

Tackling resistance and sustaining change in Inclusive Gendered Innovation

Working Paper KSH4 - Innovation

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Executive summary

This working paper examines how resistance emerges when Inclusive Gendered Innovation (IGI) is implemented in research and innovation systems. It draws on INSPIRE evidence from the Research Funding Organisations (RFO) Community of Practice (CoP) and from the Knowledge Exchange Event 4 held in Kraków in October 2025, complemented by comparative case-study work on policies supporting IGI in innovation funding.

The central finding is that resistance is a normal and informative part of institutional change that can cause harm if left unaddressed. We identified resistance at individual, organisational and societal levels. It appears more often through hesitation, claims of irrelevance, avoidance, procedural inertia, symbolic compliance or the confusion of gender expertise with personal opinion than through open opposition. Resistance also stems from different sources: Among the common sources, participants discussed the lack of knowledge and confidence, ambiguous leadership positioning, structural rigidity, resource constraints, gender fatigue and, in some contexts, political or cultural backlash.

The working paper therefore reads resistance as a diagnostic signal. Resistance reveals where policy ambition exceeds operational clarity, where reviewer competence does not yet match assessment expectations, where innovation routines crowd out reflexive work, and where equality commitments remain under-resourced. Read in this way, it helps to identify the measures required to make IGI a sustained element of research quality, innovation processes and societal impact rather than a fragile add-on to existing procedures.

From the perspective of workshop participants and CoP members, sustainable change depends on a set of connected conditions: clear expectations, role-specific capacity-building, evidence and examples, leadership accountability, peer-learning spaces, gender and social sciences and humanities expertise in projects and review processes, and the coherent integration of IGI across funding design, proposal assessment, monitoring and project implementation. For the promotion of IGI, the task is not to eliminate resistance once and for all, but to recognise it early, to interpret it carefully and to transform it into institutional learning. By engaging with resistance constructively, actors across the research and innovation ecosystem can turn discomfort into learning and uncertainty into progress.

1. Introduction

Change in research and innovation is rarely straightforward. Efforts to make science more inclusive and gender-responsive often meet hesitation, uncertainty or open pushback. These reactions are not in themselves signs of failure; they are part of the process of transformation. This working paper explores how such reactions, and the discomfort or disagreement that arises when new expectations challenge established systems, can become a productive force in advancing Inclusive Gendered Innovation.

(Inclusive) Gendered Innovation refers to the integration of sex, gender and other intersecting dimensions of diversity into research and innovation content, processes and outcomes (European Commission, 2020; Schiebinger & Schraudner, 2011; Karaulova et al., 2023). IGI is concerned not only with *who participates in research and innovation*, but also with *how problems are framed, which methods and data are used, whose needs are addressed and who benefits from the resulting knowledge and innovation outcomes*. For funders, this means embedding IGI across the funding cycle from programme design, call text, applicant guidance, reviewer selection, evaluation criteria, funding decisions to monitoring and learning. For researchers and innovators, it means considering gender and diversity dimensions from the earliest stages of problem definition through to dissemination, implementation and impact assessment (Hunt et al., 2022).

The shift towards IGI is demanding because it asks institutions and individuals to reconsider **what counts as relevance, quality and excellence in research and innovation**. Earlier gender equality interventions often concentrated on representation, careers and organisational procedures. These remain important. IGI, however, moves closer to the epistemic core of research and innovation: research questions, methods, classifications, user assumptions, design choices, evaluation criteria and impact claims. The closer equality policy comes to this core, the more it may unsettle established routines and professional identities.

Resistance is therefore not an exceptional disturbance in an otherwise linear implementation process. It is part of the process itself. Reviewers may state that gender and diversity dimensions are not relevant to a proposal. Applicants may treat IGI requirements as bureaucratic rather than scientific. Programme managers may support the principle but hesitate to allocate time, resources or accountability to implementation. Senior management may communicate general support for equality while leaving operational decisions unresolved. In some national contexts, gender equality is politically contested; in others, long-standing equality commitments generate complacency and the belief that the issue has already been solved.

This paper treats such reactions as more than obstacles. **Resistance can be read as a diagnostic signal.** It reveals *where IGI collides with disciplinary assumptions, where guidance is unclear, where capacity is insufficient, where procedures do not match policy ambition and where societal or organisational narratives undermine implementation*. It also helps to distinguish between opposition based on principle and hesitation rooted in uncertainty or lack of knowledge. This diagnostic reading does not romanticise resistance. Resistance can block, dilute or reverse equality work. Yet when it is named and analysed, it can help policy actors identify the infrastructures required to make change durable (Dvořáčková, 2025).

The paper builds on **three sources**. First, it draws on **comparative case-study work on policies** implemented by Vinnova, the Austrian Research Promotion Agency (FFG), the European Commission in Horizon 2020 and FONRID in Burkina Faso (Reidl & Beranek, 2025; Schiffbänker & Walker, 2025; Holzinger et al., 2025; Wienand, Araki & Schiffbänker, 2025).

