

1 Introduction

Reflecting on a Community of Practice approach to institutional change for a greater gender equality in R&I and HE – Policy and practice

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This book reflects on the use of Communities of Practice (CoPs) to further gender equality in research and innovation (R&I) organisations and higher education (HE) institutes throughout Europe. It is grounded on our experiences of setting up and supporting eight CoPs comprising 144 organisations as part of the ACT project (2018–2022), a three-and-a-half-year effort funded by the European Commissions' Horizon 2020 programme.¹

The 12 chapters collected in this volume provide a window into the practical experiences and lessons learnt by CoP members, CoP facilitators and collaborators. The rich diversity of CoP organising principles (geographic, disciplinary and thematic) offers key insights into the different challenges faced by change agents in pushing for gender equality in R&I and HE. Together with a sound conceptual embedding in the CoP literature as well as the wider literature on gender equality interventions, the various perspectives presented contribute to providing a better, more nuanced understanding of the complex European landscape of gender equality in R&I and HE. A particular focus that runs throughout the book will examine how inter-organisational cooperation can be harnessed to impact the three objectives that form part of the European Research Area (ERA) priority 4 on gender equality and gender mainstreaming in R&I: scientific careers, decision-making and integrating the gender dimension in teaching and research content. These wider insights are rounded up with reflections on the benefits and limitations of a CoP approach to promoting gender equality in R&I and HE.

In 2021, it has been exactly 30 years since the idea of CoPs was introduced through the publication by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) on “Situated Learning”. A rich literature has emerged in the meantime, building upon and unfolding the three determining features of a CoP, namely, a “joint enterprise” (shared interest, or domain), “mutual engagement” (community) and development of a “shared repertoire” of resources and practice

(Wenger, 1998). Extensive reviews testify to the different engagements and ways of appropriating CoPs with regard to organisational embedding (Schulte, 2020), knowledge management (Bolisani & Scarso, 2014), innovation studies (Pattinson et al., 2016), social learning systems (Blackmore, 2010), higher education (McDonald & Cater-Steel, 2017) or nursing practice (Terry et al., 2020) to name just a few. Surprisingly, gender scholars are relatively absent from this body of literature. While organisational scholars have extensively contributed to the reception of this concept, experts on gender – despite their overall contribution to the literature on organisational change – have only engaged on the margins with this body of work. Except for the special edition of *Language and Society* (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999), there have been only isolated publications reflecting on gender and CoPs specifically, largely in the *Women’s Studies International Forum* (Curnow, 2013; Paechter, 2003; Stapleton, 2001; Wagner, 1994) while major journal outlets such as *Gender, Work and Organisation* have remained silent on this topic. Equally, from a policy perspective, the suggestion to appropriate CoPs for gender equality work in organisations is relatively recent. While the European Commission has put great emphasis on institutional change (European Commission, 2011) highlighting Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) as the main instrument for achieving gender equality, beyond this, particular methodologies for its implementation are not defined. Explicit references to CoPs (or “communities of practitioners”) only start to emerge from 2013 onwards. Notable, sporadic usage of the concept does exist with regard to the implementation of a GEP (Barnard et al., 2016); however, a more systematic and empirically grounded exploration of what CoPs are and can achieve for gender equality, particularly in the context of R&I and HE institutions, is largely missing.

Gender equality in R&I and HE: Evidence and policy framework

The present book addresses this lacuna in the literature and aims to provide an explicit consideration of CoPs as an instrument for accelerating gender equality and institutional change in R&I across Europe. So, what do we mean when we talk about gender (in)equality in R&I in Europe? Considering the statistical key figures on gender equality first, one can applaud the overall improvements over the years but lament the slow pace. According to the most recent *She Figures* (European Commission, 2021b), gender balance among PhD graduates (48.1% women) has nearly been reached, yet women account only for one-third of all researchers in the European Union (EU) and one-fifth in the business sector. Women are also still significantly under-represented at higher stages of the career ladder: the share of women in Grade A positions in HE (full professor and equivalent) reached just 26% for the EU in 2018 and the proportion of women heading HE institutions in Europe was only 23.6% in 2019. The number of women among patent holders also remains extremely low, similar to the low participation

of women in the creation of innovative start-ups. Concerning the integration of the gender dimension, the recent data provided by She Figures are sobering: only 1.80% of scientific publications of the EU integrate a gender analysis despite the fact that an increasing number of organisations at least mention the cited actions and measures towards gender equality on their websites. Whilst gender (in) equalities in R&I and HE go far beyond a binary representation of men and women at different levels and fields of academia – the statistical evidence of the under-representation of women is one key piece of the puzzle that cannot be overlooked.

