

# Towards Gender Equality in Hungarian Universities BME as a Case Study

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## Abstract

Women's participation in higher positions in education, particularly in higher education, is a critical issue. Governments are working toward improving gender equality in education, as well as other aspects of the issue such as economics, social issues, and work. This study aims to investigate the factors that influence gender equality at the Budapest University of Technology and Economics. To accomplish the aim, two research questions were set up: How do the employees perceive gender equality at BME, and what factors have an impact on gender equality? Plus, what does the BME Gender Equality Plan reveal about workplace equality and policies, and how is the university working towards achieving gender equality?

The study relied on qualitative methods, such as interviews and data analysis of the gender equality plan 2022-2025 and its intervention areas. The study explored the university background and experiences toward achieving gender equality, and the challenges encountered. The interviews revealed some of the challenges that the participants have faced regarding equal pay, promotion, and research opportunities. The evidence indicates that there is an underrepresentation of women in managerial and teaching positions, while there is an overrepresentation in administration positions. This can be attributed to the lack of formal policies that aim to promote gender equality, culture, and the lack of appropriate communication channels. However, based on the Gender Equality Plan 2022-2025, the university aims towards achieving gender equality within all faculties.

## Keywords

gender equality, BME gender equality plan, equal pay, recruitment, career progression

## 1 Introduction

Recent academic gender studies more diverse viewpoints (Eddy et al., 2017; Gansmo et al., 2003) that encompass gender balance in terms of the job distribution between men and women in respect of different positions (Lagesen, 2007), quality (Acker, 2006), equity (UN Women, 2017), and equality (Eddy et al., 2017; Lewis et al., 2017; UN Women, 2017; 2018). In higher education institutions, power relations are fundamental in providing the basis for the organisational structures and gender is a key component of that (Shah, 2020). Consequently, many women's careers are affected by inferior gender norms which are visible in the recruitment process, promotion (van den Brink et al., 2010), as well as women's representation in senior and leadership positions (Marchant and Wallace, 2013; Morley, 2014; Nielsen, 2014; Sang, 2018; Shah, 2020).

There are a few factors that are connected to the diversity of women's academic experiences and that are

believed to affect women's advancement into leadership positions (Sang, 2018; Winchester and Browning, 2015); discriminatory educational organisational structures, lack of gender equality policies or the lack of an enforcement mechanism, cultural traits such as the different roles men and women play in the society and finally, social norms that provide different opportunities for women and men (Grove and Montgomery, 2000; Morley, 2014; Nielsen, 2014; Sang, 2018).

This research aims to answer the following questions:

1. How do the employees perceive gender equality at BME? And to what factors have an impact on gender equality?
2. What does the BME Gender Equality Plan reveal about workplace equality and policies and how is the university working towards achieving gender equality?

### 1.1 Women in higher education

Women's underrepresentation in higher education institutions' leadership roles has been a concern for a long time, and it has been exacerbated by powerful gender stereotyping discourses (David, 2016; Dominici et al., 2009; Dunn et al., 2014; Odhiambo, 2011; Sandberg and Scovell, 2013). UNESCO organised a World Conference in 1998 to evaluate the Beijing Conference of 1995's gender objectives. One of the key aims of the conference was to enable women to advance to senior leadership roles in higher education institutions, which according to the findings, was not achieved globally.

More than 189 member-states accepted the Millennium Declaration, and its specified priorities and development targets, at the Millennium Assembly in September 2000. Eight goals were set for 2015, and one of them was to ensure the involvement of women in higher education institutions (UNESCO, 2017). Nevertheless, despite these goals to promote gender equality in Higher education institutions, there are still fewer women in leadership positions in comparison to men (UNDP, 2017).

Moreover, several researchers (e.g., CODESRIA, 2014; Dunn et al., 2014; Fitzgerald, 2013; Mohajeri et al., 2015; Nyoni et al., 2017; Odhiambo, 2011; Rubini and Menegatti, 2014) have highlighted the factors that affect gender equality in higher education which are cultural, political, economic, personal, etc. (CODESRIA, 2014; Lituchy et al., 2015; Nkomo and Ngambi, 2013; UNESCO, 2017).

This can also be connected to the allocation of resources and power within the household, where according to empirical data, women's empowerment and equality will advance if they receive more economic resources than males do within the same home. It has been demonstrated that increased financial resources among the family's female members contribute to the better education of children, especially girls (Becker, 1991).

