

## Gender Equality Without Transformation? A Comparative Study of University Gender Plans in Mexico, Peru and Italy

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### Abstract

This article examines how gender is conceptualized and operationalized in institutional policy frameworks through a comparative qualitative document analysis of three major public universities: the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú (PUCP), and the University of Bologna (UNIBO). Official institutional gender policy documents – including gender equality plans and strategic development plans – were analyzed using a theory-driven framework organized around five analytical categories: conceptualization of gender, subjects of gender policy, policy domains, policy instruments, and underlying gender paradigms, drawing on feminist, intersectional, and organizational theory.

The findings reveal that, despite distinct national governance contexts and institutional cultures, all three universities frame gender equality predominantly through managerial and procedural logics. Gender inequality is understood primarily as a problem of representation, participation, and risk management, rather than as a structural power relation embedded in academic labor, governance, and knowledge production. Intersectionality is formally acknowledged across all three cases but remains additive and programmatic rather than analytically integrated. Symbolic and procedural instruments dominate, while redistributive measures are largely absent. The article identifies a shared tension between institutionalization and transformation: while current paradigms facilitate policy legitimacy and compliance, they simultaneously constrain the transformative potential of gender equality initiatives.

**Keywords:** Institutional Gender Policy, Feminist Organizational Theory, Comparative Higher Education, Latin America, Europe.

### Introduction

In recent decades, higher education institutions (HEIs) have increasingly adopted diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) frameworks as part of broader efforts to strengthen democratic citizenship and inclusive development (UNESCO, 2020; Hulbert & Harkins, 2024; Sánchez Torrejón & Machín Álvarez, 2026). Recent scholarship also shows that DEI has become politically contested in higher education systems, including in the United States and Hungary (Majtényi & Ryder, 2025; E. Stich et al., 2025). Within these

frameworks, HEIs are expected both to expand access and to address persistent inequalities in participation, representation, and institutional power (Kuhar et al., 2025). Importantly, DEI is no longer understood as a matter of symbolic inclusion or token representation, but as a project aimed at systemic institutional change (Ahmed, 2012; Rosa, 2025). DEI requires transforming the structures that govern hiring, curriculum, workplace culture, and access to opportunity, rather than merely increasing visibility or participation.

Within this broader policy environment, gender occupies a particularly prominent and analytically revealing position. Gender has become one of the most institutionalized dimensions of equity policy in HE, often serving as the primary axis through which universities articulate commitments to inclusion, develop formal strategies, and establish dedicated governance structures (EIGE, 2025). At the same time, gender equality remains deeply contested, revealing tensions between equality objectives, institutional autonomy, academic power relations, and prevailing social norms. For this reason, gender policies offer a particularly useful lens for examining how universities interpret and operationalize broader equity commitments (Kuhar et al., 2025; Sánchez Torrejón & Machín Álvarez, 2026).

It has been long demonstrated that HEIs are not gender-neutral spaces (Acker, 1990; Britton & Logan, 2008). As Acker (1990) famously argues, gender is present in the processes, practices, images, and ideologies of organizations. From this perspective, gender inequality in universities cannot be reduced to individual disadvantage or underrepresentation alone, but must be understood as embedded in organizational structures, norms, and decision-making processes (Rodriguez & Guenther, 2022). This insight justifies treating gender as a structural and institutional phenomenon, not merely as a demographic variable.

DEI is not a homogeneous policy field. Therefore, this paper focuses specifically on gender as an analytical entry point. It is clear that gender does not exhaust the meaning of diversity, but it does have a strategic role within institutional policymaking. Gender policies frequently function as testing grounds for universities' capacity to translate normative commitments into organizational practices (Kuhar et al., 2025; Cumming et

al., 2023). At the same time, feminist scholars caution that the adoption of equality language in institutional policies does not automatically produce transformation (Ahmed, 2012; Sánchez Torrejón & Machín Álvarez, 2026). As Ahmed (2012) observes, when organizations use the language of diversity, it does not necessarily mean that they do diversity. Analyzing gender policy documents thus allows for an examination not only of what institutions claim to value, but of how responsibility for inequality is framed and operationalized.

From a democratic perspective, HEIs play a central role in shaping citizenship, public debate, and access to opportunity. Persistent gender inequalities in participation, academic careers, leadership, and institutional climate undermine these functions and risk reproducing broader societal exclusions (UNESCO, 2020; UNESCO IESALC, 2024). As the OECD (2023) cautions, education systems that fail to address equity in a comprehensive manner risk reinforcing existing patterns of inequality rather than mitigating them. Gender inequality in HE therefore represents a social concern as much as a structural challenge to the democratic role of universities.

Gender equality is also closely linked to academic quality and innovation, because inclusive academic environments can strengthen students' sense of belonging and authenticity and thereby support their functioning within HE. At the institutional level, inclusive academic environments contribute to stronger research outcomes by broadening the range of perspectives involved in knowledge production (Ryymin, 2025). As the League of European Research Universities notes, equality and inclusion will “build community by improving the sense of belonging for everyone who comes to them for work or study, which in turn is likely to enhance their commitment and performance” (2019, p. 3). Addressing gender inequality can be both a normative objective, and a condition for academic excellence and institutional resilience (Verbree et al., 2025).

This paper examines how gender is conceptualized and operationalized in institutional policy documents through a comparative analysis of three universities located in Mexico, Peru, and Italy. The guiding research question is: How do HEIs in different national contexts conceptualize gender and operationalize gender equality within their institutional policy frameworks? Rather than evaluating policy effectiveness, the analysis

focuses on the assumptions, priorities, and governance logics embedded in institutional gender policies.

The goal of this analysis is twofold. First, it seeks to identify similarities and differences in how gender is framed across institutional contexts, including whether gender is treated as an individual, group-based, or structural issue; which subjects are included or excluded; and which institutional domains are prioritized. Second, it aims to situate these findings within broader debates on gender and equity governance in HE, highlighting the extent to which institutional gender policies align with liberal equality, intersectional recognition, or managerial approaches.

The selection of Mexico, Peru and Italy is analytically motivated rather than autobiographical. These cases represent HE systems embedded in distinct governance traditions and socio-political contexts, while facing shared pressures related to global policy diffusion, regulatory reform, and institutional accountability. Mexico and Peru provide insight into Latin American systems characterized by rapid expansion and contested debates surrounding gender and education but that differ geographically as they provide North and South American perspectives, while Italy represents a European public university system operating within longer-standing equality frameworks and supranational policy environments. Comparing these contexts enables an examination of how HEIs from these three countries interpret and give meaning to gender, and specifically to gender equality.

By adopting a qualitative document analysis of institutional gender plans, this article contributes to comparative HE research by moving beyond formal commitments to examine how gender is understood, prioritized, and governed at the organizational level. In doing so, it sheds light on both the possibilities and the limits of gender-focused institutional strategies within diverse HE systems.

### **Methods and analytical framework**

This study adopts a qualitative document analysis approach to examine how gender is conceptualized and operationalized in institutional policy documents from three universities. The corpus consists of official institutional policy documents, including

gender equality plans and related strategic or governance texts that constitute the main formal instruments through which each university articulates gender policy. The universities were selected purposively because they are major public universities in their respective national systems and are located in major urban centers – Mexico City, Lima and Bologna – where HEIs have particular visibility and policy relevance.

The analytical framework is theory-driven and draws on feminist, intersectional, and organizational scholarship that conceptualizes gender not as a neutral or individual attribute, but as a structural and institutional process embedded in policy language, organizational practices, and power relations (Sánchez Torrejón & Machín Álvarez 2026; Aggarwal et al., 2026).

The first analytical category concerns the conceptualization of gender, with particular attention to the terms through which gender is framed, such as equality, equity, diversity, or justice. Institutional language is not politically neutral: as Ahmed (2012) argues, the adoption of certain terms may narrow or displace more critical understandings of inequality, power, and institutional responsibility. In a related way, Acker's analysis of gendered organizations shows that formal documents often present themselves as neutral while reproducing gendered assumptions through their underlying organizational logics (1990). This category therefore examines how gender is named in policy texts and what conceptual boundaries this naming produces.

