men. By 2016, the legal standards had been formally applied in all 48 public

universities. However, research has pointed to a formal rather than transformative strategy (Castaño et al., 2017; Verge et al., 2018; Pastor et al., 2020). Gender equality legislation constitutes a soft law strategy rather than targeting the structural reasons behind gender inequalities (Verloo, 2018). The diversity of policy frameworks and the changing nature of gender equality (Hearn, 2001), together with a lack of clear-cut objectives and ongoing restructuring processes at Spanish universities in an increasingly complex neoliberal context (de Villota & Vázquez-Cupeiro, 2016) have also contributed to placing equality initiatives on the back burner.

Gender and resistance also intersect in universities (Lee-Gosselin et al., 2013; Salminen-Karlsson, 2016). The implementation of measures to address gender equality challenges norms and practices and threatens power structures and the dominance of certain groups (Peterson et al., 2021). Any process of change generates resistance, which is here defined as multiple complex reactions—which imply discourses and practices—against interventions aimed at increasing gender equality in universities. Feminist institutionalism offers the instruments to analyse resistance to gender equity policies and how it is contested (Krook and Mackay, 2012; Mackay et al., 2010). Inspired by Acker (1990), the focus is on structural aspects and how gendered processes are interlinked with a continuum between formal and informal norms. It is assumed that organisations—and universities are not an exception—are not gender neutral, either in their functioning or in their gender effects. Certain groups may have more capacity to impose their interests and, specifically, informal politics are proved to hinder any attempt at change (Vázquez-Cupeiro & Elston, 2006; Vázquez-Cupeiro, 2022). The coexistence of formal and informal norms not only legitimises the resistance to gender equality policies (Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013; Mergaert & Lombardo, 2014; Verge, 2021; Alonso & Diz, 2022) but, ultimately, helps to explain the gap between the adoption of equality policies and their limited effects (Waylen, 2014). Unofficial norms are particularly useful to understand, on the one hand, institutional resistance (mainly implicit) to gender equality policies, which can easily lead to collective inaction; and on the other hand, explicit individual resistances (Chappell & Waylen, 2013). In parallel, while institutional processes both construct and maintain gender power dynamics, there is also a complex interaction between structure and agency. Negative reactions can generate constructive feedback that favours change, and according to O'Connor (1993), exploring the different origins of resistance may be a good strategy to overcome it. Our empirical analysis assumes that implementation of gender equality policies depends not only on ability and commitment but also on the power to effect change (Ball, 1993). The actions taken by EqUs to tackle the resistance to gender equality that they encounter can, in this regard, be seen as a form of power that implies agency. This requires, first, exploring the resistance intended to interfere in the EqUs' implementation of gender equality initiatives in universities. And second, investigating how gender equality agents—that is, the directors of these specialised bodies—counteract the refusal to (implicitly or explicitly) accept or

comply with gender equality and, ultimately, identify the strategic actions they undertake to neutralise them. This paper focuses on resistance, both individual and institutional, to gender equality in the university context, and specifically on how it is perceived and challenged by the directors of the Equality Units.

The article begins by defining the concept of resistance. We present a critical review of empirical and theoretical research on the diverse forms of opposition to gender equality in academia, and describe the institutionalisation of gender equality in the Spanish university system, focusing on the mission of the EqUs and the characteristics of the selected universities. The second section outlines the methodology, including the context of our empirical study, research approach and data collection and analysis. The next two sections describe, on the one hand, the multifaceted forms of resistance aimed at constraining gender equality initiatives in university settings, and on the other, the counter-resistance strategies deployed by gender equality actors to try to neutralise them. Finally, in the discussion and conclusion sections, we assess and summarise our main findings in relation to previous research, including limitations, implications and future lines of research.

2. Literature review

Gender inequality in academia is a serious problem. Despite ongoing efforts and initiatives, it remains a deep-rooted and persistent international phenomenon (Fitzgerald & Wilkinson, 2010; Pastor et al., 2014, 2020; Vázquez-Cupeiro, 2015; de Villota & Vázquez-Cupeiro, 2016; Castaño et al., 2017; Castaño & Suárez, 2017; O'Connor, 2020). According to the literature, gender equality measures have met with resistance in organisations, and specifically in academic institutions, contributing to (re)creating a pattern of discrimination (Connell, 2005; Müller, 2007; Mergaert & Lombardo, 2014; Verge et al., 2018; Verge, 2021; O'Connor & White, 2021; Peterson et al., 2021; Lombardo & Bustelo, 2021; Tildesley et al., 2021; Alonso & Diz, 2022). In fact, resistance to change seems to be particularly strong when the focus is on gender inequalities (Agócs, 1997; Thomas & Davies, 2005). Following Powell et al. (2018), resistance can be understood as a complex, socially constructed concept, emphasising power dynamics and the associated discursive practices (expressed actively or through passivity, neutrality or indifference). This phenomenon emerges during processes of change; is a form of opposition aimed at maintaining the status quo and protecting power relations; and should be interpreted as context-specific practices to be overcome.

