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# ATHENA Newsletter

## A journey of change: reflecting on five years of gender equality in action

Dear ATHENA community,

After five inspiring years, the ATHENA project proudly celebrates its success in not only implementing Gender Equality Plans across partner institutions, but also in sparking a true transformation in mindsets and institutional cultures.

This achievement marks a major step forward—yet the journey continues, especially in sustaining these gains within smaller, younger, and more remote “ATHENA-type” organisations, and in deepening our commitment to gender and diversity through an intersectional approach.



**Michelle Perello**

*ATHENA Project Coordinator*



# Project Overview

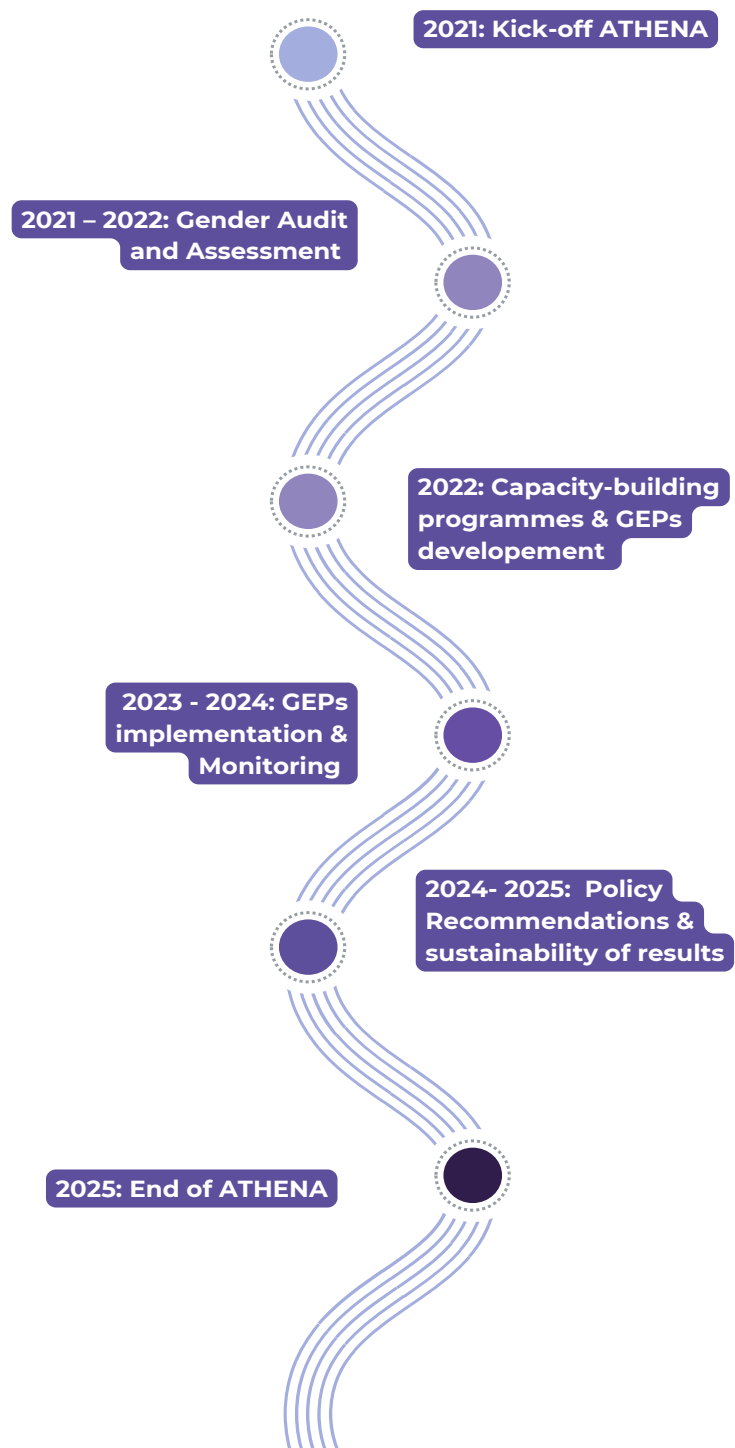
## The ATHENA project mission: Advancing Gender Equality in Research

ATHENA is a collaborative project aimed at developing, implementing and monitoring Gender Equality Plans to unlock research potential in European Research Performing Organisations (RPOs) and Research Funding Organisations (RFOs).