A second category addresses whether gender is treated primarily as an individual issue or as a structural one. Feminist organizational scholarship has long shown that gender inequality in institutions cannot be reduced to individual disadvantage alone, but must be understood in relation to organizational norms, hierarchies, and decision-making structures (Acker, 1990). Recent work on gender equality in HE likewise emphasizes that effective institutional change requires moving beyond individualized understandings of inequality toward structural and participatory approaches (Sánchez Torrejón & Machín Álvarez 2026; UNDP, 2025). This category therefore assesses whether policy documents individualize responsibility or acknowledge institutional accountability.

The third category focuses on the subjects included and excluded by gender policies.

Intersectional feminist theory demonstrates that single-axis approaches tend to universalize experience and obscure the ways in which gender is shaped by race, class, sexuality, disability, migration status, and other axes of inequality (Crenshaw, 1991). Recent work on translating intersectionality into gender analytical frameworks further argues that intersectionality should not be treated as a descriptive add-on, but as an analytical lens for identifying exclusion, power, and relational forms of inequality beyond the binary understanding of gender (Lahiri-Dutt, 2024; Aggarwal et al., 2026). This category therefore examines who is explicitly named in policy language, who is implicitly assumed, and who remains absent.

Closely related is the category of intersectionality, understood here as a framework for analyzing how multiple forms of inequality interact within institutional settings beyond a simple enumeration of diverse identities. Crenshaw's (1991) foundational work remains central to this perspective because it shows that gendered experiences cannot be adequately understood through additive or single-category models. More recent feminist scholarship similarly emphasizes that the analytical value of intersectionality lies in its ability to connect structural critique with empirical inquiry (Aggarwal et al., 2026). This category provides insights to whether institutional policy documents move beyond singular and binary understandings of gender.

The analysis also distinguishes between policy domains, including teaching and curriculum, research, employment and careers, leadership and governance, work-life balance and care, and gender-based violence. Research on gender equality in HE shows that institutions differ significantly in the areas they prioritize and that equality strategies are often operationalized through specific institutional domains rather than through holistic transformation (Klein, 2016). Studies of HE policy in Europe likewise indicate that diversity and equality agendas are frequently structured around identifiable areas of intervention, which makes domain-based comparison especially useful (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019). Mapping these domains allows for a systematic comparison of institutional priorities, silences, and omissions.

Within these domains, particular attention is paid to leadership and governance, given longstanding evidence that power and decision-making structures are deeply gendered

(Acker, 1990). In addition, work-life balance and care are treated as distinct analytical categories, as feminist legal and policy scholarship identifies the unequal distribution of care responsibilities as central to gender inequality (European Commission, 2018), while empirical evidence shows that unpaid care work remains largely invisible in institutional frameworks (UNDP, 2025). Gender-based violence is also analyzed as a structural institutional issue rather than an individual problem, in line with feminist accounts that situate violence within broader systems of domination (Crenshaw, 1991).

Finally, the framework differentiates between policy instruments, distinguishing symbolic, procedural, redistributive, and sanctioning mechanisms. Studies of gender mainstreaming and institutional equality policies show that commitments often remain at the level of formal compliance or symbolic recognition, with limited redistributive impact (UNDP, 2025). This distinction allows for an analysis of not only what institutions claim to do, but how gender equality is materially supported or constrained.

## **The National Autonomous University of Mexico**

### ***National and Institutional Context***

Mexico is a federal republic located in North America, with a population of approximately 126 million. Young people between the ages of 18 and 29 represent 19.6% of the population, a demographic group that constitutes a central constituency for HE policy (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, 2020). Since 2019, HE has been recognized as a constitutional right under Article 3 (CPEUM, 2024), and is regulated through the 2019 General Law for Higher Education. The governance of HE is primarily the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, particularly through the Office for Higher Education. The Mexican HE system is characterized by the coexistence of multiple subsystems, most composed of non-autonomous institutions dependent directly on the Ministry of Education. In this governance context, institutional autonomy plays a key role in shaping how universities define and implement their own gender equality policies.

Within this context, the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* (UNAM) occupies a singular position as the largest and oldest university in the country, and a public, secular, and tuition-free institution. It traces its institutional antecedent to the *Real y Pontificia*

*Universidad de México*, founded in 1551, and was formally re-established in 1910, shortly before the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution, following the educational projects promoted by Justo Sierra Méndez and Ezequiel A. Chávez. From its inception, UNAM was conceived as a national institution with a strong public mission (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, n.d.). Its Organic Law charges UNAM with three core missions: (1) training professionals, researchers, university professors, and technicians useful to society; (2) conducting research on national conditions and problems; and (3) disseminating culture as widely as possible (Ley Orgánica de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2019). University autonomy was formally granted in 1929, in the wake of the Cordoba Reform of 1918 and the broader process of national reconstruction following the Mexican Revolution. Autonomy in the Mexican context entails the constitutional right of the university's self governance, academic freedom, and control over admissions, promotion, and assets (CPEUM, art. 3).

UNAM's governance structure is based on a combination of individual authorities and collegial bodies. The University Council is the highest governing body, the Governing Board appoints the rector for a four-year term, and Technical and Academic Councils operate at the faculty and disciplinary level, distributing decisions on academic activity, staffing, and resources, reflecting a governance model grounded in academic collegiality (Ley Orgánica de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2019). In terms of scale and international visibility, UNAM ranked 136th worldwide and first nationally in the QS World University Rankings 2026 (QS International, 2026). During the 2024-2025 academic year, the university enrolled 265,957 HE students, employed 43,156 academic staff, and offered 133 undergraduate and 96 postgraduate programs (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2025).

As mandated by institutional regulations, each new rectorate publishes an institutional development plan. In 2023, the newly appointed rector, Leonardo Lomelí Vanegas, presented the *Plan de Desarrollo Institucional (PDI) 2023-2027*, which constitutes the primary source for the analysis of gender policies at UNAM. Unlike the other two universities examined in this study, UNAM does not currently have a standalone institutional gender equality plan. Instead, the PDI identifies *igualdad de género* as a transversal axis across its seven guiding principles: from inclusive university serving and

academic careers to research, outreach and institutional management (Lomelí Vanegas, 2024), making UNAM case particularly relevant for analyzing how gender equality is articulated through transversal institutional planning rather than through a dedicated gender policy instrument. UNAM does host two key institutional bodies dedicated to gender issues: the *Coordinación para la Igualdad de Género en la UNAM* (CIGU) and the *Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios de Género*, but their scope remains limited, and neither has produced a university-wide gender equality plan. Against this background, the following section analyses the UNAM PDI 2023-2027 in light of the methodological framework outlined above.

### *Analysis of the PDI (2023-2027)*

#### *Conceptualization of Gender*

Gender is conceptualized in the PDI primarily through the language of *igualdad de género* (hereafter referred to as gender equality), *brechas de género* (gender gaps), and *no discriminación* (non-discrimination). Throughout the document, gender inequality is framed as an equality-related problem embedded within broader structural social challenges. While gender disparities are acknowledged as persistent and unacceptable, they are not explicitly articulated in terms of social justice or power relations. Instead, the focus remains on reducing gaps and promoting equal conditions of participation, particularly within the university context (pp. 5-6).

As a strategic planning document, the PDI defines gender equality as a transversal axis that cuts across all institutional priorities, including inclusivity, the promotion of the academic career, teaching and research, cultural outreach, national and international cooperation, and institutional management. In this sense, gender equality functions as part of the university's normative framework, shaping the orientation of multiple actions and programs without being confined to a specific operational domain (pp. 12-13).

#### *Subjects of Gender Policy*

The explicit subjects of gender-related policies are *universitarias y universitarios*, that is, women and men who participate in the university as students, academic staff, or administrative personnel. The consistent use of binary language, particularly in the initial

sections of the document, reflects a dominant recognition of gender as limited to women and men, with no systematic linguistic inclusion of non-binary identities or broader sexual diversity. However, the PDI does include a formal acknowledgement of gender diversity through the proposal of a “program to sensitize students, academic staff, and administrative personnel for the inclusion of the LGBTTTIQ+ community” (pp. 20-21). This suggests that sexual and gender diversity is addressed at the programmatic level, although it is not fully integrated into the conceptual framing of gender nor reflected in the document’s general use of language.