Feminist studies have examined when and why resistance to gender equality occurs and have identified the diverse forms of resistance (Verloo, 2018). According to Lombardo and Mergaert (2013), these include trivialising gender equality, viewing the division of gender roles as a natural phenomenon, and denying any responsibility or need for individual and institutional change. The authors also distinguish between individual and institutional resistance, which can be explicit (through action or statement) or implicit (through inaction and

non-decision making). These categories can be expressed in various forms and, as Alonso and Diz (2022) suggest, manifested at an aggregated level. The most frequently encountered forms are gender-specific and individual resistances, implicit or explicit (Mergaert & Lombardo, 2014). Individual resistance to change, following Agócs (1997), can be explained because of "habit and inertia, fear of the unknown, absence of the skills they will need after the change, and the fear of losing power" (p. 45). O'Connor (1993) identified four types of individual resistors to change: *saboteurs*, individuals who verbally support change but ignore their responsibility (covert and conscious); *survivors*, those who undermine change because they are unaware of their failure to meet targets (covert and unconscious); *zombies*, people who seem unable to change (overt and unconscious); and *protesters*, those who believe that refusal to change makes a positive contribution to the organisation (overt and conscious).

More recently, Ahrens (2018) categorised individual resistance and, in addition to a lack of gender training and of material and human resources, identified opposition to gender equality as an expression of indirect and overlapping forms of resistance: *inertia, evasion* and *degradation*. *Inertia* refers to inactivity. It is neither confrontational nor conflictual but involves denying that gender equality is a priority. Inertia can take various forms: *nescience* (lack of gender expertise or sensitivity because sex-disaggregated statistics are limited and the relevance of gender studies are questioned); *negligence* (failure to address gender issues, even when there are formal obligations, by being supportive but uncommitted); *unsupportive hierarchy* (facilitating the aforementioned types of opposition); and *satisfaction* (accepting the gender equality status quo and preventing it from being placed on the agenda). The second form of indirect resistance, *evasion,* entails avoiding involvement in gender equality issues by not attending meetings, or refusing to give a voice to equality actors, or ignoring gender equality as a suitable policy field and refusing to allocate resources. Finally, *degradation* is a strategy that devalues gender equality policy and those promoting it—through personal attacks and by deriding quotas or the gender perspective in science—due to fear of losing power.

The analysis of this article builds on the categorization of the three separated forms of resistance identified by Lombardo and Mergaert (2013) and develops it, adopting Ahrens' (2018) classification based on individual resistance—as summarised in Table 1—to present an analytical framework that accounts both for individual and institutional resistances. University settings are presented as spaces of power struggle, particularly, although not exclusively, in the implementation of gender equality policies (Bagilhole, 2002; Tildesley et al., 2021). As found elsewhere, cultural and structural resistance to gender equality plans in scientific and academic institutions has been associated with various factors, including the absence of a tradition of gender studies, a lack of sex-disaggregated data, and unconscious bias concerning academic excellence, along with a lack of commitment to gender equality by key actors, often accompanied by a scarcity of resources that frustrates the effective power of gender equality actors (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2016). Accor-

Table 1. Forms of resistance

Denial of the evidence and need for gender change	Inertia — inaction: denial of evidence and need for gender change — nescience: lack of gender training or sex disaggregated data — negligence: failure to fulfil obligations — unsupportive hierarchy — satisfaction with current situation
Refusal to accept responsibility	Evasion — ignoring gender equality as a relevant policy field — avoiding giving voice to equality actors — not allocating resources
Trivialization of gender equality (gender roles natural)	Degradation (isolation; devaluing; ridiculing) — related to people and policies

Source: Own elaboration adapted from Mergaert & Lombardo (2014) and Ahrens (2018)

ding to Acker (1991), explicit institutional resistance is the result of a predominant male-centric mentality in a significant part of the academic community. Nonetheless, even if resistance may be visible and openly expressed, discursive practices are often more subtle. Agócs (1997) defines institutional resistance as "patterns of organisational behaviour that decision makers or people in power positions employ to actively or passively deny, reject and refuse to implement, repress or even dismantle gender equality change proposals and initiatives" (p. 918). This understanding of institutional resistance which entails processes that operate and impact at organisational (structure and process) and individual (behaviour and experience) level, can be manifested in three types of institutional structures and processes: legitimation, decision-making and resource allocation (Peterson et al., 2021).

In relation to institutional commitment, the literature has focused on the role of academic leaders and stakeholders in institutionalising gender mainstreaming. Men seem to be the key resisting actors when it comes to gender equality change in organisations (Benschop & Verloo, 2006; Connell, 2006), in as much as many perceive it as a threat to the hegemonic masculine status quo (Glazer, 1997; Thornton, 1989). Hearn (2001) has identified many reasons behind men's resistance, ranging from sexism and the maintenance of power to defining gender equality as "women's business", but nonetheless he also states that power structures are not fixed or monolithic. Far from representing a continuum that ranges from actively friendly to actively hostile, men's attitudes should be understood as involving dilemmas, contradictions and ambivalences. In fact, predominantly reticent and noncommittal attitudes coexist with proactive and supportive environments. In this regard, practices in German universities have been identified by Müller (2007) as *proactive*, *passive tolerance* and *reluctant opening*. Meanwhile, three approaches taken by university rectors have also been identified in Austria: *passive*, when they do

not feel responsible and even ignore equality objectives; *supportive*, when they publicly assume equality objectives but delegate them to other bodies; and *active*, when they assume direct responsibility and actively collaborate with EqUs (Wroblenski, 2012).