The ATHENA was committed to striving towards gender equality, mitigating barriers to the recruitment, retention, and career progression of female researchers, and addressing gender imbalances in decision-making processes

### What we've achieved:

- Comprehensive gender audit at organisational and national levels in 8 countries
- Capacity building programme to drive systemic institutional change within partners institutions
- Development and implementation of 8 GEPs
- Replication actions for exploitation of project results, including local workshops, one EURAXESS webinar, video interviews, policy briefs and high-level policy events
- Evidence-based policy recommendations to foster gender equality strategies for research excellence and in smaller, younger or remote performing organisations.



# Key Results & Achievements

## What We've Achieved: From GEPs to Institutional Transformation

The Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) implemented by ATHENA partners were developed using a shared set of diversity and inclusion standards. These standards were informed by gender audits, capacity-building activities, and best practices across Europe, and align with Horizon Europe requirements. Each plan promotes structural change in areas such as work-life balance, leadership access, inclusive recruitment, and gender-sensitive research. While guided by common principles, each institution tailored its GEP to local challenges and priorities.

ATHENA's GEPs address the six content areas recommended by the European Commission:

- Ensuring work-life balance for all staff.
- Equal access to leadership and transparent promotion mechanisms.
- Inclusive, bias-free recruitment processes.
- Career development support through mentoring, training, and funding access.
- Integration of gender perspectives into research and teaching.
- Mechanisms to prevent and respond to discrimination and harassment.

**Check the GENDER  
EQUALITY PLANS**



**10 partners**

6 RFOs & 2 RFOs



**8 EU Countries**

Spain, Portugal, Slovenia, Poland, Romania, Italy, Slovakia & Bulgaria



**1.8 M€**

Funded by Horizon 2020 Programme



**54 Months**

February 2021 to July 2025



**8 Gender Equality Plans**



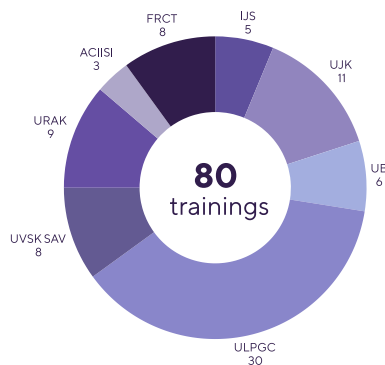
**8 Work Packages**

## Real institutional systemic transformations

When six RPOs and two RFOs across Europe committed to implementing Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) through the ATHENA project, they weren't just checking a box. They were laying the foundation for measurable, institutional change.

**Two years later, the data is in —** and the results tell a compelling story of progress and impact for real institutional transformation.





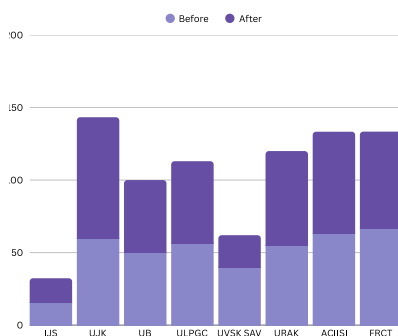
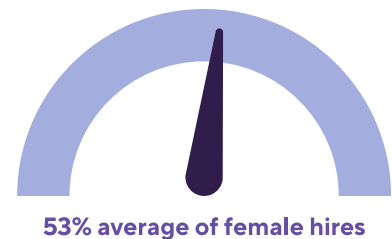
## Training for Equality: Over 80 Sessions Delivered

Across the board, institutions recognised that change begins with awareness. More than 80 training sessions on gender equality were delivered, from foundational workshops to leadership-specific modules. In Spain, the **University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (ULPGC)** led the charge with 30 sessions — a robust investment in capacity-building. Other partners like **UVSK SAV (Slovakia)**, **UB (Romania)**, and **IJS (Slovenia)** built their training portfolios from scratch, while **FRCT (Azores)** and **ACIISI (Canary Islands)** hosted their first gender-related sessions for staff.