Representative bureaucracy is the ideal form of organisation as it provides a greater representation of society's members, with the workplace acting as a mirror for society as a whole (Light, 1999; Loaden and Rosener, 1991; Meier and Bohte, 2007; Waters, 1996). Therefore, the idea of inclusion can result in extending the candidate pool from which hiring, appointment, promotion, and training take place (Hallman et al., 2005; Loprest, 1992; Sharma and Sharma, 2010; Weyer, 2007).

Yaghi and Alibeli (2006) and Shaw and Cassell (2007) both claim that women's economic activity can be influenced by their educational status. Researchers disagree

about how education affects working women, yet they all agree that more education increases the employment prospects for women.

Although the education of women has continuously increased in most nations, women continue to choose some college majors while avoiding others which affects their job choices after graduation. Consequently, women are underrepresented in several fields where they did not specialise due to this pattern of employment (Light, 1999).

Some governments offer training to women so they can become qualified for positions in particular professions, particularly in fields where women are underrepresented (Shaw and Cassell, 2007).

Many women cannot retain a job that does not pay them enough to employ a babysitter in many nations, meaning that there is a high rate of job turnover among working women. Additionally, some companies are not interested in modifying work schedules to accommodate working mothers who are nursing, pregnant, or have children (Shaw and Cassell, 2007).

Nevertheless, some governments used quota systems that allocated a specific percentage of positions for women to lower the turnover rate among women. In some countries (Hammarstedt and Shukur, 2007), companies were required to make adequate accommodations for working women, particularly in the public sector.

The situation of women in higher education cannot be considered in isolation from their overall social standing (England, 2005). Women have had a limited position in society throughout history, with limited options (Britton, 2000). Even in this new period, this unpleasant reality persists, and gender inequities continue to disproportionately affect women, who are subjected to far more discrimination than males (ESU, 2008). Even though academia has been viewed as a progressive aspect of society, the education sector, notably at its highest level on the career ladder, Higher Education has been impacted by "the women's issue" (ESU, 2008).

### 1.2 Gender equality

The Council of Europe (2014) defined gender equality as "Equal visibility, empowerment and participation of both sexes in all spheres of public and private life". The notion has previously been defined as a way of understanding and respecting the differences between men and women, as well as the various responsibilities they play in society. The achievement of gender equality is a critical component in the preservation of human rights (Council of

Europe, 2014). Human rights relate to everyone's right to be self-sufficient, not to be discriminated against, and to have equal rights and duties (UN, 2015). Both men and women must recognise the need to address societal imbalances, and they must also share the responsibility for taking action (Council of Europe, 2014).

Frink et al. (2003) discovered that having a gender-balanced staff is helpful to businesses. Their premise that firms with a gender-equal workforce, defined as 50/50, perform better in terms of profitability than those with an unequal gender distribution was confirmed. Gender diversity among board members has a favourable influence on an organisation's market value, according to Campbell and Mínguez-Vera (2008). It is emphasised that a more equitable distribution between men and women is required. This phenomenon was corroborated by Kakabadse et al. (2015), who discovered that gender-diverse boards had several non-financial benefits, including greater business reputation, better decision-making, and better utilisation of skills.

### 1.3 Gender equality in Hungary

There are precedents in Hungarian law for enforcing the norm of equal treatment and fostering equal chances. Several major legal documents, including the Constitution 4, Section 76 of the Act IV of 1959 On the Civil Code of the Republic of Hungary, Section 5 of the Act XXII of 1992 On the Labour Code, and the Act No. 26 of 1998 on assuring equal opportunity for persons with disabilities (Hungarian Parliament, 1959; 1992; 1998) contain normative provisions that are binding on persons, legal relations, and institutions within their scope. This suggests that the normative view of the law, which implies that it has the potential to promote the formation of new, desirable attitudes, has precedents. As a result, given that state legislation already included equality principles, one would expect a seamless institutional transition to the EU institutions and legislature. However, the above-mentioned gender-neutral policy framework, in which gender was treated alongside race, ethnicity, cultural differences, and impairments, hampered the adoption of new policy measures that may address gender-specific concerns. As a result, the Hungarian law limited the EU integrationist stance.

The establishment of the gender-sensitive policy, which is backed by the new EU strategy on social inclusion, was hampered by existing legislation on (gender) equality. The Joint Inclusion Memorandum (JIM) and the National Action Plan on Social Inclusion (NAP), which followed the Memorandum, marked the start of new policy procedures.