Research on this topic is very recent in Spain (Pastor et al., 2014; Castaño & Suárez, 2017; Lombardo & Bustelo, 2021; Verge, 2021; Tildesley et al., 2021). Spanish universities only began taking gender equality seriously when they were obliged to do so by law, and the institutionalisation of EqUs is thus the result of adopting policy instruments to comply with the legal mandate to ensure the principle of equality between men and women (LOMLOU/2007). Even if gender studies remain marginalised, a tradition, or a long trajectory, of gender studies and the existence of women's advocacy groups and gender equality activists in university settings may have been highly influential factors in this institutionalisation process (Cerdá, 2010; Elizondo et al., 2010; Verge et al., 2018; Pastor et al., 2020). Nonetheless, the absence of a clear implementation strategy has not helped to ensure the effective implementation of actions within the equality plans, and there remains a need to change organisational cultures and mentalities. In this regard, bodies and structures dedicated to working for gender equality, such as EqUs, are considered essential (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2016).

The right to autonomy of Spanish universities, as well as the different levels of government – national and regional – influence the character and diversity of the EqUs. Although universities must comply with state laws on gender equality, they can do so in accordance with regional regulations, and can take advantage of the university's own autonomy. The EqUs are directly responsible for developing, promoting and implementing gender equality policy. This includes the establishment of the gender equality plan, tackling sexual harassment and launching initiatives and campaigns to increase the visibility of women. The capacity of these specialised bodies to enforce recommendations is nonetheless constrained by a lack of monitoring tools and resources. While their institutional nature is diverse, most EqUs have a precarious structure. The majority are headed by a female academic, a situation, at the time we carried out the fieldwork, based on tradition rather than on statutory imposition. They are often feminist senior academics who are not fully dedicated to being EqU directors (25 out of 48 cases), and appointed through a purely political top-down approach (they remain in office solely for the duration of the incumbent rector's mandate). At the time we carried out the fieldwork, most EqUs lacked administrative and/or technical support (31 cases), and only one third were supported by other bodies: an equality committee (11 cases) and an observatory (5 cases) (Castaño & Suárez, 2017). In more recent years, most public universities have also created an equality commission or other type of network with an advisory or deliberative role (Verge & Lombardo, 2021).

It has been suggested that the assignment of responsibilities and the person to whom EUs report both indicate universities' priorities regarding gender equality (Cerdá, 2010). A study by Castaño and Suárez (2017) revealed

that EqUs enjoyed greater visibility and effectiveness if they reported directly to the rector (14 cases), which was further heightened if they also participated in the governing board (10 cases). When we carried out the fieldwork the majority reported to vice-rectors, in most cases to those responsible for social affairs/social responsibility (26 cases), generally reflecting a view of women as merely another disadvantaged group, and a clear case of Ahrens' (2018) resistance by *denial of evidence or the need for change*. Some EqUs (5 cases) formed part of student services, leading to the perception that students are the sole recipients of gender mainstreaming policies. The findings of Cerdá (2010) confirm that only when these specialised bodies report to the chief executive authority of the university, or to vice-rectors responsible for academic affairs, teaching quality or research (3 cases), is gender equality considered a strategic element in the highest ranks of university management and government positions. Consequently, perhaps despite the rapid creation of EqUs, or because of it, there is a certain level of stagnation in the progress towards gender equality in Spanish universities.

Although analyses of diverse forms of resistance—for example, towards the actions within the equality plans—have not focused on EqUs, different levels of commitment have nevertheless been identified among the university community. While some segments actively collaborate or publicly support equality principles (despite not necessarily assuming any responsibility), others trivialize gender inequality or discrimination, and deny the need for change (Cerdá, 2010). Substantiating this finding, de los Cobos (2012) classified governing bodies in Spanish public universities according to their engagement with gender equality policies, as follows: 1) bodies committed to equality supported by feminist advocacy groups; 2) bureaucratic law-followers that limit the effectiveness of EqUs by applying supposedly "gender neutral" policies; and 3) evasive bodies that underestimate gender inequalities. Among the recommendations proposed in previous studies to overcome resistance to gender equality, university structures should increase their flexibility and commitment (Pastor et al., 2020), showing a willingness to engage in dialogue while avoiding judgement (O'Connor, 1993).

The reactions to gender equality initiatives are complex, from resistance to engagement to indifference or neutrality, as are the responses to those reactions. In this article we address how resistance towards interventions aimed at increasing gender equality is manifested in Spanish universities, and what strategic responses equality actors deploy to counteract those resistances. This approach requires a further definition of the concept of resistance, as it should also acknowledge the standpoint of those who are not opposed to gender equality initiatives but struggle against the systems of domination (Agócs, 1997); that is to say *how resistance is resisted,* and in this context, what are the strategic responses of refusal to (re)produce gender inequalities deployed by EqUs. As found elsewhere, tension is inherent to feminist strategies of counter-resistance, particularly in male-dominated settings. First, because feminist counter-resistance discourses, which are too often perceived as invasive and non-hegemonic, are also likely to be co-opted. And second, because they only lead to the inclusion of gender initiatives in the political agenda when they serve an

instrumental purpose: to achieve *more relevant* objectives (Verge, 2021). That said, by analysing how feminist agents deploy strategic responses to counteract those actors that actively resist to maintain the status quo, we highlight how feminist institutional transformation is sought.