Second, it builds on the **co-creation work of the INSPIRE RFO Community of Practice**, including Support Package 5 on Inclusive Gendered Innovation Policies (Walker et al., 2025) and Open Training Unit 7: Inclusive Gendered Innovation Policy Toolkit (Walker et al., n.d.). Third, it reflects the **workshop** “Tackling Resistance and Sustaining Change: Exploring Pathways to Inclusive Gendered Innovation”, held during the INSPIRE Knowledge Exchange Event in Kraków in October 2025.

The working paper is written for people who design, implement, evaluate or support equality policies in research and innovation settings. Its main **audience** includes *research funders, research performing organisations, equality practitioners, programme managers, reviewers, researchers, innovation actors and policymakers*. Its **purpose** is both practical and analytical: to make resistance visible, to interpret what it reveals, and to identify strategies for transforming resistance into a source of learning and sustained change.

This Working Paper is structured into eight **sections**. Following this introduction, the second section clarifies why resistance emerges when gender, sex and diversity dimensions are expected to shape research and innovation content. The third and fourth sections present the insights that emerged in the RFO Community of Practice and in the KEE4 workshop. The fifth section systematises the main forms and sources of resistance and reads them through a diagnostic lens to understand the underlying reasons. The sixth section develops strategies and pathways for research funders and research organisations, the seventh draws out implications for policy, and the eighth offers concluding reflections and questions for further work.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Resistance is a natural and revealing part of transformative change.
- Analysing resistance helps to identify gaps in communication, capacity and institutional design.
- Research Funding Organisations both encounter resistance and shape the conditions that can reduce it.
- Constructive engagement is essential to embed Inclusive Gendered Innovation across research systems.

2. Setting the stage of the knowledge exchange

2.1 Why resistance becomes central when policy moves to research content

Moving from formal commitments to inclusive practice requires gender equality policies in research and innovation to extend beyond representation and organisational structures to research and innovation content and outcomes. This shift is not merely procedural: it changes the object of equality policy. **IGI** asks not only *who participates*, but also *how knowledge is produced, which assumptions guide innovation, and whether outputs are relevant, useful and safe for diverse users and affected communities*.

The comparative INSPIRE case studies show that this shift creates specific **implementation challenges**. Beneficiaries, and especially private-sector research and innovation actors, often have limited awareness of what IGI entails and may conflate it with the representation of women in project teams. RFO staff and reviewers may also lack the competences required to advise applicants or to assess proposals consistently. Across funding schemes, good practice

examples, evidence of impact, role-specific guidance and reviewer preparation were identified as critical conditions for effective implementation (Karaulova et al., 2025; Schiffbänker et al., 2025).

The case studies illustrate **different policy formats** rather than a single preferred model. Vinnova and FFG used dedicated schemes that enabled applicants, reviewers and programme staff to learn across repeated calls. Horizon 2020 mainstreamed gender dimensions through a programme-wide flag, but implementation was uneven where capacity-building lagged behind formal requirements. FONRID linked inclusion to local socio-economic priorities. Across these cases, IGI was more robust when formal expectations were matched by support, assessment routines and opportunities for learning.

Resistance becomes central in this context because it marks the places where the system is not yet able or willing to carry the new expectation. The issue is not only whether actors agree with gender equality in general. Many do. The more difficult question is whether they are prepared to integrate gender, sex and diversity analysis into the practical decisions that shape research and innovation content. It is here that resistance becomes most visible and most informative.

For the purposes of this paper, **resistance** is understood broadly as the *set of reactions, practices and conditions that slow, dilute, displace or block the meaningful integration of IGI*. It includes explicit opposition, but also more indirect forms: silence, delay, superficial compliance, claims of irrelevance, appeals to a lack of expertise, procedural ambiguity, shifting responsibility, or the reframing of gender and diversity as peripheral to quality. Resistance is thus not located only in individuals. It is distributed across actor groups, organisational routines, evaluation systems and wider political contexts.

2.2 A diagnostic approach to resistance

This paper does not treat resistance as an analytical pass or fail. It proposes instead a diagnostic approach that asks four iterative questions:

- **Mapping:** Where does resistance appear, through which actors, procedures and narratives, and with which effects?
- **Systematising:** How do different forms of resistance relate to each other across individual, organisational and societal levels?
- **Theorising:** Which underlying mechanisms are exposed by resistance?
- **Strategising:** Which forms of communication, capacity-building, policy design, assessment and monitoring can transform resistance into learning and sustained change?

This approach moves the discussion away from the question of how to defeat resistance once and for all. Resistance will not disappear from transformative equality work. The more relevant question is *how research and innovation systems can develop the capacity to recognise, interpret and work with it*.

2.3 Evidence and the two-step Kraków process

The evidence base combines two linked activities held in Kraków in October 2025. An RFO Community of Practice meeting elicited funder-specific experiences and informed the subsequent KEE4 workshop, where participatory exercises and breakout discussions were used to identify manifestations of resistance and possible responses.