The Joint Inclusion Memorandum outlined the main issues Hungary faced in terms of social exclusion and poverty, as well as the tasks Hungary still needed to complete to achieve EU common social policy objectives. It looked at how poverty, ethnicity (with a focus on Roma), disability, gender, and, to a lesser extent, sexual orientation, all have exclusionary implications.

Hungary adopted various components of gender equality policy into EU papers by 2006, two years after accession, but it did not adopt any strategic policy documents to establish gender mainstreaming which can be defined as "a globally accepted strategy, an approach, and a means for promoting gender equality. Mainstreaming involves ensuring that gender perspectives and attention to the goal of gender equality are central to all the activities. Mainstreaming represents a shift in thinking about women; from women as a target group of development assistance to gender equality as a development objective" UN (1997).

These policy texts represented the start of a long-term process aimed at improving the position of women. They did, however, highlight the contentious nature of gender equality issues on the Hungarian political agenda. Documents were accepted to meet EU standards, but they also highlighted the inconsistencies that arose from a lack of political will and commitment to the issue: no policy instruments or monitoring systems were built, and the proposed policy goals did not address the genuine needs of Hungarian women (Timár, 2007).

### 1.4 Gender equality in higher education

In organisations in Hungary and other countries, impact assessment and monitoring of the results of equality programmes are largely undeveloped practices (Tardos and Paksi, 2018). Nevertheless, it is a crucial component of the majority of Diversity Management (DM) frameworks, whether they be more specialised models concentrating on gender equality or more generic DM models. Kandola and Fullerton have created the "Strategy Web", one of the iconic diversity management frameworks (Kandola and Fullerton, 1998).

The authors contend that seven essential organisational procedures must be followed for diversity initiatives in organisations to be successful: Diversity must be a component of the organisation's vision, and the leaders' commitment and involvement must be evident to the organisation's members. Other requirements include audits and following up on results and the process, goal clarity, effective communication, coordination, and appraisal. Similarly,

the last stage of the GEAR Tool created by the European Institute for Gender Equality is the evaluation and monitoring process. In order to implement gender equality programmes, the Toolkit for Gender Equality in Academia and Research, or GEAR Tool, emphasises four essential steps: analysis, planning, implementation, and monitoring (Kandola and Fullerton, 1998).

Accountability, Infrastructure, Incentives, and Resources (AIIR) are the four components that Brooks et al. (2018) suggest for implementing diversity strategies in higher education institutions as part of "institutional transformation initiatives". They emphasise that to execute a gender equality plan or a diversity plan, the leaders must work towards building various mechanisms at the different levels across the organisation, moreover, financial allocation is essential to executing the plan, drafting clear policies that are communicated throughout the organisation through committees and change agents. Additionally, leaders must be provided with incentives to promote change, resources must be allocated, and financial expenditures made to support the diversity efforts (Brooks et al., 2018).

Clavero and Galligan (2021) emphasise the significance of dealing with gender inequality as it is an issue of justice and a power relation between the genders. Consequently, organisational culture plays a vital role in the perpetuation of these inequalities so it could attain continuous structural change through gender and diversity plans in higher education institutions (Clavero and Galligan, 2021). Furthermore, Bencivenga and Drew (2021) highlight the impact leaders play in enabling the change for gender equality in higher education institutions and they also encourage that future national and EU initiatives should aim to promote gender equality.

### 1.5 Academia in Hungary

Recently, there was an increase in the number of female students in Hungary, and mirroring patterns have also been seen in other industrialised nations (Fényes, 2010). As a result, after 1990, signs of reversal movements in the new generations have become increasingly evident, and the proportion of degree-holding women has surpassed that of males first in the younger generations, then in the entire population. This contrasts with the pre-political period when the average educational attainment of women in the overall 15+ population was lower than that of men (Varga, 2019). Women have consistently represented slightly more than 50% of all students in higher education, despite a minor decline since the peak in 2004 (Varga, 2019).

According to official data (found at felvi.hu), women outnumbered males in both bachelor's and master's degree programmes between 2008 and 2017 (53% in 2017), while women's involvement in PhD programmes is lower (47% in 2017) and has been declining recently. Although women holding master's degrees outnumber men, when you observe the universities and academic career ladder, the more you move up the ladder, the more male-dominated the hierarchy becomes (Lannert and Nagy, 2020).