Agócs (1997) identifies six strategic individual and collective responses by advocates of change to deal with institutionalised resistance: 1) *resist* (refusal to collaborate with the oppressive, to be co-opted, etc.); 2) *create allies*; 3) *make the case for change*; 4) *make effective use of existing resources*; 5) *mobilise politically*; and 6) *build new parallel organisations*. It should be noted that to deal with the denial of the need for change, and particularly with the denial of credibility, making the case for change would be a limited action, as the source of power is not based on knowledge or expertise, but on "which authorities have conferred legitimacy and assimilated into the organisation's ideological framework" (p.925). Moreover, to respond to attacks on individuals or groups and their credibility, advocates of change should prepare a sound case but, according to Agócs, should also be prepared to accept the risk of personal attacks and have basic qualities such as the self-preservation instinct: "[t]hus knowledge and skill, personal courage, commitment to the change project, and an instinct for survival, are all essential qualities of advocates of fundamental change" (p. 926). Recently, Verge (2021) has categorised feminist counter-resistance discourses in the Spanish setting: 1) *strategic framing*, aimed at reformulating dominant interpretive frameworks to promote the adoption of new policies; 2) *discursive ambiguity*, as a camouflage creative strategy that aims to be accommodated in the political agendas to open new spaces and give relevance to undervalued issues; 3) *discursive ambivalence*, using different linguistic registers to communicate with the heterogeneity of actors; and 4) *linguistic jujitsu*, which implies using the resistance encountered against them and invoking coherence. Considering and contributing to the literature both around resistance to gender equality and around counter-resistance, this article examines on the one hand, the multifaceted forms of resistance in the effort to constrain gender equality initiatives, and on the other hand, identifies the feminist counter-resistance strategies deployed by the directors of EqUs to try to neutralise them. This analytical framework allows for the identification not only of frequent and conspicuous forms of perceived opposition to gender equality initiatives, both individual and institutional, but also of the EqUs' capacity for agency—whether this is limited and should redesign or redeploy new strategies to counter resistance—to undertake strategic actions to neutralise resistance. In sum, this perspective broadens the academic debate on the advancement of gender equality, while helping to think strategically about effective responses to deal with resistance in Spanish universities.

3. Methodology

The research presented here formed part of a broader project centred on the investigation of gender equality in the 48 public universities in Spain. A data-

base on all EqUs was compiled in phase I, conducted between March and May 2016, collecting information from their websites and through administration of a complementary questionnaire (Castaño & Suárez, 2017). As indicated in the previous section, the systematic collection of information has revealed that these specialised bodies vary widely, not only in relation to their material and human resources, but also as regards their institutional (in)dependence. To this must be added the complexity of a multilevel system of government in Spain, resulting from regional decentralisation. Previous research has concluded that regional higher education legislation can influence gender equality policies in university settings (Alonso & Diz, 2022). This circumstance, which would require an *ad hoc* study to capture the complexity of the Spanish system (Gómez Sancho & Pérez Esparrell, 2010), led us to focus on the six public universities of Madrid to carry out the in-depth qualitative study. By doing so, the sample strategy was neither biased by the regional dimension nor by variables such as university type (public/private), while accounting for significant contrasts in terms of university size, strategic orientation, and feminist tradition (gender studies/research institutes). The case study included two large universities with major research activity, one medium-sized university that boasts intensive research activity, another medium-sized university that specialises in technological education, and two medium-sized universities with limited specialisation. As regards strategic orientation and feminist tradition of these universities, two are pioneer universities with gender research institutes and a long tradition of feminist academics (cases 1 and 2). In case 1, the EqU participates in the university's governing body and the gender perspective is incorporated into every political and academic decision. Case 3 is a university with no tradition of feminist academic groups and little sensitivity, and even with hostility, toward feminism. The remaining three are new universities with less established feminist groups, but which are nevertheless relatively proactive in gender equality issues (cases 4, 5, and 6).

Subsequently, in phase II, we conducted seven semi-structured in-depth interviews with the female EqU directors at these universities in Madrid, to explore their discourses, strategies and capacity for agency in relation to resistance to gender initiatives. The rationale for carrying out seven rather than six interviews was that the director of one of the specialised bodies changed during the research process. Consequently, we decided to interview both the incumbent and her predecessor. These women can be considered pioneers or precursors in the struggle for gender equality. While paving the way in their respective universities, they have been involved in the institutionalisation of these specialised bodies. Supported by feminist academics, but with scant legislative development in the region, their leading role has been crucial in day-to-day implementation. They were considered key informants (and often the only ones, given the structure of the EqUs) and drawing on their testimonies was possibly the best way to address how resistance is encountered and counteracted in university settings. However, future studies should also include the perspective of male and female academic authorities and university governing board members.

The interviews were conducted between January and March 2016. They lasted an average of 90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. The analysis below also includes insights obtained in a session conducted in phase III with participants at the 9th Annual Meeting of the Spanish Network of Gender Equality Units for University Excellence, held in May 2016. EqU representatives from public universities throughout Spain attended this session, and 14 of them (out of 25) shared their impressions regarding our preliminary results. The session was recorded and transcribed, and the testimonies analysed in the light of the in-depth interviews with EqU directors. While acknowledging its limitations, this approach endowed us not only with a deeper understanding of the initiatives and strategies of these specialised bodies, but also with the opportunity to contrast the testimonies of EqU directors in the region of Madrid with those in other regions. Although the data were collected six years ago, they remain relevant, given the autonomous nature of the Spanish university system and the universities' failure to introduce new regulations, impeding the capacity of EqUs to increase their influence.