## Opening the Doors to Women in Research

The push for gender-balanced recruitment has yielded clear results. In Poland, the **Jan Kochanowski University (UJK)** made a bold leap, increasing the percentage of women hired for research roles from **42.3% to 62.4%**. **URAK (Bulgaria)** also improved significantly, reaching **66.7%**. In Slovenia, **IJS** boosted its recruitment of women from **36.8% to 40.6%**, showing slow but steady progress in a traditionally male-dominated field.

Even funders showed change: **FRCT in the Azores** achieved gender balance in new hires, with women making up **over 51%** of recent recruits.



## Breaking the Glass Ceiling: More Women at the Top

Leadership representation was another area where ATHENA partners made headway. At **UJK**, the number of women in rectors' leadership roles jumped from **60% to over 83%** — one of the highest rates in the network. **UB** and **URAK** also saw improvements in middle and upper management structures, while **ACIISI** maintained a strong female presence across strategic departments. For **IJS**, the shift was more gradual, but even a modest increase in women participating on boards signalled movement in the right direction.

## Gender-Based Violence: Prevention Measures Multiply

Tackling gender-based violence was a shared priority — and a sensitive one. Yet across institutions, courage met commitment: **over 47 new measures** were introduced to prevent and respond to violence and harassment, from internal acts, monitoring tools and reporting channels.

**ULPGC** now counts **19 active measures**, while **UJK** implemented **10** for the first time. RPOs like **URAK** and **UB** strengthened policies and protocols, and **RFOs** joined the effort: **FRCT** went from zero to four concrete actions, and **ACIISI** doubled its initiatives.



**100+**  
gender modules



**80+**  
trainings



**47**  
gender violence  
measures

## Gender Modules in Curricula: Embedding Equality in Academia

Perhaps the most striking long-term transformation came through education. Over **100 gender-focused modules** were introduced into research and teaching.

UJK made the most remarkable leap, jumping from just **1 to 26 modules**. UB built on its previous foundation, expanding from **30 to 40**. URAK, IJS, and others followed suit. Though RFOs are not teaching institutions, both **ACIISI** and **FRCT** began embedding gender equality into funding calls and outreach programs — setting the tone for future academic content.

## Hybrid Work

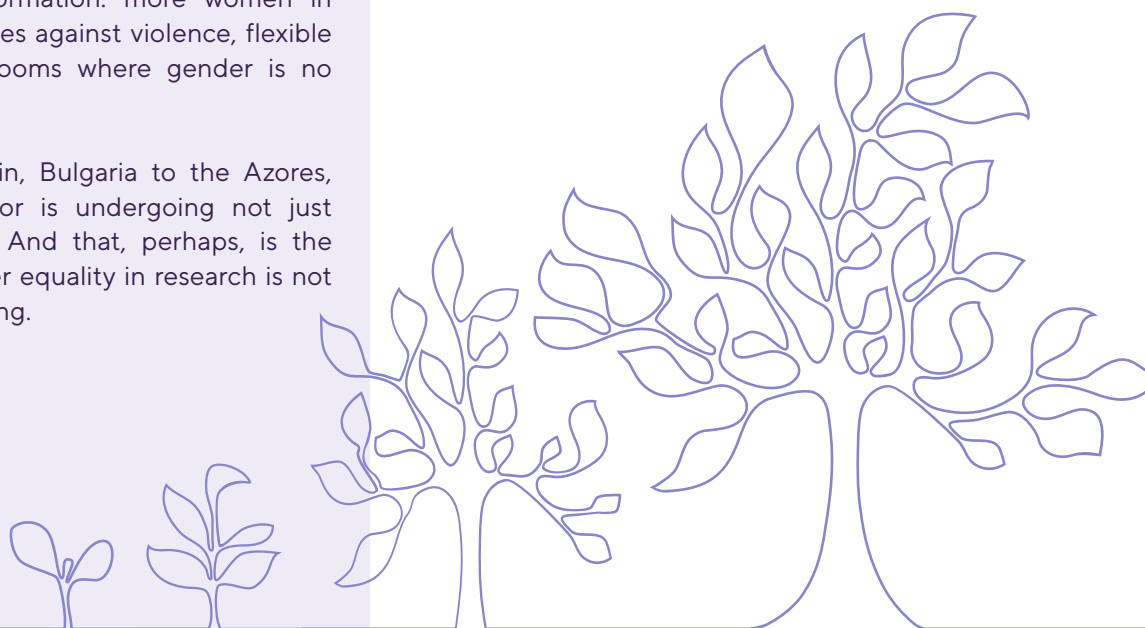
Flexible work — often dismissed as a side issue — became a tool for inclusion. In Slovakia, **UVSK SAV** reported that **70% of women and 65% of men** now benefit from flexible working conditions. On the Azores, **FRCT** embedded hybrid work into its culture, with **over 41%** of its workforce using it regularly, and **63.3% of women** opting for flexible hours. The change wasn't just policy — it was cultural.