Although there are more women than males among graduates, their proportion among PhD holders is just 36.8%, and at the pinnacle of their academic careers, among the Hungarian Academy of Sciences members, their percentage is small (6.2%) (Lannert and Nagy, 2020).

In 2019, the average percentage of women who were full members of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences was 6.2%, and in no field did the percentage reach 15%. Moreover, women's representation is higher in philosophy and historical sciences, and medical sciences, while their presence is at its lowest—below 3%—in the sections of mathematics and engineering sciences. This trend reflects a global pattern where it is common for women to be at the bottom of the university hierarchy, where the teaching load is heavier, the associated "caring activity" is more prevalent, the accessible, reachable salary is lower, and the job contract is frequently short and provides less security (Lannert and Nagy, 2020).

According to one Hungarian study, the main obstacles that women face in academia are motherhood and work-life balance, the absence of international research career opportunities, and the lack of visibility. These issues are all a part of a culture that devalues women's participation in academic disciplines by being cold, macho, and discriminatory (Lannert and Nagy, 2020).

Women typically have a limited career path, which makes it difficult for them to get full professorships. In addition, they are often stuck in less desirable support roles, which signify a limited or subordinate status in the academic community. The structure of women's academic citizenship and belonging is also influenced by the hardly-ever-present work-life balance (Lannert and Nagy, 2020).

### 1.6 Gender equality plan at BME

The Gender Equality Plan 2022-2025 (BME, 2021) is a strategic document drafted in October 2021 as a commitment from BME to provide equal opportunities to both employees and students. The following are the main objectives of

the Intervention areas that have defined priorities and time-lines of actions for the respective coming year:

1. Fostering gender equality in recruitment and career progression.
2. Supporting work-life balance.
3. Achieving gender balance in leadership, decision-making, and representation.
4. Applying measures against gender-based violence, supporting inclusive institutional culture.
5. Integration of gender dimensions in the research and teaching content.

## 2 Methodology

This section provides an overview of the research approach, design, and practical and theoretical methodology implemented for data collection.

### 2.1 Research design

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), qualitative studies aim to answer certain questions that reflect on a social aspect that you do not answer with an amount, frequency, or quantity. They also indicate that interviews or focus groups help in capturing the participants' perspectives and understanding the factors influencing them.

In this research, qualitative research was conducted to understand the gender equality and gender policies in the university and get a deeper knowledge of the staff's opinions and personal experiences. The researcher has studied the organisation's approach toward gender equality by interviewing the staff members and by reviewing the Gender Equality Plan 2022-2025 (BME, 2021).

The researcher divided the interview questions into six themes that are adapted from the university's Gender Equality plan and then were analysed based on them. This method helped to combine the conducting of interviews with the documents as similar themes were used in both.

### 2.2 Case study university

The Budapest University of Technology and Economics (BME) was chosen as the case study for this research. BME was founded in 1782 and is considered one of the oldest technical universities in Europe. It has more than 110 departments and institutes operating within the structure of eight faculties, plus about 1100 lecturers, 400 researchers, and other degree holders.

### 2.3 Participants

In this study, we conducted 25 interviews (Anonymous group interview, 2022) with staff from different

departments and faculties and at different levels to guarantee a correct and fair picture of the overall organisation and its work towards achieving gender equality. The researcher aimed to understand individuals' points of view and perceptions on how their university promotes gender equality. Therefore, we chose to keep all the details about the participants anonymous in case the topic might cause them to be viewed in a negative light (Saunders et al., 2012). All interviews were recorded and transcribed to examine the participants' answers and lower the risk of any biased opinions or misunderstood information (Bryman and Bell, 2011).

The interviews took place from March-May 2022 via Microsoft Teams. The average time per interview was 40 minutes. The interviews were conducted in English, so no translation of the transcript was required.

## 3 Findings

This section provides an overview of the findings of the qualitative research, as mentioned previously, twenty-five in-depth interviews were conducted with BME staff members from different levels. Data is collected and analysed into six themes and areas of discussion that are connected to the Gender Equality Plan 2022-2025 and its intervention areas (BME, 2021).

Table 1 shows the analysis of the participants who were interviewed for this study.

### 3.1 Gender equality at BME in general

*"Do you think there is gender equality within the department? If yes/no, Why?"* was the question in the Anonymous group interview (2022).