Data analysis comprised three stages. We took notes during the interviews and the session with EqUs representatives from all public universities. The data were recorded and fully transcribed, and in this first stage, the material was tentatively classified. In the second stage, we re-read the material to reach a more thorough categorization. A manual content analysis was eventually structured around the EqU directors' perceptions of university community responses to their initiatives and their identification of their own counterstrategies to neutralise resistance to gender equality. Categorization of the information was informed by the previous literature (Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013; Ahrens, 2018), but the analysis was actor-centred, considering particular institutional settings. This approach enabled us to identify the most frequently perceived forms of opposition to gender equality and the strategies deployed to counter them, acknowledging differences and similarities in our informants' discourses. The approach was qualitative and did not attempt to produce generalizable results, but rather to explore the interpretation of academic community reactions as resistance to gender equality initiatives, and the EqUs' counter-responses to these reactions.

4. Findings

This section includes two sub-sections: firstly, the forms of resistance encountered by the directors of the EqUs towards interventions aimed at increasing gender equality, and secondly, the strategies deployed by the specialised gender equality bodies to counteract those resistances.

4.1. Resistance to gender equality initiatives

In this section we present the results, building on the categorization identified by Lombardo and Mergaert (2013), developing it from the forms of resistance described by Ahrens (2018).

4.1.1. Denial of the evidence or the need for change

Our informants' testimonies coincided on frequent forms of individual resistance in the academic community, built around *denial* of the evidence of gender inequality or the need for change. Ambiguity and doubts existed, for example, in relation to gender pay gaps. Here, the underlying discourse revealed not only a lack of awareness about discrimination, but also the assumption that gender equality policies are unnecessary, prioritising market logic instead. According to the interviewees' perception, those supporting this perspective deny the logic behind these specialised bodies, viewing them as contrary to efficacy. This argument was based on the premise that a gender perspective is unnecessary and that the EqUs are "*just another unnecessary expense*" (case 5). There was agreement that this stance was becoming more widespread, especially in cases 5 and 6, mainly because of the restructuring processes currently underway in Spanish universities (merging of departments, reduction of personnel, etc.). The premise "*it is not the right time* [to spend money to create an EqU]" (case 3), along the lines of the above, was also used to justify this position. The fear of cultural change, and even a certain *satisfaction* with the current situation, was also evident. Overall, insofar as it is installed in hostility toward gender mainstreaming and positive discrimination policies, this discourse was perceived as antifeminist.

> Regarding acceptance of the EqUs, above all, there is still a lack of awareness of the body. The need for a body to deal with [gender] equality isn't perceived. As if we were free of harassment, discrimination, and whatever else I tell them! In other words, most people are grateful that it exists, but [there is] also apathy and [from some people], open hostility. (case 5)

The interviewees also reported that arguments based on academic excellence are not uncommon, and they perceived this discourse as generating *hostility* toward gender equality initiatives. Several EqU directors identified the use of arguments associated with discrimination against men (case 3) to oppose gender equality initiatives such as UNICEF's International Day of the Girl, launched to advocate for girls' rights and celebrated in technical public universities to tackle the problem of young women's low participation in STEM subjects. Furthermore, the participants confirmed the existence of active and somewhat explicit resistance in the form of *negligence* (case 5), as they had reason to believe the EqUs were only created out of fear of being sanctioned by labour inspectors.

4.1.2. Trivialization of gender equality

Most interviewees perceived that trivialising, devaluing or even ridiculing the EqUs' initiatives was probably the most frequent form of individual resistance encountered among the academic community. The discourse underlying this type of resistance revolves around use of the derogatory term "gender ideology" and questioning of feminist goals: "Here we have the feminists who want

to tear everything down" (case 1) or "Why don't we create a Men's Unit? (case 3)". Such devaluation is evidenced also in the following statement: "[E]very time we organise an activity, no matter what it is – the Conference against Gender-Based Violence, International Women's Day, Girl's Day... – we must get authorization" (case 3). Some EqU directors condemned the exhaustive bureaucratic control exercised by administrative managers, vice-rectors or rectors, which sometimes even entailed supervision of the content of communications sent to the university community. In addition to a lack of autonomy, interviewees decried the lack of interaction with high-level decision-makers concerning their activity, but instead with administration and management departments. For example, with the Human Resources Unit or the Registrar's Office. Given all the above, there is evidence that the EqUs' actions are constrained, and there is a lack of legitimacy and autonomy granted to the EqU.

Notably, the EqUs directors reported resistance from individuals located in the university administrative structure who, without any real or apparent motive, were opposed to legally approved gender equality measures such as producing data disaggregated by sex (case 3). This could be an example of *non-gender specific resistance* to initiatives by non-acting (Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013). It would be a manifestation of power of those individuals, as they take non-action (Lukes, 2005), but a form of resistance probably due to their lack of expertise, or lack of time, to carry out the tasks requested. Nonetheless, regardless of their institution's official position, some individuals within the administrative or academic structure often adopted a hostile approach—at times subtle, at others proactive—which all too often thwarted gender equality initiatives. One interviewee illustrated this type of individual resistance by describing how an information technology manager proffered a wide range of excuses to impede the EqU's visibility on the university website (case 6), prompting the women in the EqU to create their own blog, what could be considered, as shown below, a bottom-line strategy or a survival strategy of counter resistance. Such trivialization of gender equality was also illustrated by the strong reaction against institutional recommendations to use non-sexist language (cases 3, 5 and 6) instead of the generic *he* or *his* (in Spanish used as generics) to refer to both men and women, which erases women. One EqU director criticised the refusal to use the gender-neutral term *Engineering School* (*Escuela de Ingeniería*)—referring to the subject of engineering—instead of *Engineers' School* (*Escuela de Ingenieros*), which in Spanish refers only to male engineering students. This would be an example of resistance in favour of established ways of doing things, which can be well-explained by feminist institutionalism, because despite the adoption of new formal rules (non-sexist use of language), its implementation is undermined due to informal norms that seek to maintain the status quo (in this case, the established use of masculine generics in language). Although some interviewees reported feeling frustrated (case 3), as we show below, far from being passive actors, the EqU directors' capacity for agency was revealed through implementation of strategic actions to neutralise the forms of institutional or individual resistance they encountered.