## A Growing Momentum

The ATHENA project shows what happens when gender equality is treated not as a checklist, but as a **strategic commitment**.

Across eight institutions in seven countries, data tells a story of transformation: more women in research, stronger policies against violence, flexible workspaces, and classrooms where gender is no longer invisible.

From Slovenia to Spain, Bulgaria to the Azores, Europe's research sector is undergoing not just reform — but renewal. And that, perhaps, is the clearest sign that gender equality in research is not just a goal — it's happening.



*"GEPs are not just about compliance — they're a tool for real, lasting change"*

# Voices of ATHENA

## The Impact of GEPs, in Our Partners' Words

Across Europe, ATHENA partners are reshaping research cultures, and we've heard directly from those at the heart of institutional change—project managers, researchers, equality officers, and university leadership. Here's how the Gender Equality Plans are transforming institutions — in their own words.

### Neuza Vertentes Melo

*Regional Fund for Science and Technology, Portugal - Azores*

"One of the biggest misconceptions is that GEPs are just tick-box exercises. In truth, they drive meaningful change — improving workplace dynamics, productivity, and innovation by fostering fairness and accountability for all."



### Gabriel Bianchi

*Slovak Academy of Sciences, Slovakia*

"Our biggest challenge was engaging people at all levels. We focused on those who responded to build a pool of multipliers — agents of change who spread enthusiasm for gender equality in academia."

### Laura Ruiz Carames

*Canary Islands Government, Canarian Agency for Research, Innovation and Information Society (ACIISI), Spain - Canary Islands*

"Thanks to ATHENA, we created our own GEP — something we couldn't have done otherwise. Training sessions and analysis helped us open new paths for women in research."



### Desislava Atanasova

*University of Ruse Angel Kanchev, Bulgaria*

"ATHENA helped us establish lasting institutional change — a unified equality policy that prevents discrimination not only by gender but across race, ethnicity, disability, and more."



## Ita Junkar

*Jožef Stefan Institute, Slovenia*

"We introduced gender-sensitive language guidelines, created a new HR unit, and rewrote internal rules. ATHENA made these changes possible with strong institutional support."



## Francesco Giacosa

*Jan Kochanowski University, Poland*

"As director of the PhD school, I noticed that motherhood delays studies for some women. Later in their careers, reaching the same level as men becomes difficult. ATHENA helped me reflect on how I can improve behaviours—even unconsciously—to support gender equality."

## Nicoleta Apostol

*University of Bucharest, Romania*

"I met two partners for my research through the Gender Equality Plan — one with whom I implemented a grant, and another with whom I co-prepared a thematic issue for a gender studies publication"



## Romana Jordan

*Jožef Stefan Institute, Slovenia*

"To make the GEP reflect real needs, we collaborated with external social scientists and ATHENA partners. This helped us understand diversity beyond gender—across age, interests, and roles—and design a plan that works for all."