Theme one consisted of one question where interviewees had to reflect on their perception of gender equality within their departments and faculties. They were asked a question about whether they think there is gender equality in their department and faculty, most of the female participants agreed that gender equality does not exist within their facilities, while all-male interviewees except two indicated that there is no gender inequality within their departments.

*"We say we are equal, but we are not! we have problems presenting these issues and dealing with them. The problem is not only in higher education, it is in all the sectors in Hungary. We still live in a man's world."* (Female participant 5; Anonymous group interview, 2022).

**Table 1** Analysis of the participants  
(Anonymous group interview, 2022)

Participant	Gender	Type of job	Position
Participant 1	Female	Academic	Teaching Assistant
Participant 2	Male	Academic	Teaching Assistant
Participant 3	Male	Academic	Teaching Assistant
Participant 4	Male	Academic	PhD Student and Researcher
Participant 5	Female	Academic	Teaching Assistant and Researcher
Participant 6	PhD	Academic	Ph.D. Student
Participant 7	Female	Academic	Teaching Assistant
Participant 8	Female	Administrator	Admin
Participant 9	Male	Academic	Assistant Professor
Participant 10	Female	Administrator	Admin
Participant 11	Male	Academic	Teaching Assistant
Participant 12	Female	Administrator	Admin
Participant 13	Female	Academic	Head of Department
Participant 14	Female	Academic	Teaching Assistant
Participant 15	Female	Academic	Teaching Assistant
Participant 16	Female	Academic	Assistant Professor
Participant 17	Female	Administrator	Admin
Participant 18	Female	Academic	Teaching Assistant
Participant 19	Male	Academic	Head of Department
Participant 20	Male	Academic	Teaching Assistant
Participant 21	Female	Administrator	Admin
Participant 22	Female	Academic	Head of Department
Participant 23	Female	Academic	Teaching Assistant
Participant 24	Male	Academic	Teaching Assistant
Participant 25	Female	Academic	Teaching Assistant

Most female interviewees highlighted that they cannot grasp inequality in a formal sense as there are no formal policies or guidelines that discriminate against women, however, there are subtle and informal discriminatory behaviours that they face in their daily jobs in the hiring process, promotions, research, and everyday communication.

*"First of all, I don't think there is gender equality anywhere in society, and therefore at the University. You cannot find gender inequality in the policies or in a formalised way, however, I face gender inequality every day in my job."* (Female participant 12; Anonymous group interview, 2022).

Furthermore, when participants were asked to highlight how they can define gender equality and how the university can achieve that, most participants agreed that introducing

quotas helps rectify women's under-representation in prominent positions and encourages women to apply for more managerial positions. Moreover, granting equal opportunities for high-profile research projects, at the same time initiating work-life balance laws and regulations, and raising awareness about gender equality in all aspects help in achieving a healthy workplace and reaching gender equality.

*"There are indeed some ways which gender equality can be achieved in the University; for example, if tasks are known to everyone and the key performance indicators which lead to promotions, and if there is an adoption of work-life balance policies – better communication – and clear policies for promotions and personal development opportunities."* (Female Participant 25; Anonymous group interview, 2022).

### 3.2 Recruitment, career progression, and leadership

*"How challenging was it for you to get to this level you are in?"* was the question in the Anonymous group interview (2022).

The recruitment procedure of BME guarantees equal opportunities for all applicants as regulated by national law and university rules, the same as the promotion opportunity. The participants agreed that there is no gender limitation for applying for any position within the university, and the academic progression is based on individual achievements as it grants the equal opportunity for both genders. However, most of the female participants addressed there is no fairness in the promotion process for the managerial positions, as it lacks transparency, and it is mostly reliant on informal communication between the head of the faculty and the candidates, meaning that in some cases it is based on their relationship and views.

*"The recruitment process was easy as I knew about the opening of the job from one of the staff members. I informally had a meeting with the head of the department, we discussed the job requirements and how it aligns with my experience then I was given the opportunity."* (Male participant 3; Anonymous group interview, 2022).

In addition, the participants agreed on the different treatments they faced in the recruitment and promotion process, as they highlighted that personal connection plays an important role in getting promoted, where men get to spend more informal time outside of the university with

the leaders of the faculty or the university, who are also men, most women tend to not have access to these informal networks in which the key information on promotion and the high-profile projects are exchanged due to family responsibilities or the overall culture that limits them from progressing in their career.