### *Policy Domains Addressed*

Several policy domains emerge as central to the gender agenda in the PDI. First, in the area of teaching and curriculum, the document mandates the inclusion of gender-related content across undergraduate and postgraduate study plans (p. 21). This represents a strong institutional commitment; however, the intervention remains largely at the level of curricular content, without explicit reference to pedagogical practices, teaching methods, or broader epistemological transformations. Second, in the domain of research, the PDI promotes the use of gender as a research lens and calls for its incorporation as a criterion in research evaluation processes. Gender is thus positioned both as an analytical perspective and as a standard for assessing academic work (p. 37). Third, regarding employment and academic careers, the document highlights the importance of integrating a gender perspective into the evaluation and promotion of academic staff, aiming to ensure more equitable career trajectories (pp. 21-23).

In terms of leadership and governance, the PDI emphasizes the strengthening of the Coordinación para la Igualdad de Género (CIGU) and the internal gender equality commissions across academic entities (p. 20). These structures are presented as key mechanisms for institutionalizing gender equality. Nevertheless, the document does not explicitly address the representation of women or gender-diverse individuals in positions of authority or decision-making, leaving leadership inequalities largely unproblematic. A notable omission is the absence of explicit measures related to work-life balance, care responsibilities, or the reconciliation of academic work with personal life, which are not addressed as part of the gender agenda. Taken together, this distribution of policy domains suggests that gender is primarily addressed through regulatory and programmatic

interventions, rather than through redistributive or transformative approaches.

By contrast, gender-based violence constitutes one of the strongest and most developed policy areas in the PDI. The document places significant emphasis on prevention, attention, and, most prominently, sanctioning mechanisms (pp. 21-23). The institutional response to violence is framed through reporting procedures, disciplinary measures, and formal accountability structures, giving greater weight to reactive enforcement than to preventive or transformative approaches.

### *Policy Instruments*

The range of policy instruments further illustrates the level and nature of the university's commitment to gender equality. At the symbolic level, the designation of gender equality as a transversal axis confers high institutional legitimacy on the issue. Procedural instruments are also prominent, particularly through the establishment and reinforcement of organizational structures such as the CIGU, internal commissions, and entity-level plans to address gender-based violence. Sanctioning mechanisms are frequently mentioned and play a central role in enforcement, although they tend to operate reactively (pp. 21-23). By contrast, redistributive instruments are notably absent: the PDI does not refer to quotas, targeted funding, or other redistributive measures aimed at correcting structural gender inequalities.

### *Underlying Gender Paradigm*

Overall, the dominant gender paradigm underlying the PDI is an equality-based, liberal, and managerial-normative paradigm, instead of transformative, in which gender inequality is treated as a correctable imbalance within existing institutional arrangements, as evidenced by the repeated emphasis on gender equality and the goal of closing gender gaps through corrective actions. Elements of an intersectional perspective can be partially identified, particularly in references to diversity and the LGBTTTIQ+ community. However, these elements remain additive rather than fully integrated into a broader critical or intersectional framework, meaning that intersectionality in the PDI is, at best, programmatic, but not structural. In this sense, the PDI does not adopt a feminist or critical paradigm that conceptualizes gender as a relation of power embedded in academic structures and institutional practices.

## **The Pontifical Catholic University of Peru**

### ***National and Institutional Context***

Peru is a geographically diverse South American country of around 34 million people, stretching along the Pacific coast across the Andes into the Amazon basin. About 58.7% of its population resides on the coast, and Lima, the capital, is the home for around 11 million Peruvians, demonstrating a marked degree of centralization. Approximately 2.1 million individuals are currently enrolled in HEIs in Peru (INEI, 2025).

HE is constitutionally recognized as a pillar of national development. Article 18 of the 1993 Constitution defines university education as serving professional training, cultural development, intellectual creation, and scientific and technological research, while establishing public and private universities alike, as autonomous institutions, self-governing in normative, academic, administrative, and economic matters. This autonomy is exercised within the Ley Universitaria No. 30220 (2014), which introduced significant governance reforms, most notably the creation of *Superintendencia Nacional de Educación Superior Universitaria* (SUNEDU) responsible for licensing and supervising HEIs. The Constitutional Tribunal later upheld the reform as compatible with, rather than a threat to, university autonomy (Alvites, 2022). SUNEDU's regulatory capacity has been progressively weakened by political counter-reforms, shifting greater responsibility for substantive policy areas onto individual universities rather than the national level.

Peru's HE system also operates with a strongly conservative socio-cultural context, in which socially conservative and religious actors play a visible role in shaping public discourse around educational change (Acevedo Rojas, 2022). Approximately 75% of the population identifies as Catholic and 14% as Evangelical (Torres, 2018). This climate has influenced national debates over gender in education. For example, the approval of the National Basic Education Curriculum in 2016 generated significant opposition specifically over its inclusion of the term "gender", perceived by critics as challenging traditional understandings of family roles and moral values. As a result, Law No. 31498 expanded the formal participation of parent associations, educational committees, civil society organizations, in the review, objection, and development of educational content established by the Ministry of Education.

Within this national context, the *Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú* (PUCP) constitutes a particularly relevant case due to its distinctive institutional culture. Founded in 1917 with the approval of the Archbishop of Lima and the Peruvian Episcopate, and canonically erected by Pope Pius XII in 1942, PUCP has combined its Catholic identity with a strong emphasis on academic autonomy, ranking as Peru's top university and among the 23% globally in the QS World University Rankings 2026 (PUCP, 2020, 2025).

Structured as 16 academic departments, 13 faculties, and a centralized Graduate School (PUCP, 2025), and governed through collegial bodies, including the University Assembly, the University Council, the Councils of Academic Units, and the Graduate School Council (PUCP, 2023), PUCP defines itself as a plural and tolerant academic community, respectful of freedom of conscience and religion, and committed to democratic principles, social responsibility, and human development alongside its Catholic identity (PUCP, 2023).

Efforts to incorporate a gender perspective at PUCP date to the 1990s, when a group of faculty established the Gender Studies Program, and developed over the following decades into a series of institutional instruments which include: the 2015 Gender Equality Policies for Teaching, the Policy for the Respect of Gender Identity approved in 2017, and the Protocol for the Prevention, Care, and Protection of Victims of Gender-Based Violence adopted in 2020 (PUCP, 2024). The formal creation of the Office for Gender Equality and Diversity (OIGD) in 2022 set the ground for the PUCP Gender Plan 2024-2028, developed under the coordination of the OIGD. This document constitutes the central empirical material analyzed here.

### ***Analysis of the PUCP Gender Plan (2024-2028)***

#### ***Conceptualization of Gender***

The Plan conceptualizes gender primarily through the recurring use of the terms *igualdad de género* (gender equality), *diversidad* (diversity), *nombre social* (chosen name) and *no discriminación* (non-discrimination), which appear consistently across its objectives and strategic lines (pp. 6-9).

While the document repeatedly refers to gender, its operational focus frequently converges on women as the principal subjects of inequality. This is evident in references to “gender gaps that primarily affect women” and in the prioritization of measures aimed at improving women’s participation, representation, and protection from violence (pp.10-14).

Moreover, gender is primarily framed as an attribute of individuals or social groups rather than as a structural condition embedded in academic labor, governance arrangements, or knowledge production. While the Plan acknowledges the existence of gender-based inequalities, these are addressed mainly through corrective and preventive measures, with responsibility channeled into corrective measures rather than through interrogation of gendered organizational processes. As a result, gender is treated as a matter of equal opportunity and institutional responsibility, with accountability articulated in terms of opportunity provision and risk management rather than as a transformation of academic power relations.