In 2012, the European Commission established gender equality as one of five priorities for achieving the objective of a common research area in Europe and this policy has been progressively strengthened (European Commission, 2020). Three objectives were established for EU countries to work on and foster institutional change:

- Gender equality in scientific careers
- Gender balance in decision-making
- Integration of the gender dimension into the content of research and innovation

It is these three gender equality objectives for institutional change that have provided a policy framework for our work in the ACT project.

The Council Conclusions on Advancing Gender Equality in the European Research Area developed in 2015 stated that EU Member States should “make institutional change a key element of their national policy framework on gender equality in R&I” by developing national action plans or strategies at both the national and institutional levels (Council of the European Union, 2015). Incentives should be provided by Member States for research-performing organisations (including universities) “to revise or develop gender mainstreaming strategies, GEPs including the gender dimension in R&I content and programmes and mobilise adequate resources to ensure their implementation”. The Council Conclusions also highlight the need to strive for gender balance in leadership and decision-making positions and invite relevant authorities to establish guiding targets (i.e. quantitative objectives) to improve gender balance in decision-making bodies specifying “leading scientific and administrative boards”, “recruitment and promotion committees” as well as “evaluation panels”. National Action Plans were then developed in 2016 by Member States that included concrete actions to advance gender equality (Ferguson, 2021, p. 14).

The European Research Area and Innovation Committee (ERAC) Standing Working Group on Gender in Research and Innovation’s (2018) main findings regarding sustainable cultural and institutional change include the following: huge differences between EU-15² and EU-13³ countries, the majority of incentives tend to be introduced by national authorities and national funding agencies in the EU-15 countries and across the

board whilst very few incentives have been introduced to integrate the gender dimension in research. Only four countries (all of which are in the EU-15) have introduced guiding targets for the proportion of women among professors. Concrete measures to reduce the effect of gender bias in the allocation of research funding have been put in place by only two national funding agencies (and no national authorities) in the EU-13 in contrast to six national funding agencies and three national authorities in the EU-15. Regarding gender balance in decision-making: six EU-15, two EU-13 and three associate countries have established guiding targets for gender balance, but these have not been implemented anywhere. The report not only highlights the differences between the EU-15 and the EU-13 but also notes great variation between Strong Innovators and Innovation Leaders on the one hand and Moderate and Modest Innovators on the other – to the extent to which policies and actions to advance gender equality in the ERA are implemented (or not). The high positive correlation between countries' positions on the 2018 EU Innovation Scoreboard and the 2017 Gender Equality Index is also recognised.

As the new ERA communication (European Commission, 2020) highlights, despite the robust policy framework put into place, there remain profound disparities in terms of policy implementation as well as the representation of women in R&I across Member States. As the chapters in this volume will show, CoPs can offer a new and promising bottom-up approach to complement the overarching policy frameworks with locally situated, context-dependent knowledge production and development of practical solutions.

Setting up eight Communities of Practice

The ACT project has setup and supported eight CoPs throughout its lifetime. From the very outset, the ACT Consortium was constructed to build upon the insights and networks created by various previous structural change projects funded by the European Commission (for an extensive overview of these projects see Ferguson, 2021). So-called seed partners set up one CoP, each building upon their work in structural change projects such as GARCIA, GenderTime, GENERA, INTEGER, LIBRA, SPEAR and TARGET. A CoP facilitator based within each seed partner organisation coordinated and supported the working of the CoP members through organising meetings, facilitating shared workspaces and providing the momentum for concrete equality work. Although all CoPs were constituted as a collaboration among different organisations, formalised by the signature of a Memorandum of Understanding and had a uniform governance mechanism, their thematic orientation varied considerably. As shown in [Table 1.1](#), CoPs included different thematic foci such as gender in physics (GENERA) or the life sciences (LifeSciCoP), gender budgeting (GenBUDGET), STRATEGIES with a focus on sustainability and

Table 1.1 Overview of ACT Communities of Practice.

<i>Acronym</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Focus</i>	<i>Coordinated by</i>
LifeSciCoP	Gender Equality in the Life Sciences	Thematic/ disciplinary	Fundació Centre de Regulació Genòmica (CRG), Spain
GEinCEE	Gender Equality in Central and Eastern Europe	Geographic	Uniwersytet Jagielloński (UJ), Poland
GenBUDGET	Gender Budgeting in Research Organisations	Thematic	Haskoli Islands (UoI), Iceland
FORGEN	Funding Organisations for Gender	Thematic	Science Foundation Ireland (SFI), Ireland
GENERA	Gender Equality in Physics	Thematic/ disciplinary	Deutsches Elektronen-Synchrotron (DESY) & Umweltbundesamt (UBA), Germany
STRATEGIES	Strategies for Sustainable Gender Equality	Thematic	Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), France
Alt+G	Alternative Infrastructure for Gender Equality	Geographic	Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (ZRC SAZU)
LAC	Latin American Community of Practice	Geographic	Regional UNESCO Chair-Women, Science and Technology in Latin America – FLACSO Argentina