## Beatriz Gonzalez López-Valcárcel

*University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain - Canary Islands*

"Gender gaps in research are both unfair and inefficient. GEPs help institutions reflect, measure inequalities, and take strategic actions toward change."



# Legacy & Resources

## Tools to inspire the next generation of change-makers

Explore the  
ATHENA E-Platform



### ATHENA TOOLKIT

to guide, step-by-step,  
other RPOs and RFOs in the  
development of GEPs

- Practical tools, templates, and resources
- Examples and guidance from ATHENA institutions
- Inspiration to adapt and shape institutional GEPs
- Complements the Best Practice Compendium (D4.1)
- Based on proven measures across European research organisations
- Relevant for any organisation seeking gender equality change



### COURSE TAILORED

to your institutional needs.  
Extensive, open-access training  
materials on gender equality.

- Covers change management, policy frameworks, inclusive communication, and GEP implementation
- Each course includes 1–8 hours of lectures
- Available in multiple languages
- Practical, adaptable content for different institutional contexts
- Suitable for training staff, researchers, and leadership teams



### WOMEN'S RESEARCH DB

to elevate women's  
contributions in EU science

- Highlights outstanding women in research
- Boosts visibility across Europe
- Encourages role models for future scientists
- Supports a more inclusive research ecosystem



# From Practice to Policy: ATHENA's recommendations for a more inclusive ERA

Policy briefs and insights for RPOs, RFOs,  
and European decision-makers

The ATHENA project has taken a decisive step in influencing policy and practice across Europe's research and innovation (R&I) ecosystem with the publication of a series of **policy briefs and recommendations**. These documents draw on the project's hands-on experience implementing Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) across diverse institutional contexts, as well as valuable insights from collaborations with

sister projects such as **SPEAR, CALIPER, GENDERACTION, and LeTSGEPs**.

Aimed at **European and national policymakers**, as well as **Research Performing Organisations (RPOs)** and **Research Funding Organisations (RFOs)**, the briefs offer practical, evidence-based strategies to promote inclusion, performance, and institutional transformation.



## Policy Brief (2023): Advancing Gender Equality in R&I

Published under *Deliverable 6.7: Policy Brief for Feedback to the European Commission – 1*, ATHENA's first brief outlines three core areas for policy intervention:

- **Promoting Gender Equality in the European Research Area (ERA)** - Recommendations include increasing gender diversity in research teams, evaluation panels, and decision-making bodies to boost innovation and ensure fair representation.
- **Strengthening Gender Equality in Funding Programmes** - Building on Horizon Europe's momentum, the brief advocates for continued gender mainstreaming in future EU funding frameworks, ensuring that inclusivity is a strategic priority.
- **Empowering RPOs and RFOs through Tailored GEPs** - Using tools like the ATHENA Toolkit, institutions are encouraged to move beyond formal compliance, embedding gender equality through strong leadership, training, and continuous monitoring.



## Policy Brief #1 (2025) Measuring Success – Gender Equality as a Performance Driver in Research

This brief highlights the direct **link between gender equality and research excellence**. Its central messages are:

- **Raising Awareness**

Policymakers and research leaders must recognize that diverse, inclusive environments foster better science and more creative solutions.

- **Data-Driven Progress**

Institutions need to systematically collect, monitor, and analyse gender-disaggregated data to measure GEP effectiveness and inform strategic decisions.

The brief positions gender equality not as a compliance task, but as a **performance driver** that enhances institutional competitiveness and impact.



## Policy Brief #2 (2025): Strategies for Smaller, Younger, and Remote Institutions

Many smaller or remote universities and RPOs face unique structural and cultural challenges in advancing gender equality — ranging from **geographical isolation and limited funding** to **institutional capacity constraints**. This policy brief offers tailored strategies to:

- Integrate gender equality into core institutional strategies.
- Build internal capacity through networking, peer learning, and mentoring. The brief positions gender equality not as a compliance task, but as a performance driver that enhances institutional competitiveness and impact.
- Encourage national and European policies to provide **dedicated support** and **context-sensitive frameworks**.