The analysis draws primarily on workshop outputs, including word associations, group notes and facilitator reflections, and situates them alongside insights from the Community of Practice and comparative case studies. These materials provide practice-based qualitative evidence that supports analytical rather than statistical generalisation by highlighting recurring mechanisms, actor positions and implementation tensions across contexts. The resulting patterns should therefore be read as grounded indications of how resistance arises and what it may reveal, rather than as a representative or exhaustive typology.

3. Insights from the RFO Community of Practice

The RFO Community of Practice provides a space in which funding organisations can reflect collectively on how to translate Inclusive Gendered Innovation into operational reality. Through regular meetings, shared exercises and peer exchange, members identify the barriers, opportunities and learning needs that shape their institutional contexts. Several insights can be derived from our meetings:

A first insight concerns the **varied forms that resistance** takes within funding organisations. Some forms are structural, embedded in procedures, hierarchies and evaluation systems that privilege conventional understandings of excellence. Others are cultural, linked to habits of thought, institutional language and the everyday routines of research policy. Participants noted that these forms often coexist and reinforce one another. Addressing them therefore requires both procedural reform and cultural reflection.

A second insight relates to **internal capacity-building**. Many RFOs face a gap between formal commitments to equality and the skills or resources needed to act on them. Staff and reviewers may hesitate to engage with IGI criteria because they lack field-specific examples, guidance or evidence of added value. This creates a cycle in which uncertainty fuels avoidance. Strengthening internal knowledge bases, creating safe learning spaces and offering practical tools were identified as essential steps in breaking that cycle.

The CoP discussions also emphasised **leadership and communication**. When leadership signals clear support for inclusive innovation, resistance tends to become more open and therefore more manageable. When messages are mixed or inconsistent, resistance often takes the form of quiet disengagement. Participants highlighted the need for leaders to connect IGI to broader organisational missions and to communicate its relevance in terms of research quality, societal impact and institutional credibility.

Another recurrent theme was **context sensitivity**. RFOs operate within diverse political, cultural and policy environments, and what counts as legitimate action in one setting may be contested in another. The CoP identified the value of flexible strategies that can adapt to different national contexts while maintaining shared principles. Collaboration across organisations was viewed as a means to reinforce legitimacy, share evidence and reduce the isolation that equality practitioners sometimes experience.

Finally, the CoP reflected on the **productive role of resistance** itself. Moments of hesitation or disagreement were understood as opportunities to clarify concepts, refine messages and build stronger coalitions. By treating resistance as feedback rather than only as opposition, RFOs can better understand how their actions are perceived and adjust their approaches accordingly.

4. Insights from the Knowledge Exchange Event

4.1 Purpose and participants

The KEE4 workshop “**Tackling Resistance and Sustaining Change: Exploring Pathways to Inclusive Gendered Innovation**” was organised to create an open, participatory space in which members of the INSPIRE Communities of Practice and Knowledge and Support Hubs, together with other KEE participants, could share experiences and deepen their understanding of resistance as an element of institutional change (INSPIRE, 2025c).

The session brought together approximately **fifteen participants** from **different organisational and national contexts**, including research funding bodies, universities, policy actors and researchers in various roles. This diversity mattered because resistance to gender equality and to IGI does not take one single form across Europe and beyond. It is shaped by institutional histories, cultural narratives, political environments and the specific functions that different actors perform in the research and innovation system. The workshop therefore worked with a dual perspective: RFOs as enablers who set expectations, guide applicants and structure evaluation processes, and researchers or innovators as those expected to integrate IGI into research design, methods, project routines and outputs.

The aim was to facilitate reflective and comparative dialogue. By exchanging perspectives across contexts, participants could see that resistance is not an individual or isolated phenomenon but part of broader systemic dynamics that shape how equality policies are received and implemented. Discussing concrete experiences allowed participants to articulate challenges that are often felt in isolation yet widely shared across organisations.

GUIDING QUESTIONS USED IN THE WORKSHOP

- What kinds of resistance do you encounter most often in your role as a funder, researcher or innovator?
- How can we reframe IGI, both in funding procedures and in day-to-day research and innovation practices, so that it is seen as part of research excellence rather than as an additional burden?
- Which small but concrete steps can help to build momentum and reduce resistance in your organisation or project team?
- What role can allies, networks or leadership play in sustaining long-term change?
- How can we share and learn from experiences of resistance, including successes and failures, in order to build collective strategies?

4.2 Workshop design: from association to strategy

The workshop began with a word-association exercise. Participants wrote one word that they associated with resistance and placed it in front of the group, forming a collective word cloud. The resulting collection included leadership, alliances and networks, barriers, trigger, anger, ignorance, power, scepticism, avoidance, resources, biases, cultural context, excellence, lack of knowledge, false feminism, Nordic exceptionalism and non-action because the issue is perceived as already fixed. The exercise revealed both the emotional intensity and the analytical range of participants' experiences. Resistance is not encountered only as an abstract policy problem; it is felt as frustration, fatigue and conflict, and it is at the same time recognised as a clue to where institutional cultures and societal narratives shape implementation.