early career researchers or for funding organisations (FORGEN). Other CoPs had a clear geographic orientation, with GEinCEE supporting gender equality work across many organisations in Eastern Europe, Alt+G in Slovenia and the Latin American Community of Practice (LAC). As a result of this diverse set of thematic, disciplinary and geographic CoPs, the insights collected in the chapters of this volume cover a lot of ground in terms of different organisational settings and challenges for gender equality in R&I throughout Europe.

To some extent, the ACT project and subsequently this book are characterised by the dual aims or logics of strengthening gender equality within R&I and HE institutions on the one hand and implementing an inter-organisational CoP approach on the other. This tension has really defined the project in terms of its overarching aim – to foster collaboration across several organisations or to really push forward gender equality within a single organisation. Whilst initially institutional change could be conceptualised as the broad goal and inter-organisational collaboration the means

to achieve it, we can see how this conceptualisation may be problematic on various levels. Firstly, the whole concept of institutional change is focused on the internal workings of one organisation at a time. GEPs target individual organisation or its sub-units such as departments or faculties – each having its specific needs and idiosyncratic agendas of change. Although many examples of CoPs do exist that operate within a single organisation, the distinct approach of the ACT project consisted of setting up inter-organisational CoPs whose members span organisational boundaries. The question that naturally then arises concerns the possibilities to bring these two worlds together and apply cross-institutional learning to gender equality challenges within one’s own institution. As it will become apparent, the chapters to this edited volume can be seen as contributing with their reflections to the wider discussion on an eco-system approach to foster equality and social justice beyond the individual organisation (Janssens & Zanoni, 2021).

A second issue concerns the relative autonomy of CoPs. As will become clear in the next section, CoPs are highly flexible and innovative forms of organising social learning whose effectiveness is grounded in their bottom-up, needs-centred management. CoPs are autonomous “units” which can be difficult to subsume under pre-defined, top-down organisational goals – even when these goals are as valuable as the pursuit of gender equality. A cursory reading of the CoP literature highlights the perils of superimposing objectives on CoP members that do not meet their needs. Thus, cultivating CoPs implies being attentive to the internal, bottom-up agenda setting as it unfolds in relation to overarching and broader goals such as the design and implementation of a GEP within an organisation.

What makes the chapters assembled in this book so interesting is this very tension – bringing together a gender equality lens with the CoP approach. This book offers a rich overview not only regarding the diverse CoP experiences of institutional collaboration in pushing forward the gender equality agenda but also regarding the diverse thematic issues that constitute the landscape of gender equality in R&I and HE across Europe and beyond. We think that bringing together these approaches has proven more powerful and fruitful than we could have ever predicted.

Community of Practice – Its relevance for advancing gender equality

Let’s start with a minimal definition: “Communities of Practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 4). This definition put forward by Wenger and colleagues suggests a coherence and clarity of what CoPs entail that does not necessarily match the empirical reality which is far more complex. CoPs can differ along their lifecycle phase which run from

initial design/launching to growing and maturing (Wenger et al., 2002). CoPs in the empirical field also differ in terms of their demographics (purpose and maturity), organisational context (creation process, professional/organisational boundary-crossing and degree of institutionalisation) and membership characteristics (size, geographic dispersion and selection) to name just the most relevant features in the context of this book (Dubé et al., 2003; Hara et al., 2009). Depending on which aspect is deemed most interesting, authors have foregrounded certain features while neglecting others. Amin & Joanne (2006), for example, distinguish four types of CoPs, namely, task/craft-based CoPs which are preoccupied with the preservation of knowledge from professional- or expert/creative-based communities whose focus is on the creation of new knowledge (Pattinson et al., 2016).

As already mentioned, the eight CoPs in the ACT project are indeed relatively uniform: all of them are inter-organisational CoPs involving persons that are located across different organisations. This also implies that the CoPs are relatively dispersed geographically speaking: while in the case of Alt+G membership spans several organisations in the same country (Slovenia), in other cases members are distributed across a certain geographic region like several Eastern European (GEinCEE) or mainly Northern European (GenBudget) countries, or the entire South American continent (LAC). Although several CoPs are a prolongation of previous structural change projects, none of them has been launched as a CoP for longer than three years. This implies that all CoPs within ACT pertain to an early lifecycle phase, with a rather limited lifespan due to the end of the project funding in 2022. In all cases, members within the ACT CoPs are quite diverse, usually spanning organisational, disciplinary and cultural backgrounds – which provide a rich and diverse environment for mutual learning.