# Policy Briefs presented at the European Parliament



The **2025 policy briefs** were officially presented during the **ATHENA Policy Event** held at the European Parliament in May 2025, bringing together Members of the European Parliament, representatives from the European Commission, RPOs, RFOs, and civil society. The event sparked high-level dialogue on how gender equality fuels institutional excellence and innovation—and emphasised the **urgent need for continued political commitment and investment**.



## Key Messages from the Event:



Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) must be integrated into core institutional strategy—not treated as a compliance exercise.



Smaller and less-resourced institutions require tailored support to advance gender equality.



Systematic monitoring and data collection are critical for sustainable change.



[Read report here.](#)

# Delivering Change: ATHENA outputs by institutional action

A structured overview of ATHENA's key deliverables to help you design, implement and monitor your GEP

<b>AUDIT</b>	Gender Equality Audit and assessment	<a href="#">D2.1 Common database for gender equality audit</a> <a href="#">D2.2 Report on national status in gender equality in in Bulgaria, Spain, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia</a> <a href="#">D2.3 Gender equality reports for ATHENA project partners</a>
<b>CAPACITY BUILDING</b>	Capacity building for systemic institutional change	<a href="#">D3.1 Programme and material of the training for GEPI Committees</a> <a href="#">D3.2 Programme and material of the Gender Training Programme</a> <a href="#">D3.3 Reports on learning activities for GEPI Committees - v1</a> <a href="#">D3.4 Reports on learning activities for GEPI Committees - v2</a> <a href="#">D3.5 Reports on learning activities for GEPI Committees – vfinal (not published yet)</a>
<b>GEP DESIGN</b>	GEPs Development and Implementation	<a href="#">D4.1 GEPs best practices compendium</a> <a href="#">D4.2 Gender and Diversity Standards</a> <a href="#">D4.3 ATHENA Toolkit for transforming the institutional culture in terms of gender aspects</a> <a href="#">D4.4 Gender Equality Plans</a>
<b>MONITOR</b>	Monitoring and Evaluation	<a href="#">D5.1 Guidelines on monitoring and evaluation</a> <a href="#">D5.2 GEPVISION on-line tool</a> <a href="#">D5.3 GEP implementation monitoring reports - v1</a> <a href="#">D5.4 GEP implementation monitoring reports -vfinal (not published yet)</a> <a href="#">D5.5 Impact report (not published yet)</a>

**More scientific outputs?** Check our scientific and non-scientific publications [here](#)



**athena**  
gender equality to unlock  
research potential

## Acknowledgements

The ATHENA project would not have been possible without the dedication, collaboration, and passion of an exceptional group of individuals and institutions. We extend our heartfelt thanks to:

- **Project Partners** who brought energy, expertise, and local commitment to every stage of GEP design and implementation across 8 countries.
- **The ATHENA Advisory Board**, for their invaluable guidance, thought leadership, and critical feedback throughout the project.
- **European Commission** – Directorate-General for Research and Innovation for funding and supporting ATHENA, and for championing gender equality in the European Research Area.
- **Sister Projects** including SPEAR, CALIPER, GENDERACTION, LeTSGEPs, RESET, INSPIRE, FLIARA, and others, for their collaborative spirit and shared knowledge.

To every trainer, researcher, policymaker, communicator, and equality officer who contributed to this journey—thank you. Your efforts have created a legacy of structural change and a stronger, more inclusive future for European research and innovation.

## Stay in touch with us

**E-mail:** [info@athenaequality.eu](mailto:info@athenaequality.eu)

**E-mail of coordinator:** [michelle.perello@consulta-europa.eu](mailto:michelle.perello@consulta-europa.eu)

**Phone:** (+34) 828 041 258

[athenaequality.eu](http://athenaequality.eu)



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