*"Most of the leaders in my faculty are men, I was trying to be promoted to Deputy Head as I was preparing for this position for the last few years, but I found out that one of my male colleagues was trying to win the position too, so it wasn't a transparent process and I had to go through a lot of stress and formal and informal communication to make sure that I got it."* (Female Participant 13; Anonymous group interview, 2022).

However, our finding indicates that only 38% of all staff are women, while only 20.93% at the academic level, 0.0% as Deans, 10.7% as Vice-Deans, 8.3% as Leaders of Doctorate schools, and 13.8% are heads of Departments.

*"We don't have female deans, we had 4 different deans and they were all men. The same is for the head of the departments, there are a few and for example, I was the only female head of my department, and it's 70 years old."* (Female Participant 22; Anonymous group interview, 2022).

### 3.3 Work-life balance

*"Do you believe you have a work-life balance? And how is the university working towards achieving that?"* was the question in the Anonymous group interview (2022).

Most female participants agreed that the lack of gender equality policies in the university can undoubtedly cause difficulties in achieving work-life balance and can limit their career progression and at the same time affect their relationship with their families which indeed can result in pressure and job dissatisfaction. Thus, the research indicated addressing effective measures to achieve a family-friendly workplace and work-life balance plays an important role in achieving gender equality and improving job satisfaction among employees.

*"I believe that having kids and families is a huge barrier for career advancement, especially when applying for grants for big research and I believe that's why there are fewer women in research."* (Female participant 18; Anonymous group interview, 2022).

Moreover, male participants and female participants who do not have families were more positive about having a work-life balance and they indicated that they have more opportunities for career advancement.

*"I have a fine work-life balance as a teacher assistant, I believe that my workload is balanced with my research requirement and home responsibilities."* (Male Participant 2; Anonymous group interview, 2022).

*"In my life, there are no barriers because I don't have kids, so it doesn't challenge me and for the last 5 years, the university has been the biggest part of my life."* (Female Participant 7; Anonymous group interview, 2022).

### 3.4 Pay gap between male and female staff members

*"Do you believe there is a pay gap between both genders at the University?"* was the question in the Anonymous group interview (2022).

Regarding any discrimination in wages based on gender, most participants agreed that they do not hold any information about their peers' salaries, which means that there is no clear evidence to support this claim. However, the female participants indicated that their male colleagues are assigned to more projects which means that their wages will be higher.

*"I am not sure about my colleagues' salaries as it is not transparent, however, I think for the faculty, everybody gets the minimum salary, but I know that some of my male colleagues earn a lot because they get assigned to different big projects."* (Female Participant 5; Anonymous group interview, 2022).

Moreover, when the participants were asked whether they prefer an open policy for the salaries, and to have it published. Most disagreed with this, indicating that it is culturally inappropriate. In addition, as previously mentioned while there is no clear evidence of a pay gap within the same position, most leadership positions in the university are occupied by men, on the other hand, more than 60% of the administrative positions are occupied by women. Therefore, there is a clear pay gap between men and women in the university as men hold all the higher positions where they are paid the maximum, while women hold most of the administrative work where it pays the minimum.

*"I believe everyone in the department gets paid the same in the same positions but no, it is not transparent as there have been some issues in the past in Hungary in making salaries published therefore the University would not take the step in making salaries public to everyone."* (Male Participant 9; Anonymous group interview, 2022).

### 3.5 Gender-based violence

*"Have you ever faced verbal or sexual harassment?"* was the question in the Anonymous group interview (2022).

Based on the interview, most female participants have faced verbal harassment, and a few have faced sexual harassment cases. Interestingly, verbal harassment tended to be associated with lower-level men targeting lower-level women, most commonly in administrative positions. And another interesting finding is that women in the technical field face more verbal harassment than in other fields in the university regardless of the position and level.

*"I have faced verbal abuse that I believe was because of my position. I tried to manage the situation with the person because we understand that the abuse can have consequences, therefore I should not let it pass. But on the other hand, I believe that the highest level of the University does not consider these types of abuse (shouting, disrespect) as part of verbal abuse."* (Female Participant 10; Anonymous group interview, 2022).

Based on the interviews, it is observed that the university's culture does not encourage women to stand up against sexual and verbal harassment especially if it is against a male staff member in a leadership position. When the participants were asked if there are clear policies against sexual and verbal harassment, most of them did not know the procedures.