These empirical features of the ACT CoPs need to be put in dialogue with the conceptual dimensions and issues discussed in the wider literature. By carrying out a selective reading of the three foundational facets of CoPs – domain, community and practice – in conjunction with the gender equality literature, the starting points for conceiving CoPs as an instrument for advancing gender equality in R&I and HE in Europe and beyond will become into sharper view.

The domain: Knowledge and gender equality

As already mentioned, a CoP is defined first, through a “domain” or shared interest among its participants. This domain of knowledge “creates a common ground and a sense of common identity” and “inspires members to contribute and participate, guides their learning, and gives meaning to their actions” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 27). Rather than simply being a stated goal, what differentiates a CoP from a project team, for example, are relations of “mutual accountability” towards its subject domain. It implies generating

knowledge through nurturing and re-negotiating a shared understanding of what is important.

As a consequence, what a CoP “is” or “can do” is fundamentally entangled with how knowledge and learning are conceived. Indeed, the revolutionary impulse from the outset of Lave and Wenger’s book on “peripheral participation” (1991) consisted of moving beyond a cognitive account of learning towards a social process-based model. Learning, in this initial account, was not conceived as a mental exercise of appropriating explicit, codified knowledge but rather as a gradual transition from “peripheral to full membership” in a (professional) community. While learning through social participation can involve episodes of transmission of codified knowledge (facts, theories), it also and more importantly involves apprenticeship through supervised, hands-on practice. Knowledge is never simply transferred from expert to novice but requires interactions among “oldtimers” and “newcomers” involving the observation of codes of conduct as well as the imitation of how things are done. In short, it requires a whole set of practices that need to be learned through (social) interaction and participation.

The emphasis on this social dimension of knowledge strikes an immediate chord with feminist thinking. Different philosophers of science have argued that knowledge is socially situated (Anderson, 1995; Harding, 1986; Longino, 1990). However, instead of underscoring simply the social embeddedness of learning, gender scholars have highlighted the resulting partial and biased nature of knowledge, foregrounding ultimately the political dimension of all knowledge claims (Haraway, 1988). As Alison Wylie writes, “social location systematically shapes and limits what we know, including tacit, experiential knowledge as well as explicit understanding, what we take knowledge to be as well as specific epistemic content” (Wylie, 2003, p. 31). First formulated during the 1970s and 1980s and refined through contemporary debates, standpoint feminism (Harding, 2004; Intemann, 2010) leaves no doubt that social positions in society are hierarchically structured by power relations which in turn condition not only individual experiences but also the means to make collective sense of these. Knowledge, far from being a neutral and distanced accumulation of facts and universal laws, involves political negotiations of value and struggles over what is included or excluded, what/who is in positions of power and what/who is operating on the margins of science and society.

Both aspects – the standpoint dependent production of knowledge as well as its concomitant political and power dimension – have been discussed in the CoP literature, albeit to different degrees. The insight into the situatedness of learning and knowledge is tightly associated with the concept of practice – which always conceives social interactions as embedded in a network of material artefacts and objects (see also section on practice below). The fact that learning is always located in an idiosyncratic social context constitutes a prominent point of departure for early receptions of Lave and Wenger’s (1991) work. Thus, Brown and Duguid (1991), for example,

underscore the strength of CoPs in being responsive and flexible to address unforeseen and emergent challenges in work practice. By conceiving learning as rooted in social practice, CoPs become a highly effective, organic instrument of innovation as practical solutions are generated where they emerge, continuously refined in tight, localised feedback loops until the job is done. Undoubtedly, the ability to take one's immediate needs and interests as a starting point for CoPs was one of the key motivating factors to invest in this type of work among the participants of the ACT CoPs.

However, the idiosyncratic nature of CoPs – their responsiveness to local context – posed from the very outset also a key challenge particularly for management scholars in terms of steering and controlling the ensuing innovation process. How can locally generated solutions to problems be re-inserted and aligned with the overarching organisational goals? Unfortunately, as Schulte (2020) and others have remarked, the implied power relations both within CoPs as well as in relation to their wider organisational, political, legal and cultural embedding have so far not been sufficiently addressed (Contu & Willmott, 2003; Schulte, 2020). The fact that many CoPs emerge through bottom-up processes does not imply that they exist in a power-free vacuum, neither among its members nor in terms of their knowledge production. That knowledge is contested should be nowhere more visible than in the arena of gender equality and institutional change. On the one hand, as gender equality work often involves academic as well as administrative staff across organisational as well as scientific units, what counts as knowledge and evidence for decision-making is not self-evident. In addition, CoPs tend to operate outside the formal, established organisational units – which is an advantage when dealing with a transversal issue such as gender. However, insofar gender equality work aims for a redistribution of resources and privileges – it is also likely to come into direct conflict with wider organisational agendas, goals and decision-making power. The well-rehearsed insistence to include top management and decision-makers in gender equality work points in this direction, to assure CoPs leverage in terms of organisational steering and decision-making. Producing knowledge through CoPs is insufficient without the ability to make decisions based upon this knowledge for greater gender equality.