### *Subjects of Gender Policy*

The Plan explicitly addresses a broad range of institutional actors, including students, academic staff, and administrative personnel, stating its intention to apply gender policies to “all members of the university community” (p. 7). The inclusion of administrative workers is particularly significant, as this group is often marginalized or omitted in HE gender policies. Their explicit mention indicates an awareness of the differentiated positions and vulnerabilities that exist within the university’s occupational structure.

At the same time, while the Plan refers repeatedly to diversity and inclusion, recognition of non-binary, trans, or gender-diverse identities remains largely symbolic. The document employs inclusive language that references “diverse identities and expressions” (p. 8), by, for example acknowledging chosen names (p. 12) as well as the expansion of regulations governing the use of said name, but these references are not consistently translated into targeted policy measures or clearly defined institutional protections. Gender-diverse persons are acknowledged discursively but are not clearly articulated as juridical or policy subjects.

This selective inclusion reveals the boundaries of the Plan's inclusivity. The absence of differentiated measures addressing non-binary or trans identities functions as analytical data, indicating that while diversity is recognized in principle, institutional action remains focused primarily on women within a binary gender framework.

While the Plan invokes diversity and recognizes multiple identities, this does not amount to a fully intersectional diagnosis of inequality. Intersectionality functions primarily as a descriptive and inclusive vocabulary, rather than as an analytical framework that examines how gender interacts with race, class, disability, or sexuality to structure institutional hierarchies and outcomes.

### *Policy Domains Addressed*

Analysis of the policy domains addressed in the Plan reveals a clear prioritization of certain areas over others. The strongest emphasis is placed on institutional climate and the prevention of gender-based violence, with repeated references to the creation of “safe spaces free from violence and harassment” (pp. 12-15). This domain is supported by detailed protocols, preventive strategies, and coordination mechanisms, signaling its centrality within the Plan.

A closer examination of the policy domains addressed in the Plan Institucional de Género PUCP 2024-2028 reveals a differentiated distribution of attention across the core functions of the university.

Teaching constitutes a priority domain within the Plan. Strategic Objective 2 explicitly aims to “progressively incorporate the gender perspective into the teaching-learning experience” (pp. 11-12), framing gender as a formative competence and a criterion for curricular and pedagogical review. This objective is supported by indicators measuring incorporation at the faculty level, mandatory courses addressing gender themes, and faculty training initiatives, as well as tools such as a pedagogical “toolbox” to support academic units (pp. 13-14, 18).

Research is treated as an active site of intervention rather than merely a diagnostic domain. The Plan identifies “Research, Innovation and Creation” as a strategic area, with objectives focused on increasing women’s participation in knowledge production and promoting research that incorporates gender and intersectional perspectives (p. 9). Measures include a gender classifier in institutional repositories, competitive research funds, and indicators tracking recognition and participation in research groups (pp. 12, 16-17, 18-19, 23-24).

Employment and careers are addressed primarily through representation and institutional processes. The Plan identifies persistent challenges in women’s incorporation into the academic career and their under-representation in authority positions (p. 4). Proposed measures focus on integrating a gender perspective into recruitment and hiring processes and assessing organizational climate, with indicators tracking participation and perceptions of fair treatment (pp. 16-17). Notably, the emphasis lies on procedural fairness and capacity development rather than on explicit redistributive measures such as pay equity audits.

Leadership and governance are among the most clearly articulated domains. The Plan explicitly sets parity between women and men in decision-making positions as an institutional aspiration, supported by indicators measuring gender distribution in leadership roles (pp. 8, 16). Initiatives such as the strengthening of the PUCP Women Leaders Network combine training, mentoring, and recognition, while a formal directive committee integrates academic, administrative, and student actors into governance structures (pp. 19, 25).

Work-life balance and care are recognized as conditions affecting participation and equality, particularly for women. The Plan frames conciliation between professional, academic, and personal life as a strategic area and proposes institutional diagnostics and support mechanisms for students, faculty, and administrative staff with caregiving responsibilities (pp. 9, 12, 19). Indicators focus on perceptions of work-life balance (p. 16). However, the approach prioritizes services and internal policies over structural reforms to workload or evaluation systems.

Gender-based violence is the most developed policy domain in the Plan. The document adopts a “zero tolerance” stance toward sexual harassment and gender-based violence and establishes a dedicated strategic area encompassing prevention, attention, investigation, and sanctioning mechanisms (pp. 6, 8-9). Objective 3 focuses on strengthening reporting channels, victim support, and disciplinary procedures, with clearly defined institutional roles and bodies (pp. 12, 20-22). Compared to other domains, this area combines cultural, procedural, and sanctioning instruments, giving it greater implementation capacity.

Taken together, the analysis of policy domains suggests that the Plan does not address all areas of intervention with equal intensity. Gender-based violence and harassment, teaching and curriculum, and leadership and governance receive the most sustained and operationalized attention, as evidenced by clearly defined objectives, indicators, and institutional responsibilities. By contrast, research and academic careers are addressed through more selective and process-oriented measures, while work-life balance and care are primarily approached through support services rather than structural reforms. This uneven distribution indicates a strategic prioritization of domains where institutional control, measurability, and procedural enforcement are strongest, while areas that would require deeper transformation of academic practices and evaluation systems receive comparatively less emphasis. As such, the Plan reflects differentiated levels of institutional engagement across domains rather than a uniformly transversal implementation of the gender approach.

### *Policy Instruments*

The Plan deploys a mixed portfolio of policy instruments, combining symbolic, procedural, redistributive, and sanctioning measures. Symbolic instruments establish a shared normative horizon through statements of institutional commitment, aspirational goals, and a declared stance of “zero tolerance” toward gender-based violence and harassment (pp. 6, 8). Procedural instruments form the backbone of implementation and include the designation of the Office for Gender Equality and Diversity as the leading body, the creation of consultative and directive committees, the establishment of an observatory, mandatory training processes, and faculty-level measurement and evaluation systems (pp. 5, 12-13, 17-18, 20-26). Redistributive and incentive-based instruments, though more limited in scope, are present through competitive funds, innovation contests,

and the adaptation of services and infrastructure to promote accessibility and inclusion (pp. 7, 12, 18-19). Finally, sanctioning instruments are explicitly articulated in relation to sexual harassment and gender-based violence, with defined disciplinary bodies and procedures responsible for investigation and sanction (pp. 20-22).

### *Underlying Gender Paradigm*

The Plan reflects a hybrid gender paradigm that combines liberal equality, intersectional recognition, and managerial governance. The Plan explicitly adopts both a gender perspective and an intersectional approach as transversal principles (pp. 8-10), signaling alignment with contemporary gender and diversity discourse. However, intersectionality is primarily mobilized as a framework of recognition and inclusion, rather than as a diagnostic tool for analyzing how intersecting inequalities are produced and sustained through academic labor, evaluation, and governance structures.

Operationally, the Plan is dominated by a liberal equality or “gap-closing” logic, centered on measurable objectives such as parity between women and men in leadership positions, increased participation of women in STEM fields, and reductions in cases of gender-based violence (pp. 8, 15-17). These goals frame gender inequality mainly as a problem of representation and access, rather than as the outcome of gendered organizational structures. In this sense, gender equality is translated into a set of technical and managerial targets.

This orientation is reinforced by a strong managerial DEI framework, visible in the reliance on strategic management tools, performance indicators, monitoring systems, and alignment with the Institutional Strategic Plan (pp. 5, 24-26). Gender equality is thus embedded within institutional governance and compliance mechanisms, privileging procedural accountability over structural critique. While the Plan acknowledges gender gaps, stereotypes, and violence, these issues are addressed as organizational risks to be managed rather than as manifestations of deeply embedded power relations.

Overall, the Plan advances a pragmatic and institutionally embedded approach to gender equality that facilitates implementation and legitimacy within a contested national context, while simultaneously delineating the limits of transformation by prioritizing

measurable inclusion over a deeper reconfiguration of academic power and knowledge structures.