Participants then mapped resistance through three questions:

- Where is resistance encountered?
- How does it become visible?
- What appears to drive it?

The mapping helped to distinguish between individual, organisational and societal levels of resistance and revealed common patterns across contexts. It also encouraged participants to move from anecdotal experience to collective understanding. As one group noted, resistance is “**everywhere and nowhere at once**”: it appears in small acts of hesitation, silence or procedural delay rather than in open opposition.

The third step moved **from observation to response**. Building on the mapped examples, each group discussed what could help them to respond constructively to the forms of resistance they had identified. Participants proposed strengthening internal communication, linking equality goals to institutional missions, involving leadership early, building alliances across departments and institutions, using evidence to demonstrate the benefits of IGI for research quality and innovation outcomes, and making IGI knowledge more accessible through tools, templates and training. Several participants emphasised the importance of emotional intelligence and patience, noting that resistance cannot be overcome through compliance measures alone.

The workshop closed with a plenary reflection in which each group shared its findings and the facilitators summarised recurring themes. Participants agreed that resistance operates on multiple levels and often reflects the gap between formal commitments and practical realities. They also observed that discussing resistance collectively reduced its sense of isolation and stigma. What had initially seemed like individual barriers began to appear as signals of where further engagement, clarity and support were needed.

4.3 Observed forms and sources of resistance

The breakout discussions revealed a nuanced picture of **how resistance to IGI appears in practice**. Participants agreed that resistance is rarely an isolated act of opposition and that it tends to emerge in many small and interrelated ways, shaped by personal beliefs, organisational structures and wider societal contexts. Talking about concrete experiences helped to make visible what often remains implicit or unspoken.

At the **individual level**, participants described resistance rooted in *uncertainty, insecurity and emotional fatigue*. Researchers, reviewers and programme managers may hesitate to engage with gender or diversity issues because they feel that they lack the expertise to do so confidently. This uncertainty easily turns into avoidance, expressed through statements such as “*gender is not relevant here*” or “*I do not know enough to assess this properly*”. Several participants recognised this as a recurring pattern that they called *strategic incompetence*: the tendency to use a lack of knowledge as a reason for inaction. In some cases this reflects genuine discomfort; in others it functions as a convenient way to defer responsibility. Emotional responses featured strongly in the discussions. Frustration and defensiveness often accompany equality initiatives that are perceived as externally imposed or politically sensitive, and several participants described a sense of gender fatigue, an exhaustion produced by constant demands for change. Such emotions are rarely voiced openly but can slow down or quietly derail progress.

Participants also emphasised that resistance arises when opinion is mistaken for expertise. Discussions about gender and equality are frequently treated as matters of personal belief

rather than of professional knowledge, which leads to dismissive attitudes towards research evidence or expert guidance. The remark that “*we all have a gender*” was discussed as a signal of this problem: having a gender does not mean having gender expertise. When everyone is treated as equally qualified to judge gender-related issues, research-based knowledge and specialist expertise are easily marginalised, and the misconception that equality work lacks rigour is reinforced.

Reviewers were discussed as a particularly important site of resistance, because they translate policy requirements into funding decisions. Participants reported that reviewers may state that assessing the gender dimension is difficult or outside their competence. They may also conflate IGI with gender balance in teams rather than understanding it as the integration of sex, gender and diversity dimensions into research and innovation content. Some participants interpreted this as fear of being wrong, fear of appearing political, or reluctance to admit a competence gap. Where reviewers are not prepared, criteria are vague and panel chairs do not ensure that IGI is discussed, assessment becomes inconsistent and applicants receive little useful feedback, which in turn weakens future applications. Resistance in review therefore tends to reproduce itself through the evaluation system.

Within organisations, resistance was described as embedded in structures and cultures that prioritise continuity over reflection. Equality work is often treated as an administrative add-on rather than as part of research excellence and innovation quality. Even where formal commitments exist, implementation may remain inconsistent because accountability is unclear, incentives are weak or leadership is silent. Funding templates, review forms, evaluation criteria, budget structures and workload models may reproduce traditional understandings of quality and impact that leave little room for IGI considerations. Informal cultures reinforce this further: jokes, sceptical remarks or the absence of recognition for equality work communicate that engagement is not valued.

Beyond institutions, participants highlighted how **wider political and cultural contexts** shape the space for action. In several countries, anti-gender narratives and public scepticism have made organisations more cautious in their language, and staff may downplay gender and diversity dimensions or frame them in purely technical terms in order to avoid controversy. In other settings, a different form of resistance was observed: complacency born of perceived success. Where gender equality has been on the agenda for decades, the belief that the problem has already been solved discourages continued effort. Both dynamics, open backlash and quiet fatigue, limit the scope for innovation that takes the diverse needs and realities of societal groups seriously.