The reflection of the situated and political knowledge creation with/through CoPs also needs to be critically examined from a European policy-level perspective. The experiences and knowledge that will emerge across CoPs that operate in different national contexts bring into sharper focus what can be learned across these national contexts and across CoP experiences. Wenger-Trayner and colleagues introduce the concept of “Landscape of Practice” to explain how different CoPs might interact and depend upon each other rather than their own, situated practices (Pyrko et al., 2019; Wenger-Trayner et al., 2014). However, this conjures up the question of which knowledge is considered “valid” knowledge? What might be deemed important in one context does not necessarily apply in another one. Hence, the

simple generation of knowledge within and across CoPs becomes a political negotiation about the empirical adequacy of what is important, what counts and what serves as evidence for subsequent actions and policies. What can we learn from the situated knowledge generated in Sweden for our situation in Hungary and vice versa? Can we assume that the underlying problems are the same? Which knowledge will be circulated and define the policy agendas of the future? How will the limits between important knowledge and knowledge that remains on the margins be negotiated? These are questions likely to be considered however productive and rich the learning experiences within and across CoPs.

Community: CoPs in the neoliberal academy?

The second defining feature of a CoP concerns its “community” aspect. For a community to exist, there needs to be mutual engagement among its participants. “The community creates the social fabric of learning. A strong community fosters interactions and relationships based on mutual respect and trust. It encourages a willingness to share ideas, expose one’s ignorance, ask difficult questions, and listen carefully” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 28). Thus, what makes a community different from a group of employees who might belong to the same job category or a loose network of contacts is a habit of regular interaction which builds trusting relationships and a sense of belonging – not on any matter but on issues that are important to their domain. Despite the fact that a lot of effort and work is usually involved in cultivating a sense of community across diverse and contrasting views, tensions, or even conflict, there is tendency to conceive CoPs as a primarily harmonious, safe haven (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2000; Reynolds, 2000). Reaburn & McDonald (2017, p. 121), for example, suggest that CoPs provide precisely the means for “establishing collegial relations in a safe place that is free of hierarchical power and politics typically observed in schools and faculties”. CoPs are frequently introduced as a space that lies orthogonal to the formal hierarchies and strategic priorities of organisations since the primary driver of a community is precisely a “shared interest” not governed by management but by self-interested, passionate individuals. Despite Lave & Wenger’s (1991) initial recognition of the importance of power relations for learning communities, these issues have faded into the background in favour of a primary occupation for steering and managing self-organised communities. Wenger et al. (2002) speak in their later writings of “Cultivating Communities of Practice” (emphasis added), while Brown & Duguid (1991) popularise CoPs primarily as a “medium, and even as technology of consensus and stability” (Contu & Willmott, 2003, p. 284). Along these lines, many contributions in this book will confirm the pivotal role of the CoP facilitator for establishing and moving forward a CoP. Community in this sense involves a common history and shared identity, which does not imply that social relations are harmonious and tension-free.

Rather, the defining feature of the community lies in the “voluntary, informal and authentic” nature of its social relations which cannot be imposed because they are based upon authentic, personal interest and engagement (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 36).

The rather romantic account of community, however, is somehow at odds with the reality across contemporary HE institutions in Europe. Indeed, working conditions inside and outside the academia are less than favourable for establishing such safe spaces of togetherness. As Cox (2005, p. 533) writes, “... conditions of much, perhaps most twenty-first-century work inhibit sustained collective sense making, leading to fragmented, rather individualised appropriation of tasks”. Specifically, feminist scholars have documented the pervasive and perverse effects of the “neoliberal university” (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2000) where contracts and careers have become more precarious while working demands have intensified. A new managerialism has cut funding and academic autonomy alike, requiring staff to do more with fewer resources and in less time: more teaching, more papers, more administrative committee work, more frequent reporting and engagement with (social) media (Anderson, 2008; Barry et al., 2001; Mountz et al., 2015; Ward, 2012). As Korczynski (2003) rightly observes, many CoPs in today’s working environments resemble rather “communities of coping” than genuine opportunities for learning and emancipation.