4.1.3. Refusal to accept responsibility

This type of resistance involves ignoring, avoiding and even neglecting institutionally designed equality plans to achieve gender equality, which was considered *passive tolerance* by one informant.

> The problem is, you approve an equality plan, you approve a diagnosis… but nothing is done. No one moves a finger and nothing is accomplished. And we are going to have a monitoring commission, we are going to do whatever. We have legislation but nothing has been done! We have an EqU, we have an equality plan, we have a diagnosis, we have whatever, but nothing is done. The passive tolerance thing that I said... (Participant 6, 9th Equality Units Meeting)

They also reported that gender equality policies were sometimes only acknowledged when there was no other choice. However, resistance to legal mandates was more often revealed through informal and unspoken (implicit) procedures, as is illustrated in the quotation below, that eventually took precedence over formal regulations. The lack of institutional commitment frequently resulted in declarations of intention, fuzzy statements and lack of a timeframe in relation to gender equality plans and measures.

> Vague statements, such as "we must guarantee", "we must ensure" compliance with the equality plan, or a lack of specificity regarding who has responsibility for what… The resistance to using non-sexist language in university communications or attempting to limit application of the sexual harassment protocol to labour relationships, not to relationships between colleagues. (case 2)

Delay in approval of diagnostics or proposals for equality plans provides a good example of *evasion*, as it is very often months or even years before these are put on the table for debate: "A quantitative analysis was conducted, but the committee didn't approve it... [and] it dragged on while they tried to reach an agreement" (case 1). In this case, the lengthy process merely yielded a declarative document with few effective commitments to promote gender equality, only approved almost two years later. Refusal to accept responsibility for gender equality mandates was also displayed through institutional resistance to and obstruction of gender initiatives, undermining the capacity, visibility or power of EqUs. A strategy of *evasion* was perceived in some environments where the EqUs tended to have insufficient material and human resources. The testimonies revealed that some universities aimed to comply with the law while creating an EqU at "zero cost" (case 3). This would be an example of both *evasion* and *degradation*, generally associated with *unsupportive hierarchies*, reinforcing the EqUs' lack of autonomy. The EqUs analysed did not formally participate in either the university board or the governing council, a body responsible for establishing political strategies and assisting the rector in the areas of academic, human and financial resources. Most were staffed by three people, with job rotation and working on a part-time basis, and were not

included in the "university's organisational chart". These resistances were reinforced by others such as *inertia* and *unsupportive hierarchies*, which placed the EqUs directors in the position of having to "beg" for economic resources: "We must beg those in charge. We don't have a budget... If we want to produce a pamphlet, then we must go begging and see which vice rector's office will give us some money" (case 3). Overall, this contributed to *degradation* in two ways: 1) by redirecting EqUs activity away from gender equality initiatives and toward fund-raising and seeking authorization; and 2) by putting additional strain on EqU directors, while devaluing their efforts to implement initiatives and ultimately paralysing the EqUs.

4.2. Strategies of counter-resistance

The results confirmed the existence of a complex web of resistance toward EqUs initiatives, ultimately affecting these specialised bodies' autonomy and even survival in university settings. In response, the EqUs designed and put into place strategies to neutralise the resistance encountered, although these were not always as successful as they would have liked. Before describing this approach, two dimensions that appeared to facilitate the EqUs' mission need to be highlighted: the institutional context and the institutional commitment to gender equality. The differences between both elements are conceptual and operational, as is summarised in Table 2, yet they are related to the institutional resistances encountered as each university setting holds them differently.

The first of these was the institutionalisation of gender equality and a tradition of gender activism in the university setting. This was often associated with the involvement of gender research institutes (cases 1 and 2), the creation of a gender observatory (case 6), gender parity on the rector's team (case 2), and the existence of an informal but proactive group of gender equality activists (case 6). Parity can be nevertheless problematic because the presence of women does not in itself guarantee gender equality awareness or the implementation of

Table 2. Factors enabling the EqUs mission

Tradition of gender equality culture and gender activism in the university	— Gender parity in Rector's and university governing teams — A Gender Research Institute — A Gender Observatory
Institutional commitment to gender equality	— EqU located near to the top of the university structure — Reaffirming EqU's human and material autonomy — own budget — assigned administrative and academic staff — adequate infrastructure and suitable space to work. — Proactive promotion of non-sexist language (university statutes, university research calls, etc.)

Source: Own elaboration

women-friendly policies. Second, as mentioned earlier, political commitment to gender equality was often associated with the location of EqUs close to the top of the university structure. But despite this potential closeness to the top power structures, the interviewees perceived a lack of institutional commitment and noted that, all too often, progress appeared to depend on personal relationships, resulting in a sense of powerlessness.

> Personally, I do communicate with the rector, and he takes an interest in these matters. So, if I write him an email, not to the generic rector email address but to his [private account], we exchange emails, we talk about things... above all, with the equality plan, he took it very personally. But if the rector is replaced, if the new rector that comes in isn't very interested in gender issues, then I'll be lost. (case 5)

Consequently, institutional commitment was perceived as effective when the EqUs were given a budget—even if not always sufficient—, assigned academic and administrative staff, and, even if this might seem symbolic, endowed with adequate infrastructures (for example, a suitable space to work and a visible place on the university webpage). Participants also agreed that political commitment was displayed using non-sexist language in university statutes and calls for research proposals.