The workshop also showed that resistance can arise from **tensions among equality agendas**. Participants noted that gender and other diversity dimensions are sometimes played out against each other, as if attention to one dimension necessarily weakened another. This can create false choices and may feed defensive narratives. An IGI perspective requires a more integrated approach in which gender remains analytically important but is considered in relation to intersecting dimensions of inequality and to situated user needs (Crenshaw, 1989; Nielsen et al., 2025).

Taken together, the mapped examples can be grouped into **four clusters, presented in Table 1**. The clusters are analytical rather than exclusive: in practice they overlap, and the same statement may belong to more than one of them.

Table 1. Clusters of resistance identified in the Kraków workshop

Cluster of resistance	Typical manifestations reported by participants	Core dynamic
Cognitive and perceptual <i>Knowledge gaps, misunderstanding and denial of expertise</i>	Lack of awareness and knowledge; misunderstanding of what gendered innovation means; “we all have gender” as a false equivalence; opinion counted as expertise; scepticism; implicit or unconscious bias; misinterpretation; “false feminism” in the sense of “we already do this”.	Low gender knowledge and misconceptions about its relevance lead to trivialisation or distortion of the concept.
Emotional and defensive <i>Fear, discomfort and perceived threat to identity or power</i>	Fear of being wrong or of political exposure; fear of losing power or legitimacy; strategic incompetence in the sense of performing not to know; defensiveness, anger and frustration; gender fatigue expressed as “not this again”; non-action out of fear or paralysis.	Emotional responses protect existing comfort zones and professional status; resistance is often expressed through avoidance or subtle hostility.
Cultural and institutional <i>Norms, structures and path dependencies in organisations and societies</i>	Institutional culture and inertia; status quo orientation; lack of incentives and resources; poor communication; “Nordic exceptionalism” and the perception of being already advanced; cultural backlash and patriarchal norms; stereotypes; leadership experienced as part of the problem.	Organisational inertia and dominant norms reproduce gender blindness; change agents lack systemic support and incentives.
Structural and procedural <i>Systems, evaluation processes and governance logics</i>	Formal and informal power structures; reviewer resistance expressed as criteria being “harder” or “difficult to assess”; lack of gender expertise in review and evaluation; bias in criteria and evaluation mechanisms; thin evidence base; fragmented governance without clear responsibility; competing priorities between gender and other diversity dimensions.	Structural settings and procedures reinforce bias through standards, resource allocation and governance fragmentation.

4.4 Patterns emerging from the discussion

Across contexts, five recurring patterns showed how systems respond when IGI challenges established routines:

- 1. Layered and interconnected:** Individual hesitation is reinforced by organisational ambiguity and societal narratives. Unclear evaluation procedures and public claims that equality is irrelevant can turn uncertainty into a self-sustaining pattern.
- 2. Subtle and persistent:** Silence, delay, agreement without follow-up and shallow compliance allow systems to absorb requirements without changing. This resistance by inertia is difficult to detect because it resembles cooperation.
- 3. Knowledge gap or bad faith:** Some actors need examples and time; others use uncertainty to delay change. A diagnostic response combines safe opportunities to learn with clear criteria, accountability and consequences for persistent non-implementation.
- 4. Leadership and communication:** Framing IGI as integral to quality, societal relevance and credibility can shift rejection towards curiosity. Silence or inconsistency instead normalises disengagement.
- 5. Emotional dimension:** Fear, loss, frustration and fatigue can threaten professional identity and intensify defensiveness. Acknowledging discomfort does not lower expectations; it

creates conditions for engagement. As one participant put it, resistance is “*not a wall but a mirror*” of the transformation still required.

5. Reading resistance diagnostically

The Kraków discussions support a diagnostic reading of resistance. Resistance is not one thing and should not be collapsed into a general attitude problem. It is distributed across actor groups and appears differently depending on where it sits in the research ecosystem system. Reading resistance diagnostically means asking what it exposes: unclear terminology, missing examples, weak reviewer preparation, insufficient leadership, under-resourced equality expertise or institutional routines that do not yet support IGI. This shifts the focus from blaming individuals to identifying the implementation conditions that are missing, and it makes clear that the response must be organisational and procedural as well as communicative.

Table 2 relates recurrent forms of resistance to the signals through which they become visible, to what they may reveal and to possible constructive responses. Whereas Table 1 documents how resistance was described by participants in Kraków, Table 2 serves as a repertoire for responding to it. Table 3 then locates resistance across the actor groups involved in the funding cycle.