Perversely, the speeding up of academic life towards output-oriented results goes hand in hand with the formation of a new regime of subjectivity that establishes new, subtle, internalised forms of self-control (Barker, 1993). Gill (2016, p. 42) observes how a new technology of the self is preoccupied with an endless task of “self-monitoring, planning, prioritising” which constitutes a “far more effective exercise of power than any imposed from above by employers”. As a result, this perpetual process of self-optimisation is highly individualised and stands precisely in opposition to community building and collective action (Baker & Kelan, 2019; Pereira, 2016; Smidt et al., 2018; Vayreda et al., 2019). Often, the belief in meritocracy and individual choice in combination with increasing work demands effectively undermine the much-needed collective response, as it eliminates basically the possibility to recognise the structural foundation of precarious working conditions, including its built-in gender inequalities.

Translated into the context and experiences of the ACT project and its focus on gender equality, it is certainly true that CoPs provide an opportunity for community. Participants underline unanimously the advantages of overcoming one’s isolation and connecting with others in similar, often marginalised positions within academic institutions. No doubt, resources are scarce in general and for gender equality, in particular, with inter-organisational CoPs offering the chance to pool assets and exchange experiences and strategies. The basis for some of the collaboration between institutions within the CoPs has in various instances been driven by informal networks of feminist activists/academics. However, it remains to be

seen to what degree CoPs, despite their allure to “community” can activate a truly more collective and political mode of action. Examples of feminist collaboration and activism for a “slow” scholarship (Mountz et al., 2015; Pels, 2003), to the degree, that they do exist (Breeze & Taylor, 2020; O’Dwyer et al., 2018) manage without explicit references to CoPs.

At the policy level, however, it rather seems that CoPs might be misused and appropriated in the opposite direction, namely as a relatively “cheap” means to respond to the rising demand for gender equality work for example to access EU funding⁴. Unsurprisingly, it is women who carry the brunt of applying for example to the Athena SWAN certification in the United Kingdom (Caffrey et al., 2016; Ovseiko et al., 2017; Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019). Since gender equality work is primarily shouldered by women, there is a danger that associated responsibilities and tasks become an additional burden for those who should rather benefit from it. As Cox succinctly states along these lines, it is “at the very least, paradoxical to see how collaboration triggered by alienation can be turned into a management tool” (Cox, 2005, p. 533). From this critical angle, “community” becomes yet another means to embed employees more efficiently into organisational goals in order to fulfil “(reified) corporate objectives” (Rennstam & Kärreman, 2020). Even if the corporate objectives are laudable as in the case of gender equality, the responsibility and workload need to be distributed in a just manner.

Practice: Institutional change and alliances

The third and last defining feature of a CoP is “practice”, already alluded to during the previous paragraphs. Albenga (2016) in her study of triggering structural change for gender equality in HE institutions highlights how, despite “awareness regarding the gendered biases of ‘objective’ excellence, these are left mostly unchallenged in practice”. “Practice” is identified as the site where enacting “real” change happens. Along similar lines, Callerstig (2016, p. 119) reflects on transformational projects highlighting “the underlying assumption within this transformative idea is thus that a change in understanding can lead to a change in behaviour, and furthermore that change in individuals can lead to a change on an institutional level and impact existing policies and practices”. These reflections highlight the primacy of focusing on “practice” in institutional change initiatives. The CoP literature has developed a sound body of knowledge reflecting on “practice” as knowledge and community through “doing” and “acting”.

In their management-oriented book, Wenger and colleagues (2002, p. 38) emphasise that the primary task of a shared practice is to establish a “basic body of knowledge that creates a common foundation” which allows the members of the community to work together effectively. A “shared repertoire” or practice can include “routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts” that crystallises past activities while providing the repertoire for its current and future

activities (Wenger, 1998, p. 83). Although the practice is often understood as some sort of accomplished, output or solidified artefact of the community, it would be more accurate to conceive it as an activity. Practice implies “doings” such as shared behaviours and embodied understandings, including tacit conventions, subtle cues or well-tuned sensitivities (Wenger, 1998, p. 47).

The full implications of conceiving “practice” as “doing”, as a truly process-oriented phenomenon that only exists to the extent that they are enacted, comes into view when consulting the critique of the CoP approach among organisation science scholars (Nicolini et al., 2003). In a rather radical comment on Wenger’s work, Silvia Gherardi argues for the primacy of practice: instead of assuming “community” as the primary setting where learning takes place, we should rather consider how “situated and repeated actions create a context in which social relations among people, and between people and the material and cultural world, stabilise and become normatively sustained” (Gherardi, 2009, p. 523). Community is an effect of practice: it is through activities that a configuration of people, artefacts and social relations are held together and can form a joint enterprise and mutual engagement (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Nicolini, 2012; Roberts, 2006).