## **The University of Bologna**

### ***National and Institutional Context***

Italy is a Southern European country of approximately 59 million inhabitants, characterized by population ageing, low fertility, and significant regional socio-economic disparities that generally favor the northern and central regions over the south in GDP, employment, and investment in education (Eurydice, 2024; Eurostat, 2024). The University of Bologna (UNIBO) is located in Emilia-Romagna, one of Italy's most economically developed and urbanized regions, whose relatively high income levels, diversified economic structure, and long-standing investment in education and social policy shape both opportunities and constraints facing women's participation in academic and professional careers.

Italian HE combines constitutionally grounded university autonomy – guaranteed under Articles 33 and 34 of the Constitution, which recognize HE as a public responsibility – with strong state coordination: responsibility for system-wide planning, funding allocation, accreditation, and regulatory oversight is primarily vested in the Ministry of University and Research (MUR), while quality assurance and evaluation functions are delegated to the National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes (ANVUR) (Eurydice, 2024).

Italian universities are legally autonomous public bodies in organizational, academic, scientific, and financial terms, though this autonomy is more constrained in funding and staffing than in curriculum development and internal governance, situating Italy within a broader European model of “regulated autonomy”, that combines institutional self-governance with extensive external steering through funding rules and evaluation mechanisms (Ferlie et al., 2008; Bleiklie, 2014; EUA, 2023). This steering operates indirectly, through regulatory frameworks and performance-based evaluation, rather than direct hierarchical control (Ferlie et al., 2008), and is reinforced at the European level by policy frameworks, mediated through EU funding instruments, that create strong

incentives for universities to formalize and institutionalize equality and inclusion strategies (EUA, 2022).

The University of Bologna (*Alma Mater Studiorum – Università di Bologna*) is conventionally dated to 1088 and is widely regarded as the oldest university in the Western world. Historiography identifies it as a paradigmatic case in the development of the medieval university, distinguished in its formative phase by its student-organized character (Rüegg, 2003, pp. 4-10; de Ridder-Symoens, 2003, pp. 281-285).

Today UNIBO is a large, public, comprehensive, research-intensive institution operating across multiple campuses in Emilia-Romagna and beyond. It regularly ranks among the top Italian universities according to the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ShanghaiRanking Consultancy, 2024) and EduRank (2024). As Marginson (2016) argues, public research universities function not only as sites of education and research but as key institutional actors through which states pursue broader social, economic, and democratic objectives. UNIBO constitutes a representative case in which a Gender Equality Plan is explicitly aligned with Horizon Europe requirements that frame gender equality as a structural governance concern rather than a voluntary or peripheral one (European Commission, 2021).

The Gender Equality Plan (GEP) 2025-2027 was developed within UNIBO's central governance structures, indicating a high level of institutional embedding: responsibility for its design and coordination lies with a multi-actor working group including the Vice Rector for Staff, the Delegate for Equality, Inclusion and Diversity, the Delegate for Well-being at Work, the President of the Guarantee Committee for Equal Opportunities (CUG), and senior personnel and planning divisions (*Alma Mater Studiorum – Università di Bologna*, 2025). This shows a cross-cutting arrangement which aligns with patterns identified in European HE, where DEI policies are most commonly managed through a combination of equality committees, rectorate-level delegates, and central administrative services (EUA, 2022). Its structure mirrors the European Commission's five priority areas for Gender Equality Plans under Horizon Europe – work-life balance, leadership and decision-making, recruitment and career progression, integration of the gender dimension

in research and teaching, and measures against gender-based violence (European Commission, 2021) – reflecting a broader shift in Italian academia toward more centralized, strategically embedded gender governance (Deiana et al., 2023; Cois et al., 2023).

### *Analysis of the UNIBO Gender Equality Plan (2025-2027)*

#### *Conceptualization of Gender*

The GEP conceptualizes gender primarily through an institutional equality framework, in which gender is understood as a dimension of organizational fairness, inclusion, and compliance with external policy requirements. Gender equality is framed in terms of equal opportunities, non-discrimination, and participation, and is explicitly linked to institutional quality and good governance (p. 7). This framing aligns closely with European research and innovation policies, particularly Horizon Europe, which position gender equality as a prerequisite for eligibility, excellence, and accountability.

Within this conceptualization, gender is not articulated as a contested social relation or as a site of structural power embedded in academic knowledge production. Rather, it is treated as a policy-relevant category that can be addressed through planning, monitoring, and procedural adjustments. This understanding makes possible the strong emphasis on indicators, governance structures, and reporting mechanisms that characterize the plan, while simultaneously limiting engagement with feminist critiques of academic hierarchies or epistemic inequality.

Although the GEP does not explicitly theorize gender as a structural power relation, its policy architecture implicitly adopts a structural framing of inequality. Gender disparities are linked to institutional arrangements such as evaluation criteria, career trajectories, leadership selection, and work organization (pp. 27-35). The repeated focus on monitoring indices, recruitment procedures, and decision-making bodies suggests that inequality is understood as produced by organizational systems rather than by individual bias alone. At the same time, the plan incorporates an individual dimension through measures related to well-being, training, awareness-raising, and psychological support (pp. 16-18). This dual framing, organizational and individual, reflects a governance logic

in which structural problems are addressed primarily through procedural reform, while individual experiences are managed through support services. The absence of an explicit theoretical discussion of structure does not negate its presence, but it does render the structural understanding implicit rather than analytically foregrounded.

### *Subjects of Gender Policy*

The GEP addresses a broad set of subjects, including academic staff, technical and administrative personnel, doctoral candidates, researchers, and students, positioning gender equality as a concern of the entire university community. Women emerge as the dominant reference category throughout the document, particularly in relation to career progression, leadership representation, and care responsibilities. While non-binary and LGBTQIA+ identities are explicitly acknowledged – most notably through dedicated services such as the Alias Career and anti-discrimination support structures (pp. 22-23) – their inclusion remains largely procedural and symbolic.

Intersectionality is referenced, especially in the context of research evaluation and European funding requirements (p. 36), but it is not developed as an analytical lens shaping the overall policy logic. Dimensions such as race, ethnicity, nationality, or migration status are largely absent from the document. This suggests that diversity is operationalized primarily through alignment with European policy frameworks rather than through a substantive re-framing of inequality within the institution. In this sense, exclusion operates less through overt omission than through the narrow delimitation of what counts as a manageable policy problem.

### *Policy Domains Addressed*

The GEP addresses all five priority areas defined by European gender equality policy, but with uneven analytical weight. Work–life balance and organizational culture constitute the most developed domain (pp. 8-26). Gender inequality is strongly associated with care responsibilities, work intensity, and well-being, implicitly recognizing the gendered distribution of social reproduction. However, this domain is treated primarily through compensatory measures – services, flexibility, and support – rather than through a critical interrogation of academic labor norms or productivity expectations. As a result,

redistribution is addressed indirectly, without challenging the underlying organization of work.

Leadership and governance are addressed through monitoring tools, incentives, and visibility initiatives, such as the Glass Ceiling Index and the “No Women No Panel” campaign (pp. 27-29). Gender imbalance is framed as a problem of representation rather than power, and solutions rely on soft governance mechanisms rather than binding rules. This reinforces a managerial logic in which change is encouraged but not enforced.

Recruitment and career advancement are approached through procedural correction, particularly in relation to evaluation criteria and parental leave (pp. 30-35). The recognition of structural penalties linked to care responsibilities indicates awareness of systemic inequality, yet many proposed measures remain exploratory, reflecting caution in confronting entrenched academic norms.

Research and teaching are addressed through gender mainstreaming in research evaluation, funding applications, and training activities (pp. 36-39). Teaching-related measures focus mainly on optional courses and awards, rather than on systematic curriculum reform. This indicates a selective integration of gender into academic content, prioritizing externally funded research contexts over internal pedagogical transformation.

Gender-based violence and harassment are framed as organizational risks requiring prevention, training, and awareness (pp. 40-41). While this fulfils formal policy requirements, the issue is not problematized as a manifestation of power relations within the institution, nor are sanctioning mechanisms made explicit. Violence is thus treated as a compliance domain rather than as a deeply political institutional issue.