Table 2. Forms of resistance and constructive responses

Form of resistance	Typical signal	What it may reveal	Constructive response
Rational	“Where is the evidence?” “Has this been proven?”	Need for credibility, field-specific examples and problem-specific justification.	Use case studies, impact evidence and examples from comparable fields.
Practical	“We are already doing too much.” “There is no time or budget.”	Capacity constraints, overload or unclear benefits.	Lower the barrier with templates, guidance, and funded support.
Cultural	“This is not how we do things here.” “That will not fit our system.”	Attachment to established norms, professional identity or disciplinary traditions.	Connect IGI to existing values, quality standards and institutional missions.
Emotional	“This feels too political.” Frustration, defensiveness or withdrawal.	Anxiety about competence, status, blame or loss of control.	Create safe spaces for questions, acknowledge discomfort and avoid personalised blame.
Conceptual	“I do not see what this has to do with our work.”	Different models of gender, diversity, innovation or relevance.	Clarify terms, distinguish representation from content and provide field-specific examples.
Political or strategic	“We support this, but not now.” Delay, dilution or redirection.	Power dynamics, risk avoidance or competing agendas.	Secure leadership accountability, set timelines and link IGI to formal procedures.
Invisible or passive	Agreement without follow-up; symbolic compliance without change.	Low ownership, fatigue or symbolic implementation.	Use monitoring, feedback loops and explicit responsibilities.

Table 3. Resistance across actor groups

Location of resistance	Typical manifestations	Likely sources	Promising entry points
Applicants and beneficiaries	Checkbox responses; conflation of IGI with gender balance; claims that gender is irrelevant; late-stage additions without analytical depth.	Conceptual uncertainty, fear of workload, lack of examples, disciplinary habits and market-oriented time pressure.	Early guidance, field-specific examples, coaching, templates, peer learning and requirements for relevant gender or SSH expertise.
Reviewers and panels	Inconsistent scoring; reluctance to assess IGI; claims of insufficient expertise; treating opinion as equivalent to gender knowledge.	Reviewer competence gaps, fear of being wrong, limited briefing and weak accountability for applying criteria.	Mandatory briefing, gender-competent reviewer pools, panel observers, explicit IGI feedback to applicants and peer learning among reviewers.
RFO staff and programme managers	Cautious communication; unclear translation of policy targets; limited follow-up; weak integration into call documents and monitoring.	Time constraints, uneven internal capacity, accountability pressure and uncertainty about how to operationalise IGI.	Role-specific capacity-building, internal checklists, communities of practice, clear responsibilities and leadership backing.
Leadership and organisational culture	General support without resources; silence; inconsistency; equality work treated as optional or peripheral.	Competing priorities, risk avoidance and limited understanding of IGI as a quality and impact issue.	Visible commitment, integration into strategy and performance systems, incentives and recognition for implementation work.
Societal and national context	Anti-gender backlash; public scepticism; political caution; complacency where equality is perceived as already achieved.	Polarised public debates, national histories, cultural narratives and policy fatigue.	Context-sensitive framing, alliances, evidence-based communication, shared standards and transnational support networks.

5.1 Diagnostic misalignments

Four recurrent misalignments help explain implementation gaps:

- 1. Policy ambition exceeds operational clarity.** Actors are asked to integrate IGI without clear definitions, examples or criteria.
- 2. Evaluation criteria exceed reviewer competence.** Calls require IGI assessment without equipping reviewers to conduct it.
- 3. Innovation rhetoric exceeds innovation routines.** Speed, technical performance, technology-readiness and market-fit logics crowd out reflection on users, needs and impacts.
- 4. Equality commitments exceed institutional capacity.** Implementation depends on work that remains invisible, under-recognised and under-resourced.

These misalignments explain why resistance often persists even in organisations that formally support equality. The problem is not always hostility. It is frequently the absence of the organisational conditions needed to translate commitments into practice. The more IGI is

expected to influence assessment and implementation, the more these support infrastructures matter (European Commission, 2025).

6. Strategies and pathways to address resistance

The collective reflections from the RFO Community of Practice and the Knowledge Exchange Event make clear that resistance cannot be removed by decree. It must be recognised, understood and worked with over time. Sustainable change requires both relational and structural approaches: dialogue, trust and empathy on the one hand, and criteria, accountability, resources and monitoring on the other. The pathways set out below follow the main implementation challenges identified in the discussions and in the comparative INSPIRE evidence.

6.1 Treat resistance as implementation data

Treat recurrent claims of irrelevance, reviewer uncertainty, weak feedback and delays as implementation data. Recording where they occur can reveal unclear guidance, missing capacity or misaligned procedures, and should inform training, reviewer preparation and policy redesign. Structured feedback loops, with clear responsibilities, turn obstruction into evidence for improvement.

6.2 Clarify expectations and make IGI assessable

Call documents, guidance and evaluation forms should define what IGI requires and how it will be assessed. Criteria need to distinguish justified non-relevance, superficial mention and substantive integration. Applicants and reviewers should see how IGI connects to research questions, design, sampling, user analysis, interpretation, innovation development, dissemination and impact. Assessment should test methodological credibility, not mere mention.