*"There was this celebration at the university, and one of the faculty leaders was having some remarks about the looks of the female staff inappropriately and the women didn't say anything they were just shocked about it, I believe that can be attributed to the fact that women are not encouraged to talk about sexual harassment in the Hungarian society."* (Female Participant 16; Anonymous group interview, 2022).

One of the participants highlighted an incident where 10 staff members filed a verbal harassment complaint against their colleague with evidence and followed the formal procedure, but it ended up being closed with no further consequences or action taken against the abuser.

*"We, 9 colleagues and myself, have faced verbal harassment at the University from one colleague. We tried to look up the regulation about the consequences of harassment, but we could only find poor information, so we talked to a lawyer outside of the University to guide us and we managed to submit a lot of documents to the leadership that supports the allegation of verbal harassment but eventually it was a disappointment as no consequences happened because there is still no practice or guideline as to how to deal with workplace harassment and verbal harassment."* (Female Participant 15; Anonymous group interview, 2022).

### 3.6 Gender and culture

*"How can you define the culture at your department and especially regarding gender equality?"* was the question in the Anonymous group interview (2022).

Based on the interviews, the participants agreed that the root of gender inequality within the university relies on the fact that academia has always been perceived as an elitist and masculine industry in its structures and values. Therefore, more men apply for higher positions and research-based projects as they like to be visible and to have power and prestige, whereas there are more women in teaching positions. Consequently, men's achievements are more visible and awarded, whereas women's achievements are less visible even though both teaching and research require great effort.

*"I see some female colleagues who put a lot of effort in teaching while men tend to focus on research which is a more visible achievement. So, the female colleagues' achievements are not recognised."* (Male Participant 11; Anonymous group interview, 2022).

Another important factor to be considered when discussing an organisational culture is communication. Participants were asked about their reflections on the communication within their department. Interestingly, all male participants agreed that there is no difference in



communication between men and women, they all have the same opportunity to express their thoughts during departmental meetings and there is a high level of professionalism between staff. On the other hand, many female participants agreed that there is a communication problem that results in women not standing up for themselves, especially in meetings where they frequently get dominated by men who usually lead these meetings as participant 14 mentions:

*"I say there is a communication problem in getting our voices heard. You can especially notice that in department meetings as we all have concerns about not being heard or being interrupted all the time. For example, if you record our department meetings, you will notice that men tend to speak 80% of the time."* (Female Participant 14; Anonymous group interview, 2022).

Moreover, women in lower positions feel that they cannot stand up for themselves especially to their supervisors, as the culture does not encourage open communication and this can also be attributed to the Hungarian culture where women and girls were raised not to stand up for themselves according to participants 8.

*"Yes, there is a problem with communication, and you can see it in every aspect, and I feel that I cannot stand up for myself because of the culture and a personal issue of how girls are raised."* (Female Participant 8; Anonymous group interview, 2022).

On the positive side, one of the participants involved in drafting the Gender Equality Plan 2022-2025 (BME, 2021) and is on the executive committee has highlighted a change in behaviour and communication since the Equality Plan was introduced. Men began to understand the sensitivity of this issue and the change in the stereotype and mainstream ideas and behaviours towards women which will lead to a healthier workplace and to reach a professional working environment. In the quote below, the participant indicates how a simple behaviour like helping with a coat can reflect how men perceive women as they have more power over them and that women need help in doing simple tasks. However, as men are more aware of the situation and how the workplace should be treated as a professional environment regarding gender, the traditional norms and the stereotypical behaviours could be changed.

*"Two weeks ago, after we finished a meeting, one of my male colleagues approached me while I was putting on my coat and said that he would help me to put on my coat but now due to the gender equality plan I will not, as I know certain things could be understood in a wrong way and I don't know how you will take it. I was happy then because I was treated as a professional, not a woman."* (Female Participants 17; Anonymous group interview, 2022).

#### 4 Discussion and conclusion

This section aims to answer the research questions.

##### 4.1 How do the employees perceive gender equality at BME? And to what factors have an impact on gender equality?

In this paper, we investigated staff perception of gender equality at the Budapest University of Technology and Economics by conducting interviews with the staff members and analysing the Gender Equality Plan 2022-2025 (BME, 2021).

Based on the interviews and the Gender Equality Plan, we found that the university has committed to supporting and promoting gender equality amongst all faculties. Not only that, but they also encourage and attract more staff members to be involved in the implementation process. However, during the interview, few staff members knew about the strategy, or the action elements suggested. This means that the university needs to increase its efforts towards promoting and achieving the strategic goals in the plan.