### *Policy instruments*

Across all areas, the GEP relies predominantly on procedural policy instruments, including monitoring systems, reports, training programs, guidelines, and feasibility studies. Redistributive instruments, such as targeted funding for services or incentives for departments, are present but limited in scope. Explicit sanctioning mechanisms are notably absent from the document.

Responsibilities for implementation are clearly assigned to central governance actors, including the Rectorate, delegates, committees, and administrative divisions. This indicates a high level of institutional capacity and coordination, aligning the GEP with managerial models of governance that emphasize planning, accountability, and measurable outcomes.

### *Underlying Gender Paradigm*

Taken as a whole, UNIBO's GEP reflects a managerial-structural equality paradigm, in which gender equality is framed as an institutional governance requirement linked to compliance, monitoring, and organizational performance rather than as a transformative feminist project. Gender is institutionalized through plans, indicators, and procedures, and change is operationalized via coordination and evaluation rather than through challenges to academic power relations or knowledge hierarchies. Intersectionality is present primarily as policy alignment rather than as analytical re-framing, and the plan does not engage critically with the norms of meritocracy, productivity, or academic labor that underpin inequality.

## **Discussion**

### *What are the Paradigms that Explain the Understanding of Gender?*

Gender equality is not approached in the same way across the three documents analyzed. The paradigms identified range from a managerial-structural equality paradigm (UNIBO and UNAM) to a hybrid paradigm combining liberal equality, intersectional recognition, and managerial governance (PUCP). These differences become more evident when examining how each institution conceptualizes gender inequality. UNIBO understands gender inequality primarily as an institutional governance issue that requires compliance, coordination, and monitoring, closely aligned with broader European Union policy frameworks. PUCP, by contrast, frames gender inequality mainly as a problem of representation, access, and measurable gaps. UNAM, in turn, treats gender inequality as an imbalance that must be corrected within existing institutional arrangements, without questioning the underlying status quo.

The same contrast is visible in how equality itself is operationalized. At UNIBO, equality functions as a governance requirement embedded in institutional procedures. PUCP translates equality into operational targets, such as parity in participation and the reduction of gender-based violence. UNAM frames equality through transversal norms and gap-closing actions integrated into institutional planning. The limited transformative scope of these approaches is also reflected in the role assigned to intersectionality. While UNIBO and PUCP formally adopt intersectionality through policy alignment and transversal principles, at UNAM it is largely reduced to the addition of references to LGBTTTIQ+ inclusion. Nevertheless, in none of the three cases is intersectionality used as a tool to reframe the analysis of institutional structures or practices. As a consequence of these limitations, gender inequality is rarely recognized as part of broader power relations within HE. UNIBO does not engage critically with academic power relations, meritocratic norms, or hierarchical structures. PUCP acknowledges power relations only indirectly, framing them primarily as organizational risks rather than as structural features of the institution. In the UNAM document, this absence is even more pronounced, as gender is not conceptualized as a relation of power embedded in academic structures.

In the absence of a conceptualization of gender grounded in power relations or intersectional analysis, a managerial logic becomes predominant. Across all three documents, gender equality is treated as a problem of institutional management, addressed through plans, indicators, monitoring mechanisms, coordination structures, and procedural instruments. While this approach facilitates institutional legitimacy and implementation, it also constrains the transformative potential of gender policies. Neither UNIBO nor UNAM articulates a project of structural transformation of academia or knowledge production. PUCP, although more ambitious in its emphasis on inclusion, similarly falls short of advancing a structural reconfiguration of academic power relations.

Overall, while these paradigms support the institutionalization and operationalization of gender equality, they are structurally limited in their transformative capacity by avoiding a structural critique of gender and other power relations within HEIs, a limitation consistently highlighted in feminist and intersectional analyses of organizational change (Acker, 1990; Ahmed, 2012; Crenshaw, 1991).

***Gender as Identity, Structure, or Power Relation***

Across the three cases, UNAM (Mexico), PUCP (Peru), and UNIBO (Italy), gender is framed through a shared vocabulary of equality, non-discrimination, and inclusion. Yet beneath this apparent convergence, the documents reflect different governance logics and degrees of engagement with the structural dimensions of gender inequality in HE.

In both PUCP and UNAM's Plans, gender is primarily conceptualized through a liberal equality lens, centered on closing identifiable gaps affecting participation, representation, and safety. In these two Latin American cases, gender inequality is treated largely as a condition affecting specific groups, most notably women, rather than as a constitutive feature of academic organizations. Although PUCP explicitly adopts an intersectional approach and UNAM frames gender as a transversal axis, intersectionality functions mainly at a discursive or programmatic level. Responsibility is addressed through corrective, preventive, and inclusion-oriented measures, rather than through interrogation of the gendered organization of academic labor, governance, or knowledge production.

UNIBO departs partially from this individualized framing by linking gender disparities more clearly to institutional arrangements, such as recruitment procedures, career progression, leadership selection, and work organization. Gender equality is framed as a matter of institutional quality, good governance, and compliance with European policy frameworks. However, this more structural diagnosis is operationalized predominantly through managerial instruments (monitoring systems, indicators, and procedural reforms) rather than through an explicit engagement with feminist critiques of academic hierarchies or epistemic power.

Across all three systems, intersectionality is acknowledged but not fully mobilized as an analytical framework capable of exposing intersecting power relations within academia. Instead, it is incorporated in ways that remain additive and administratively manageable. As a result, despite differences in institutional maturity and policy architecture, the three cases converge around a governance-oriented understanding of gender equality, in which inequality is rendered legible through metrics, targets, and procedures.

Overall, the comparison reveals a shared tendency to frame gender inequality as a problem of inclusion and management, rather than as a relational and structural feature of HE systems. While this approach facilitates institutional legitimacy and implementation, it also delineates the limits of transformation by prioritizing measurable correction over deeper reconfiguration of academic power and organizational norms.

### *Gender as Structural vs Individual Cases*

What stands out across the three documents is a shared commitment to treating gender inequality as an institutional concern, but with very different diagnoses of where inequality actually “lives.” UNIBO comes closest to a structural reading, not necessarily because it uses radical language, but because its policy logic treats inequality as something produced through organizational systems: procedures, career pathways, evaluation criteria, leadership selection, and monitoring routines. In other words, the problem is framed as “built into” how the institution operates, and therefore actionable through governance instruments (indicators, reporting, procedural reform). That is still a managerial approach, but it implies that change requires retooling the organization, not only “fixing” people.

PUCP and UNAM, by contrast, lean more clearly toward an individualized and group-based framing, where inequality appears primarily as an outcome that affects certain groups (especially women) and can be corrected through targeted actions and protective measures. In PUCP’s case, the diagnosis is strongly oriented toward participation and representation outcomes; structural dynamics are acknowledged but tend to remain secondary to who is disadvantaged and how to reduce gaps. UNAM follows a similar logic even more explicitly: gender inequality is treated as a correctable imbalance, something the institution can adjust through planning, regulation, and programmatic intervention, without deeply problematizing the organizational norms that generate those gaps in the first place.

This difference matters because it shapes what kinds of interventions become imaginable. A structural diagnosis pushes institutions toward reforms that touch evaluation criteria, workload regimes, recruitment pathways, and decision-making, what Acker would call the “processes,” through which organizations reproduce inequality (1990). An

individualized diagnosis, meanwhile, tends to center inclusion and protection, often translating responsibility into corrective measures rather than sustained interrogation of gendered organizational processes. This is where Ahmed's critique is useful: institutions can become highly fluent in equality language while still treating inequality as something to be managed through policies and procedures, rather than confronted as an organizing logic of academic life (2012). In that sense, even UNIBO's more structural framing remains bound by a compliance-oriented logic, while PUCP and UNAM more openly stabilize gender inequality as a matter of distributive "gaps" to be corrected within existing arrangements.

In sum, UNIBO frames gender inequality as institutionally produced and procedurally governable; PUCP frames it as group-based disadvantage requiring corrective action; and UNAM frames it as a correctable imbalance within institutional planning. Across all three, the shared constraint is that structural inequality becomes legible mainly when it can be translated into measurable governance tools – meaning that the deeper gendered organization of academic power is rarely named explicitly – even when parts of it are clearly being managed.