6.3 Build role-specific capacity and confidence

Support must match actors' tasks. Applicants need early examples, templates and expertise; reviewers need briefings, criteria, calibration and feedback; programme managers need capacity to translate policy into calls and panels. Training should be role-specific, iterative and grounded in field-specific cases. Peer learning and mentoring can build confidence, especially where gender expertise is seen as external to the field.

6.4 Establish gender-competent review infrastructures

Reviewer preparation is implementation infrastructure. RFOs should combine briefings, gender-competent reviewer pools, step-by-step tools, panel support and explicit feedback to applicants. Gender and intersectionality expertise must be treated as professional competence, while all reviewers remain responsible for applying IGI criteria. Peer calibration can normalise consistent assessment and reveal where calls, panels or consortia require additional expertise.

6.5 Use evidence, examples and dedicated spaces

Concrete examples can reduce scepticism by showing how IGI changes questions, methods, user analysis, design, outcomes or impact. Examples should include societal and economic value where evidence permits. Because evidence requires prior investment, dedicated calls,

pilots and learning spaces remain important: they develop expertise, examples and reviewer competence that support later mainstreaming. Retaining such spaces also helps address emerging domains, including artificial intelligence, health technologies and sustainability transitions.

6.6 Strengthen leadership commitment and communication

Leaders should frame IGI as part of research quality, innovation relevance and institutional credibility, and embed it in strategy, programme design, evaluation and staff development. Effective reasoning is context-sensitive—quality, societal relevance, legal alignment, responsible innovation, market fit, safety or reputation may be salient—but should not depoliticise IGI. Gender and diversity analysis must remain able to question power, inclusion and the distribution of benefits and harms.

6.7 Create spaces for conversation and build alliances

Structured reflection, Communities of Practice, cross-departmental groups and peer forums let actors discuss uncertainty without personalising blame. Alliances across departments, institutions, disciplines and countries reduce isolation, pool evidence and strengthen legitimacy. Shared practices and vocabulary also make clear that IGI is a system-wide responsibility, not the task of a small group of advocates.

6.8 Recognise and resource the work of addressing resistance

Addressing resistance involves preparation, emotional work, facilitation, evidence, follow-up and alliance-building. Organisations should recognise this labour in roles, workloads, budgets and professional development, and distribute it beyond equality officers or individual champions. Repeated learning and documentation are necessary; a single workshop or guidance document is insufficient.

Table 4. Addressing resistance across the funding cycle

Funding-cycle phase	Resistance risk	Implementation response
Pre-call phase	Policy ambition remains abstract; RFO staff are uncertain how to communicate or operationalise IGI.	Build internal IGI capacity; decide on policy format (e.g. dedicated calls); develop field-sensitive terminology; define criteria and reviewer competence requirements.
Call design	IGI appears as a generic add-on or is confused with representation targets.	Use clear definitions; distinguish team composition from research content; specify what applicants should address and how assessment will work.
Applicant support	Applicants claim irrelevance, lack examples or treat IGI as late-stage compliance.	Provide guidance, FAQs, examples, coaching, peer learning and access to gender or SSH expertise before submission; promote interdisciplinary research projects.
Reviewer selection and briefing	Reviewers lack competence or confidence and assessment becomes inconsistent.	Select gender-competent reviewers; brief all reviewers; support panel learning; make panel chairs accountable for IGI discussions.

Funding-cycle phase	Resistance risk	Implementation response
Assessment and decision-making	IGI is mentioned but not substantively evaluated; applicants receive little feedback.	Ask reviewers to comment explicitly on the quality of IGI integration; provide feedback to applicants; monitor scoring patterns and panel deliberations.
Monitoring and reporting	Implementation is reduced to formal reporting; learning is not captured.	Use qualitative and quantitative indicators; collect evidence on changes in methods, outputs and impacts; document recurring resistances.
Evaluation and redesign	Mainstreaming dilutes earlier learning; successful examples are not used.	Analyse outcomes, share good practices, maintain dedicated learning spaces and update criteria, guidance and training.

7. Policy implications

The analysis of resistance to IGI shows that advancing equality in research and innovation requires structural reform as well as cultural change. Resistance is not only a challenge for individual organisations; it is shaped by governance frameworks, funding mechanisms, assessment routines and societal narratives. The implications set out below therefore address the wider policy environment in which funders and research organisations operate, and they complement the operational pathways described in the previous section.

1. Treat resistance as a question of policy design rather than of individual attitude. Policy frameworks should acknowledge that resistance accompanies transformative change and should use it as feedback for redesign. Framing resistance as a source of information shifts attention from compliance to learning. At the same time, resistance can block or dilute equality work, so recognition must be paired with clear expectations, responsibilities and accountability.

2. Align definitions and expectations across the policy mix. Where national and European programmes define, request and assess IGI in different ways, applicants and reviewers receive contradictory signals, and symbolic compliance becomes the path of least resistance. Aligning terminology, criteria and reporting expectations across funding instruments, while leaving room for context-specific implementation, reduces ambiguity and makes IGI easier to operationalise. Communicating clearly that gender balance in teams and IGI in research or innovation content are related but not identical is a central part of this alignment.