The notion that the world we inhabit is “routinely made and re-made in practice, using tools, discourse and our bodies” (Nicolini, 2017) immediately conjures up West & Zimmerman’s classical essay on “Doing Gender” (1987) which conceives gender along the same lines, namely as a routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction. However, the “routine” aspect of action is only part of the story. Through continuous repetition, the social world including all its power relations, social injustice or gender inequality is made durable because it is inscribed in bodies and minds, tools and discourses and “knotted together in such a way that the results” of one inscription becomes the resources of another. The advantage of a close reading of the CoP literature along the lines of a practice-based approach to organisations should become clear: its emphasis on “doings” as well as their socio-material embedding facilitates the transition from a theory of social learning towards a much-needed understanding of organisational change (Bruni et al., 2004; Nicolini et al., 2003; Poggio, 2006). Changing social relations does not depend anymore on personal will, nor the generation of new insights and knowledge. Rather, it involves the rewiring of practice itself, which now means to decentre and transform the socio-material network that constitutes an academic organisation including its positions of privilege and marginality.

While the CoP literature often is largely limited by conceiving practice as an outcome of a CoP, a focus on gender equality and institutional change immediately conjures up a more complex picture. Even though CoPs will be more resilient and sustainable, the more they have established their own practice and identity, their overarching goal regarding gender equality needs to be seen in relation to more durable and solid practices of the embedding

organisation. There is always a “nexus” (Nicolini, 2012) of competing practices where CoPs run in parallel, are co-opted, or are in open confrontation with wider established and emerging practices. One such emerging practice, for example, concerns the new politics of documentation introduced into HE which tends to reframe equality work as a bureaucratic exercise. Attached to existing procedures of quality control and accountability, the circulation of gender equality documents constitutes a practice which seems to supplant the actual equality work itself (Ahmed, 2007; Davis et al., 2010; Garforth & Kerr, 2009; Marx, 2019). From this perspective, focusing on “practice” then not only means building shared repertoire among CoP members but also understanding how one’s own practice can possibly affect or re-enact these broader, gendered organisational requirements. It is through this development of alternative “doings” that the power of the CoP to de/en-gender organisational practices is unleashed and the role of the gender equality “practitioner” becomes paramount in the quest for institutional change.

The priority of practice has implications not only for our understanding of “community” but also for “knowledge/learning” and “power”. Learning/knowledge generation means understanding how a concrete socio-material network is articulated. Gender equality practitioners, to the extent that they are always working in a specific time and place, within a specific organisation, have a deep understanding how organisational procedures, routines, forms of documentation and decision-making, unwritten rules or personal alliances interlock to produce “their” organisation. Practice in this sense implies a “site ontology”, i.e. the primacy of a specific context for analysing and explaining social phenomena (Schatzki, 2005). The fact that generic insights, abstract theories, or even concrete examples from other times and places apply only to a limited degree is not surprising (Yanow, 2004): first, because each socio-material network is situated, constituting its site, but also because practice can never be reduced to words alone. Achieving structural change for greater gender equality requires power, now understood as shifting the “mundane practices of organizing” (Brown et al., 2010). Beyond words and intentions, it requires acting in such a way as to not re-enact established routines but enacting alternative practices, now conceived as the weaving of an alternative socio-material networks.

The full potential of a practice-based approach to CoPs, therefore, becomes visible when extending the concept to its wider organisational embedding. CoPs, to the degree that they are autonomous and thrive on the interest of their participants, provide the opportunity to explore alternative ways of “doings”: a CoPs practice often exists in opposition or in parallel to existing organisational routines. They, therefore, become the experimental environment where alternatives can not only be (re)imagined and thought about but also put into practice – relatively unbound by existing organisational hierarchies and procedures. However, if CoPs are to become an instrument for advancing gender equality in contemporary academic organisations,

then these CoP specific practices need to be extended and incorporated – mainstreamed – into the wider organisational environment. A CoP practice in this sense is never simply a means to produce knowledge – to the degree that knowledge only exists as practice, as something enacted and continuously re-enacted, it involves alliance building and drawing stakeholders and their resources in alternative processes of thinking and doing academic work. Knowledge creation is then inherently political and “slow” – as it involves forging alliances within organisations and across CoPs. Alliances that not only exist on paper but that have developed a shared practice, an alternative way of doing research, teaching and taking care of others. Members of CoPs should therefore always guard against being efficient or effective and insist on the autonomy to define their “shared concern” – which might or might not be aligned with the wider organisational agendas. To the degree that CoPs engage in gender equality work, their alternative practices can only accelerate change by slowly building and embedding alternative practices.