### ***Subjects Included and Excluded: Who Becomes Legible and Who Disappears in Institutional Gender Policy***

Across the three cases, the policy subject of "gender equality" is remarkably stable: women remain the central figure through which inequality is rendered visible, measurable, and actionable. In UNIBO, women – especially academic and administrative staff – are the implicit addressee of many equality measures; in PUCP, women are explicitly positioned as the principal group affected by gender gaps and institutional risk (careers, leadership, safety); and in UNAM, women similarly emerge as the primary subject of *igualdad de género*, framed through the language of gaps and equal participation. This convergence is not simply a reflection of demographic reality; it also reflects what critical organizational scholarship describes as the 'administrative convenience' of a policy subject that is already recognizable within existing institutional categories. As Acker argues, organizational processes often appear neutral while reproducing inequality through their underlying logics, meaning that even when

institutions “include” women, they may do so within a framework that leaves the gendered organization of work intact (Acker, 1990).

What varies across UNIBO, PUCP, and UNAM is less whether gender diversity is acknowledged than how it is made governable. UNIBO’s recognition of gender diversity is mediated through procedural mechanisms that fit a European DEI vocabulary – an approach consistent with how many European institutions historically began with “gender equality” (often associated with family-friendliness and care responsibilities) and only later broadened the scope to other grounds of discrimination (EUA, 2022). PUCP goes further in naming diversity and recognizing gender identity (including “chosen name”), but recognition remains only partially translated into enforceable protections or fully articulated policy subjects. UNAM mentions inclusion of the LGBTTTIQ+ community, yet this appears as a programmatic add-on rather than a conceptual reworking of gender itself. This pattern aligns with scholarship on the institutional shift from “women” to “gender” and then to “diversity”, where intersectionality is often invoked as a guiding paradigm but not consistently operationalized in policy logic (Longman & De Graeve, 2014). In other words, diversity language expands, but the policy subject remains narrow because it aligns most easily with measurable goals and existing institutional routines.

From an intersectional perspective, the core limitation is the persistence of a single-axis policy architecture. Crenshaw’s foundational point is that when institutions treat race and gender as separable frameworks, women of color – and, more broadly, people located at intersecting positions – can become marginal within both antiracist and feminist discourses (Crenshaw, 1991). The three cases analyzed here reproduce a comparable mechanism inside HE policy: gender equality is largely organized around women as a category, while intersectionality tends to function as a descriptor of inclusion rather than as a method that reshapes diagnosis, priorities, and instruments. This matters because intersectionality is not only a vocabulary of recognition; it is a way of analyzing how power operates through interacting structures (Maj, 2013). When intersectionality is approached additively – by “adding” categories – policy risks treating identities as separable, “summative”, and administratively sortable, rather than relational and structurally produced (Lahiri-Dutt, 2024). In practical terms, this is why non-binary identities and gender-diverse persons can be mentioned, yet remain marginal: they are

acknowledged discursively, but not rebuilt into the institutional grammar of recruitment, evaluation, leadership, or curriculum governance.

Seen through Ahmed's lens, there is also a structural reason why gender diversity often remains symbolic: institutions generate "paper trails" of commitment that may not produce the effects they name – what Ahmed calls "non-performatives" (Ahmed, 2012). This helps explain why, across the three universities, recognition of diversity can coexist with limited institutionalization of non-binary subjects and with the ongoing invisibility of epistemic hierarchies, meritocratic norms, and gendered academic labor. Policies can state commitments, create offices, and introduce training, yet still encounter what Ahmed describes as the institution experienced as resistance – an encounter often narrated through the metaphor of "banging your head against a brick wall" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 26). Read comparatively, UNIBO's EU-aligned governance architecture may create stronger procedural inclusion; PUCP's hybrid model may produce more explicit recognition and stronger enforcement in selected domains; and UNAM's transversal framing may diffuse gender across the institutional agenda. But in all three systems, the boundaries of who counts as a policy subject remain shaped by what institutions can manage without destabilizing the organizational logics that Acker identifies as already gendered (Acker, 1990).

### ***Institutional Priorities in Policy Domains***

Examining what and how institutions prioritize specific policy domains provides important insight into how gender equality is governed in practice. As outlined in the analytical framework, mapping policy domains allows for identifying institutional understandings of where gender inequality is considered actionable and governable (Klein, 2016; Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019). A key comparative finding is that all three institutions prioritize measurable and governable domains over those related to care, academic labor, and structural working conditions. This prioritization reflects a broader managerial logic in which gender equality is addressed primarily through domains that lend themselves to monitoring, evaluation, and procedural accountability, rather than through structural transformation.

*Teaching and curriculum*

In relation to teaching, both PUCP and UNAM place strong emphasis on curricular reform, although with notable differences in scope. UNAM limits its intervention primarily to the mandatory inclusion of gender-related content in undergraduate and postgraduate study plans, without extending this requirement to pedagogical practices or teaching methods. PUCP, by contrast, frames teaching as both a curricular and pedagogical domain, explicitly linking gender equality to teaching practices and educational approaches. UNIBO addresses teaching mainly through quality assurance mechanisms, where gender equality is operationalized as a set of indicators embedded in institutional evaluation processes rather than as a pedagogical transformation. This reflects what Acker (1990) identifies as the tendency of organizations to incorporate equality goals without challenging the underlying gendered assumptions embedded in everyday practices.

*Research*

Research constitutes a central domain for both UNIBO and UNAM. At UNIBO, gender equality is closely linked to research evaluation and institutional performance, reinforcing its role within governance and monitoring frameworks. UNAM similarly treats research as a core domain, promoting the use of gender both as a research perspective and as a criterion in research evaluation. In contrast, PUCP assigns a more secondary role to research, prioritizing inclusion, leadership, and institutional representation over direct intervention in research practices.

As highlighted in the analytical framework, feminist and decolonial scholarship has long emphasized the role of HEIs in reproducing epistemic inequalities through teaching and research (Grosfoguel, 2013). While the inclusion of gender – related content in curricula represents an important step, it does not address the deeper structures that determine what counts as legitimate knowledge and who is recognized as a legitimate knowledge producer – structures that remain profoundly gendered and racialized. None of the three documents explicitly engage with epistemic injustice, epistemic sexism, or epistemic racism, revealing a shared limitation in their approach to gender equality in knowledge production.

### *Employment and academic careers*

Employment and academic careers represent another strongly prioritized domain across the three cases, although with different emphases. At UNIBO, this domain is closely tied to evaluation, promotion, and performance assessment, reinforcing a managerial understanding of equality within existing career structures. PUCP places strong emphasis on parity and participation, particularly in access to academic positions and career progression. UNAM addresses academic careers more moderately, focusing on evaluation and promotion criteria that incorporate a gender perspective, without questioning the underlying organization of academic labor. As discussed in the analytical framework, this focus on access and progression aligns with liberal equality approaches that seek to correct disparities without interrogating the gendered organization of work itself (Acker, 1990).

### *Leadership and governance*

Leadership and governance emerge as a particularly strong domain at UNIBO, where gender equality is deeply institutionalized through centralized governance structures and formal procedures. PUCP also prioritizes leadership, explicitly promoting women's participation in decision-making positions and institutional governance. At UNAM, leadership and governance are present but less prominent, with limited attention to gender representation in positions of authority. Across the three cases, leadership is framed primarily as a matter of representation and institutional legitimacy, rather than as an arena for contesting hierarchical power relations, a pattern consistent with managerial and compliance-oriented equality paradigms (Ahmed, 2012).

### *Work-life balance and care*

Work-life balance and care constitute one of the weakest domains across the three institutions. At UNIBO, work-life balance is addressed in a limited and largely non-structural manner. PUCP includes this domain primarily through the provision of services and support mechanisms, without addressing workload distribution or evaluation criteria. At UNAM, work-life balance is largely absent as an explicit policy domain. As highlighted in the analytical framework, the marginalization of care-related issues reflects a broader tendency within gender equality policies to render reproductive and care labor

invisible, despite its central role in sustaining academic work (European Commission, 2018; UNDP, 2025).