3. Fund the implementation infrastructure, not only the requirement. Capacity-building, reviewer preparation, applicant support, learning spaces and monitoring all require dedicated budget lines. Policy initiatives that introduce IGI requirements without resourcing the conditions for meeting them tend to produce formal compliance rather than substantive change.

4. Support cross-institutional dialogue and collaboration. Resistance isolates both institutional actors and researchers who are expected to integrate IGI without adequate time, resources or peer support. Sustained opportunities for exchange between funding organisations, universities, research teams and policy bodies help to normalise uncertainty, to surface practical constraints and to enable collective problem-solving. Dedicated time for participation, resourced collaborative spaces, co-creation workshops and peer learning networks allow researchers to build IGI knowledge as part of their everyday work rather than as an additional burden. Transnational alliances and shared standards additionally support actors in contexts where equality policy is contested.

5. Link equality objectives to broader research policy goals. Equality and IGI should not be treated as standalone agendas. Connecting them to priorities such as research excellence, innovation impact, mission-oriented policy and open science helps to secure political and institutional buy-in. This integrated framing demonstrates that inclusivity enhances quality, creativity and societal relevance rather than competing with them.

6. Monitor implementation and resistance together. Monitoring should capture not only outputs but also how IGI is interpreted, assessed and implemented. Recurrent claims of irrelevance, reviewer inconsistency, symbolic compliance or a lack of follow-up should be documented and used to improve guidance, criteria, training and policy design. Combining quantitative and qualitative indicators and asking beneficiaries to report on societal and economic impacts where appropriate, turns monitoring into a mechanism of policy learning.

Taken together, these implications suggest that addressing resistance is less a matter of persuasion than of system design. Policies that make equality integral to funding, evaluation and leadership practice create the conditions in which resistance can be acknowledged, analysed and gradually transformed. In this way, resistance itself becomes a driver of policy learning and institutional growth.

8. Concluding reflections and emerging questions

Evidence from the RFO CoP and KEE4 shows that **resistance is an integral part of transformation processes** that seek to change not only who participates in research and innovation, but also how knowledge is produced, evaluated and used. Resistance becomes particularly visible when equality policy moves into the content of research and innovation, because this move unsettles assumptions about expertise, relevance, excellence and impact. Understanding resistance therefore means understanding how systems learn, adapt or defend themselves against change.

This working paper has argued that **resistance is multi-actor** and often indirect. It appears through applicants, reviewers, programme managers, leaders and wider political contexts, and it takes the form of claims of irrelevance, lack of knowledge, symbolic compliance, procedural inertia, strategic delay, emotional fatigue and societal backlash to gender equality. These forms are not isolated. They reinforce each other when procedures are unclear, when reviewer competence is weak, when leadership is silent and when implementation work is under-resourced.

A **diagnostic approach** changes the policy conversation. Instead of asking only how to persuade reluctant individuals, it asks which institutional conditions are missing:

- Are criteria clear enough?
- Are reviewers prepared?
- Are applicants supported before submission?
- Are programme staff trained?
- Are leaders accountable?
- Are good examples available?
- Are monitoring systems designed to capture learning?
- Are equality practitioners recognised for the work of sustaining change?

These questions move the focus from individual blame to system design.

At the same time, **resistance should not be normalised to the point of complacency**. Some resistance reflects fear, uncertainty or a lack of capacity; other forms reflect strategic opposition or the defence of existing power relations. **Constructive engagement therefore requires judgement**. Dialogue, empathy and learning matter, but they must be accompanied by clear standards, accountability and resourcing. Quick fixes and one-off interventions rarely work.

The Communities of Practice model is particularly valuable because it creates collective capacity to interpret resistance. By sharing experiences across organisations and national contexts, practitioners can recognise recurring patterns, test communication strategies, exchange examples and reduce isolation. This **collective dimension is essential**, because IGI cannot be sustained by individual champions alone. It requires an ecosystem of funders, research organisations, reviewers, researchers, policymakers and experts able to hold the policy ambition together under conditions of overload, simplification and backlash.

Several questions remain open for further work:

- *How can RFOs define minimum standards for IGI across fields?*
- *What counts as sufficient gender, intersectionality or IGI competence for reviewers and panel members?*
- *How can funders assess the longer-term societal and economic impacts of IGI projects without overburdening beneficiaries?*
- *How can national RFOs, European institutions and umbrella organisations align standards while still allowing context-specific implementation?*
- *How can organisations protect and resource equality expertise in contexts of political backlash or institutional fatigue?*

Looking ahead, the central challenge is not to eliminate resistance but to develop the capacity to work with it without allowing it to dilute the ambition of IGI. When resistance is recognised early, interpreted carefully and connected to institutional learning, it can become a catalyst for more robust policy design and more sustainable change. In this sense, resistance is not the opposite of transformation. It is one of the places where transformation becomes visible.

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