Given the context of opportunities, which varied from one university to another, the EqUs adopted a diversity of counter-resistance actions, as shown in Table 3. To combat *denial of evidence or the need for change*, they implemented initiatives to raise awareness of gender issues in the academic community and created alliances and synergies to promote gender-sensitive training and actions aimed at increasing the visibility of women and their EqU's achievements.

> The first thing we must do is train the governing boards on gender perspectives because if we don't, it's very unlikely that they'll understand because I've realised that everyone talks about gender, and that's a problem… There's also the idea of making what we're doing on gender at the university more visible; and within the equality plan there are issues that have to do with support and actions, like more balanced participation of men and women on many matters… What we must try to change are the structures. (case 1)

Concern was also voiced about the need to develop an effective communication plan. To combat individual and institutional *denial*, some adopted a realistic and pragmatic cross-cutting strategy, implementing actions one step at a time to reach consensus and ensure the effectiveness of initiatives. This could be interpreted both as *strategic framing* and *discursive ambiguity*, and a good example of this is illustrated by the following statement: "I use the camouflage strategy. Things that you can't say openly, you present with different terminology, and you end up saying the same thing. You can't say 'a patriarchal society', but instead you can say 'male-centred'" (Participant 1, 9th

Equality Units Meeting). In this regard, many EqU directors felt obliged to "invent" information, and even data, when the available facts did not present a favourable image of the institution.

Several strategies were employed to combat *trivialization,* such as presenting the EqUs as a consolidated and necessary public service for the entire university community. Again, as an example of *strategic framing*, to avoid *degradation*, some interviewees described basing their argument on human

Table 3. Examples of resistance to gender equality and EqUs counteracting strategies

Forms of resistance	Examples of resistance	Examples of counteracting strategies
Denial of the evidence and need of gender change	— Ambiguity concerning gender pay gaps, harassment, discrimination. — Gender perspective contrary to academic excellence — Gender perspective contrary to efficacy and market logic (unnecessary expense)	— Generating gender knowledge — Unveiling inequality (data, diagnosis, evaluations) — Gender equality sensitization and training for professors, administrative staff and students — Communication plan (prizes, exhibitions, etc.) oriented to visibility of: — women's achievements — EqUs' actions — EqUs in the university web
Trivialization of gender equality	— Opposition to producing sex-disaggregated data — Gender ideology to tear everything down. Why not a *Men's Equality Unit*?) — Authorisation required for EqU activities — Preventing the visibility of EqU in the university web — Strong reaction against non-sexist language	— Gender equality as a *human right* — EqUs as a service to the whole university community — EqU's activities and achievements included in the university annual report: gender equality indicator of quality — EqU blog independent of the university — EqU's regulation included in the university's main regulation
Refusal to accept responsibility	— Delays in approving gender equality diagnosis and plans — Vague statements, declarations of intentions ("we must guarantee, we must ensure") — Lack of timeframes concerning gender equality legal mandates. — Non-accomplishment of Gender Equality Plans and Sexual Harassment Protocols — Gender equality "at zero cost": — EqUs given few staff and scarce budget	— Alliances and synergies to reach consensus over gender equality plan and gender equality policies — Gender Focal Points to deliver bottom-up equality initiatives — Follow up commissions for gender plans — Alternative (non-university) funding strategy (collaboration grants; volunteer work)

Source: Own elaboration

rights rather than on feminist demands when advocating for women's right to equal opportunities in university settings. They also worked hard for formal recognition in the university statutes and annual reports, arguing that the existence of an EqU served as an indicator of university quality. One common strategy used to tackle the *refusal to accept responsibility* was to develop their own funding strategy. Given the overall scarcity of economic resources, the majority reported that they actively sought alternative, non-university funding, such as collaboration grants or volunteers, to finance legally assigned initiatives and increase the EqU's visibility. Yet too often, accounting for the gap between formal and effective support regarding gender equality—for example, but not exclusively, in terms of autonomy or financial resources—, EqUs can only adopt a *strategy of survival* to neutralise the encountered resistance and to stay afloat.

> The attitudes of the universities in relation to the Equality Plans lie on a scale that goes from hostility to reticence and support… The worst is hostility and support is the best. And this implies its reverse, which is that the EqU is an equality body that has autonomy or is an equality body that has a very strong dependency, or it is an equality body that has to dedicate itself to pure and simple survival… (Participant 6, 9th Equality Units Meeting).

Lastly, besides exposing gender inequality and increasing the visibility of achievements in gender equality, the equality unit network also implemented creative strategic actions such as follow-up gender commissions and gender focal points in each faculty, with the aim of delivering bottom-up gender equality plans and agreed protocols against sexual and sexist harassment.