Lips (2013) and Tharenou (2013) have found that most women are more likely to face gender inequality and discrimination in their workplace in the administration positions than in any other positions. Although we are discussing gender equality in a higher education institution, many participants experience some form of gender inequality in their departments either through communication with their male colleagues, the promotion process, or research opportunities regardless of their level and years of experience.

However, the awareness about the importance of promoting gender equality was high among employees from both genders as they realise that recruitment, promotion, and career development opportunity should be based on individual achievement rather than on gender. According to Kakabadse et al. (2015), female leaders strive to be chosen to fill higher positions based on their knowledge and expertise, not based on their gender, which might sometimes be challenging in male-dominated cultures and industries.

Even though the university has promoted a gender equality strategy, no tangible results are yet to be presented in this study, as there is still a huge gap in women's representation in leadership positions and there are no gender quotas presented that will limit this gap. However, previous studies have indicated the importance of workplace diversity and hiring women to fill in management positions (Emmott and Worman, 2008; Guillaume et al., 2014). Diversity in the workplace is the main indicator of the management policies and the leadership approach toward diversity (Guillaume et al., 2014).

Sexual and verbal harassment can be classified into three categories: gender harassment which refers to both verbal and physical harassment which aims in insulting and degrading women without the intention of sexual collaboration. Second, unwanted sexual attention refers to any unwanted sexual behaviour verbally or physically which can range from comments, assault, or even rape. Finally, sexual coercion is the unwanted sexual attention that is forced based on the job (Fasting et al., 2010).

Most participants have faced verbal harassment, especially in administrative positions. However, the extent varies between the different faculties, It is more common in technical faculties which are mostly dominated by men while it occurs less in the scientific fields where more women are in higher positions.

Interestingly women who work in companies with few women in leadership positions are more likely to face sexual harassment, as well as women who supervise a large number of employees (McLaughlin et al., 2017). However, other factors may also contribute to sexual harassment, including gender, age, degree of education, and marital status (Manuel, 2017).

Another important factor to be considered is creating a female-friendly workplace, by promoting more work-life balance policies, open communication channels, and sexual and verbal harassment guidelines.

According to George and Jones (2012), diversity training plays an important role in effectively implementing diversity strategies. This training should aim to increase the awareness of workplace diversity, and the importance of open communication, professionalism, and respect.

#### **4.2 What does the BME Gender Equality Plan reveals about workplace equality and policies and how is the university working towards achieving gender equality?**

The length of the Equality Plans can be a good indicator of its degree of detail and the variety of equality programs and policies it covers. The BME Gender Equality

Plan (BME, 2021) was an average of ten pages. However, the length of a plan isn't always the ideal way to determine its effectiveness as shorter and longer plans can have advantages and disadvantages.

As for the plan duration, the equality plans are usually designed for two years (Tardos and Paksi, 2018). The BME plan is set for three years starting from 2022, however, there are no exact timeframes on when these goals and objectives will be implemented which highlights the issue of whether the equality papers are actual plans or just policy documents.

The plan included statistics about the current situation of women's representation in the different positions and the percentage of the staff members of both genders, it also included 5 intervention areas which can be classified into 4 themes human resources processes and gender violence. equality police, and organisational culture. However, it is difficult to determine the practical effect of these goals by analysing the policy in isolation as it is formal and generic.

The gender equality plan should be shared with all employees and everyone within the company should understand the goals, actions, and reasons behind them (JämO, 2007). This could be achieved only if the university establishes effective communication channels where stories are shared, and employees are informed about the steps taken towards achieving the plan (Emmott and Worman, 2008).

Finally, the plan lacks detail on the mechanism whereby these intervention priorities will be implemented, the members involved, and the timeframe for achieving each one of them. In general, the gender equality plan is more likely to serve a role as legal compliance and cannot be viewed as driving institutional social change in the direction of workplace equality. It tends to become a policy and regulatory document rather than a useful manual accompanying organisational transformation.

To conclude, the paper aimed to address the issue of gender equality at Hungarian universities and chose BME as the case study. The evidence indicates that there is an underrepresentation of women in managerial and teaching positions, while there is an overrepresentation in administration positions. This can be attributed to the lack of formal policies that aim to promote gender equality, culture, and the lack of communication channels. However, based on the Gender Equality Plan 2022-2025, the university aims to achieve gender equality within all faculties.

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