### *Gender-based violence*

Gender-based violence is one of the most consistently prioritized domains across all three cases, although with varying intensity. UNAM places particularly strong emphasis on prevention, attention, and sanctioning mechanisms, making violence one of the most developed areas of its gender policy framework. PUCP similarly prioritizes this domain, integrating prevention and response mechanisms into its institutional strategy. At UNIBO, gender-based violence is addressed as part of broader equality and compliance requirements. In line with feminist policy analysis, violence is treated as a serious institutional issue; however, it is often framed in procedural and regulatory terms rather than as a manifestation of structural gendered power relations embedded in academic life.

### *Policy instruments: How Gender Equality is Managed Rather than Transformed*

A comparative examination of policy instruments across UNIBO, UNAM, and PUCP reveals a common institutional preference for symbolic and procedural instruments, alongside a marked reluctance to deploy redistributive measures, and a selective use of sanctioning tools, primarily in relation to gender-based violence. This configuration is analytically important because policy instruments do not merely implement gender equality objectives; they define the mode of governance through which inequality is rendered addressable within universities.

Symbolic instruments play a foundational role in all three cases, establishing gender equality as a legitimate and visible institutional concern. UNAM's transversal framing embeds gender across institutional priorities; UNIBO's stand-alone GEP formalizes commitment within a European compliance architecture; and PUCP's dedicated gender plan publicly codifies equality as a strategic objective. Rather than interpreting symbolism as empty, it is more analytically productive to understand it as part of what Ahmed describes as the institutional production of orientation: symbolic commitments help align organizations toward certain values and futures, even when they do not specify how conflictual change will occur (Ahmed, 2012). Symbolic instruments thus function as

direction-setting devices, but they leave open the question of how deeply organizational routines will be altered.

Procedural instruments constitute the core of all three policy regimes. UNIBO exhibits the most extensive procedural architecture, characterized by monitoring systems, indicators, reporting obligations, training programs, and coordination mechanisms. This reflects a broader European governance logic in which equality is pursued through data collection, benchmarking, and accountability frameworks. Empirical studies of European HEIs show that such proceduralizing is widespread, particularly in relation to gender equality, where quantitative indicators and monitoring are used to demonstrate compliance, transparency, and institutional responsibility (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019). UNAM similarly relies on procedural tools through commissions, planning instruments, and programmatic actions, while PUCP combines planning and monitoring through a dedicated equality office.

From a critical governance perspective, procedural dominance has ambivalent effects. While it enhances institutional capacity and continuity, it also tends to narrow gender equality to what is measurable and administratively manageable. Acker's theory of gendered organizations helps explain why this matters: formal procedures can coexist with – and even mask – deeply gendered organizational structures, allowing institutions to address symptoms of inequality without challenging the underlying division of labor, evaluation norms, or career hierarchies that reproduce it (Acker, 1990). In this sense, procedural instruments may contribute to what appears as progress while leaving core power relations intact.

Redistributive instruments emerge as the weakest dimension across the three cases. UNAM does not include explicit redistributive measures; PUCP introduces limited and targeted supports; and UNIBO refers primarily to services or feasibility studies rather than direct reallocation of resources. Feminist policy scholarship on gender mainstreaming has long identified this pattern: redistribution is the most politically demanding dimension of equality policy because it directly confronts how institutions allocate time, money, prestige, and security (UNDP, 2025). The comparative evidence

suggests that universities are far more willing to measure inequality than to restructure the organizational conditions that produce it.

Sanctioning instruments follow a different logic. UNAM and PUCP place strong emphasis on sanctioning mechanisms in relation to gender-based violence and harassment, while UNIBO's approach prioritizes prevention, training, and coordination over explicit sanctioning. This asymmetry reflects a broader tendency in HE governance: violence is treated as an urgent institutional risk that legitimizes formal enforcement, whereas everyday gendered inequalities in workload, evaluation, and career progression are addressed through softer instruments. As Acker notes, focusing on individual misconduct can depoliticize inequality by framing it as an exception rather than as an outcome of organizational power relations (Acker, 1990).

The instrument mix across UNIBO, UNAM, and PUCP supports a common analytical conclusion: gender equality is pursued primarily through institutional management rather than redistribution. Symbolic commitment and procedural governance dominate because they align with contemporary models of HE steering and reputational accountability. Critical diversity scholarship warns that such configurations can produce a form of "manageable equality", where inclusion is performed through policies and procedures while structural inequalities remain largely unaltered (Longman & De Graeve, 2014). The comparison clarifies the limits of current approaches: without stronger redistributive instruments targeting workload, evaluation criteria, career precarity, and resource allocation, procedural equality risks becoming a ceiling rather than a pathway to structural transformation.

The comparative analysis of governance and institutional logic across UNIBO, PUCP, and UNAM shows that gender equality policies are shaped less by their normative commitments than by the institutional governance environments in which they operate. Feminist scholarship on organizations has long argued that equality policies are mediated by existing power structures, accountability regimes, and decision-making arrangements (Acker, 1990; Ahmed, 2012). Across the three cases, governance structures determine not whether gender equality is addressed, but how it is stabilized, enforced, and ultimately constrained.

At UNIBO, gender equality governance is highly centralized and externally conditioned, reflecting the European policy environment in which Gender Equality Plans are tied to research funding eligibility under Horizon Europe. The Gender Equality Plan 2025-2027 is coordinated at rectorate level and embedded within central administrative structures, ensuring policy continuity and institutional authority. However, this configuration also reinforces a managerial logic in which gender equality is translated into indicators, monitoring systems, and procedural compliance, limiting engagement with deeper critiques of academic power relations (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019; Ahmed, 2012). By contrast, PUCP's gender governance is strategy-driven and internally anchored. The Plan Institucional de Género 2024-2028 is integrated into institutional planning and coordinated by the Office for Gender Equality and Diversity under the Vice rectorate for Academic Affairs, reflecting strong institutional autonomy and coherence. While this allows for a relatively comprehensive agenda, policy sustainability remains dependent on leadership commitment rather than external enforcement.

UNAM represents a third governance model, characterized by constitutional autonomy and collegial decision-making. Gender equality is framed as a transversal institutional principle within the Programa de Desarrollo Institucional, but implementation relies on coordination across faculties and internal commissions rather than hierarchical enforcement. This decentralized logic grants gender policy high symbolic legitimacy but results in uneven implementation and moderate policy stability. Taken together, the three cases reveal a shared tension identified in critical policy studies: governance arrangements prioritize stability, measurability, and procedural accountability, often at the expense of sustained institutional self-critique. As a result, gender equality is rendered governable within existing structures, while the transformative potential of feminist interventions remains structurally limited.

## **Conclusions**

This article set out to compare how gender equality is conceptualized and governed in three HEIs: the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, and the University of Bologna, through a theory-driven analysis of institutional policy documents. By operationalizing analytical categories related to

conceptualization, subjects, intersectionality, policy domains, instruments, and underlying paradigms, the study shows that all three institutions formally commit to gender equality while doing so through distinct but converging governance logics. The comparison reveals that gender equality is predominantly framed as an institutional problem to be managed through procedural, symbolic, and managerial mechanisms, rather than as a structural relation of power embedded in academic labor, governance, and knowledge production. Even where intersectionality and diversity are explicitly acknowledged, these concepts remain largely additive and programmatic, without reshaping institutional diagnoses or priorities.

Together, the findings highlight a shared tension between institutionalization and transformation in contemporary gender policies in HE. The paradigms identified managerial-structural equality at UNIBO and UNAM, and a hybrid equality-recognition paradigm at PUCP, facilitate legitimacy, compliance, and implementation within different governance contexts, but simultaneously delimit the transformative scope of gender equality initiatives. By privileging measurable domains, representation, and procedural accountability, these approaches tend to leave the deeper power-relations that sustain gendered and intersecting inequalities in academia unchallenged. This analysis contributes to ongoing debates on DEI and gender mainstreaming in HE by showing how policy design and governance context shape not only what institutions do in the name of gender equality, but also what they are structurally able, or unable, to transform.

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