6. Discussion

Resistance in academia is a pervasive phenomenon. The present study has revealed the embedded nature of resistance to gender equality and its widespread practice at multiple levels. Our results confirm the previous literature and identify diverse forms and combinations of resistance to EqU initiatives in Spanish universities, which may be actively expressed or simply implied through indifference or neutrality (Powell et al., 2018). Although indirect individual resistance was the most frequent form, institutional opposition was not negligible, substantiating previous international studies (O'Connor, 1993; Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013). Implicit and evasive resistance—inaction or omission—predominated over other forms, but the prevalence in Spain of explicit individual and/or institutional resistance was striking. In addition to the scarcity of resources allocated to them and the EqUs' location in the organisational structure, the lack of commitment to actively promoting non-sexist language proved an important dimension in terms of understanding explicit resistance to, and even rejection of, gender equality in Spain. Furthermore, the constraints faced by EqUs underscored the pivotal role of the actors involved in

the process, specifically rectors and governing boards, in either complying with or committing to gender equality legislation. In this regard, as previously stated (Hearn, 2001; Müller, 2007; de los Cobos, 2012; Wroblenski, 2012), men's attitudes exhibited contradictions and ambivalences, as those in positions of power—rectors and vice-rectors—tended to (informally) show support but withheld formal recognition and commitment, revealing a discrepancy between policy statements and gender practices. These resulted in multiple levels of resistance involved and, as suggested by Lombardo and Mergaert (2013), manifested at the aggregate level. But the edges are blurred, and often intermingled. In this regard, difficulties arose in trying to account for the interplay between individual and institutional resistances. Our testimonies are based on personal experiences, which in some cases refer to specific individuals and in others to the institution in general. Consequently, although interactions can be intuited, the results obtained show rather a distinction between individual and institutional forms of resistance, with the former the most frequent form of resistance.

EqUs constitute powerful groups at the heart of the university system, although the literature has not paid sufficient attention to their key role as bodies with the capacity for agency. Our results show that most EqU initiatives were marked by caution and the need to establish solely those objectives considered achievable, which could, paradoxically, be interpreted as *strategic framing* (Verge 2021; Mergaert & Lombardo, 2014) and as a circumstance that may be limiting their capacity to promote change. In addition, their capacity for agency was marked by constraints that influenced their degree of autonomy. But far from accepting a situation of dependence, and in line with the "instinct for survival" acknowledged by Agócs (1997), the EqUs analysed often deployed strategic *actions of survival* to neutralise resistance. Most EqUs have a precarious structure, but many also have a precarious existence, which in practical terms lead them to set only achievable objectives and to put in place initiatives marked by caution. In short, they deploy gender equality actions of mere *survival*. However, despite the persistent challenges EqUs encounter in promoting gender awareness, their capacity for agency has not been extinguished. According to the EqU directors, it is necessary not only to put alternative, more proactive counter-strategies in place, but also to strive to achieve real recognition, resources and autonomy within the university structure in order to avoid becoming irrelevant. Further research is required on individuals' resistance, the contexts in which they operate and the views of stakeholders, particularly those who enact said resistance, to identify strategies to enhance the effectiveness of EqU actions.

This article contributes to gender equality within the context of management in the Spanish university system. This topic is highly relevant but controversial, given the tension between gender equality legislation and day-to-day university practices. It has practical implications for the universities involved and for the Spanish university system. Talking with academic women working as EqU directors about resistance to gender equality initiatives and their counter-resistance strategies serves to increase visibility of the issue among the

academic community. Breaking the silence over individual and institutional forms of opposition to gender equality—even though the boundaries between the two are blurred—is similarly crucial to raise awareness among academic staff and key stakeholders involved in policy making, first, of the gap between rhetoric and practice, and second, of the need to seriously address gender equality in Spanish universities. The present article also has implications for the field of research on gender equality. Besides contributing to the state of the art, it gathers evidence of initiatives which may be effective in overcoming resistance in Spanish universities to international literature. Additionally, it paves the way for research on resistance to gender equality aimed at identifying this problem in the university system and determining effective strategies to counter it.

7. Conclusions

Gender equality measures tend to encounter resistance (Mergaert & Lombardo, 2014; Tildesley et al., 2021). Gender discourse is accepted, but silent resistance and reluctance appear to persist in everyday practice. This paper has addressed resistance to gender equality initiatives from the perspective of EqU directors in Spanish universities, where despite formal adherence to gender equality laws, the expression "gender discrimination" is still considered taboo. Accordingly, EqU initiatives face opposition, and there is a disparity between what is said and what is done as regards effecting deep-seated change in Spanish universities. Paradoxically, rules are enforced while breaking them. While indirect individual resistance to EqU initiatives prevails over other forms, institutional opposition is not negligible within the university system. Institutional resistance in the form of denial is frequently implicit, rendering it difficult to tackle. Reluctance implies that equality policies are never seen as timely, and gender equality initiatives have often been perceived as an unwarranted intrusion on academic objectivity and meritocracy. Furthermore, in university management settings, they are perceived as interference in the process of economic resource allocation. Individual and institutional trivialization of gender equality consists of creating obstacles and exerting bureaucratic control over EqU actions. Against this background, EqUs deploy a wide range of strategies to neutralise resistance, but these are mainly, albeit not exclusively, embodied in *survival actions*. We argue that although limited, the EqUs' capacity for agency has not been obliterated and could be used to put alternative and more proactive counter-strategies in place. In fact, their capacity for agency seems to be more effective when they employ alternative and proactive strategic actions. Despite the challenges, with a distinction (rather than an interplay) made between individual and institutional forms of resistance, the present research adds new insights into the progress of and resistance to gender equality in universities. Besides further research into gender equality plans, the perspective of academic authorities and members of the governing boards (both male and female) should be included to complete the picture. Future lines of research

could also be undertaken following this preliminary study to analyse the progress achieved by EqUs in relation to their objectives, and to reflect on whether EqUs should serve solely as administrative bodies or, to the contrary, be granted political status with more institutional weight in the university structure.

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