Overview of the chapters

This book provides a comprehensive overview of our experiences of setting up and supporting eight CoPs for gender equality in R&I and HE throughout Europe based on the ACT project. The empirical evidence has been gathered using various methodological approaches including participant observation, case studies and semi-structured interviews as well as a formal evaluation. During the writing process, two peer review sessions were held – where authors exchanged chapters and provided comments on another comparable chapter. This was followed by an open discussion – where all contributors to this book were able to comment and the authors then revised chapters. This approach proved fruitful in terms of fostering a common project resulting in increased synergies between the various chapters and thoughtful reflections throughout the book.

Individual chapters are distributed across three sections. In the first section, we aim to make advances on the conceptual and theoretical levels – crucially examining what a CoP approach can offer institutional change processes for a greater gender equality. This includes reflections on the main methods and tools designed to support CoPs such as the Gender Equality Audit and Monitoring (GEAM) tool as well as the co-creation methods toolkit. The second section containing [Chapters 5–9](#) is predominantly developed by those contributors who were also CoP facilitators, often academics but also practitioners who have been responsible for the setting up and running of the CoPs. In the third section, comprising [Chapters 10 and 11](#), the benefits and limits of a CoP approach to promoting gender equality in R&I is considered, followed by a reflection on its impact and effectiveness in terms of scaling up the approach regarding the three ERA objectives, namely careers, decision-making and integrating the gender dimension in teaching and research content.

In **Chapter 2** of this volume, Thomson, Barnard, Hassan and Dainty provide a theoretical contribution which argues for developing a new concept – a Community of Political Practice (CoPP). They define a CoPP, as a group of institutionally affiliated people across different organisations or nations coalescing around a shared concern for social equality who engage in transformative practice, who learn from each other and co-create knowledge through regular interactions to act on institutional change. Despite the growth of CoP scholarship, theoretical explorations of CoPs designed for social or institutional change are scarce even though change can occur through peer collaboration and institutional work of embedded agents. This is a missed opportunity for institutional change efforts, and for furthering CoP theory. Thomson, Barnard, Hassan and Dainty argue that CoP is a promising mobilising structure for promoting equality endeavours drawing on the concepts of counter-hegemony, social movement and institutional change. By mapping out new crossroads of theories of CoP, social movement and institutional change, this chapter deepens insights into potential lessons to consider when designing CoPPs for counter-hegemonic endeavours.

Chapter 3 by Guyan, Aldercotte, Müller, Caprile and Yanes takes a more practical turn and examines the design process undertaken for the Gender Equality Audit and Monitoring (GEAM) tool. Developed by research teams from the United Kingdom (Advance HE) and Spain (Notus and Universitat Oberta de Catalunya), the GEAM provides a comprehensive, transferable and transnational survey for HE and research organisations that wish to undertake an audit of gender equality among academic, technical and support staff. The transnational roll-out of the survey has highlighted areas where ideas about gender equality, education and research and working practices are conceptualised differently. The chapter, therefore, provides an introduction for other research teams engaged in the design of equality, diversity and inclusion surveys; translation of surveys into multiple languages and used across multiple national contexts; navigation of challenges when they emerge; and use of a standardised framework to gather evidence of gender inequality across a range of thematic areas.

Chapter 4 by Thomson, Rabsch, Barnard, Hassan and Dainty is also a methods-based chapter and addresses a lack of specific ground-level tools and techniques for facilitators and community members involved in cultivating CoPs for institutional change. CoPs are complex and contextually sensitive social phenomena; thus, they require a facilitative framework to connect its members to co-create and collaborate. The chapter presents a selection of co-creation methods utilised in the ACT project and reflects how such methods enable CoPs to unleash their potential, as well as enables them to act as change agents towards institutional change. The chapter presents the backdrop of the CoP concept and its theoretical framework, the CoP definition, CoP lifecycle phases, as well as CoP success factors and

primary areas of activity and argues how these theoretical elements provide a rationale for co-creation activities. Finally, the chapter considers in more detail four co-creation activities (DAKI Retrospective, 1-2-4-All, Plan of Change, and Future Workshop) to demonstrate their potential strengths in CoP collaboration efforts.

Chapter 5 by Sekula, Ciaputa, Warat, Krzaklewska, Beranek and Reidl opens the reporting on first-hand CoP experiences. Based upon the experience of the GEinCEE CoP, the authors examine to what extent CoPs can facilitate conditions for effective gender equality interventions in research and academia in Central and Eastern Europe. It also examines the usefulness of CoP as a mechanism to foster the necessary conditions for advancing gender equality. These include: the agency of change actors; the engagement of organisational stakeholders; building up gender know-how; access to practical tools for designing evidence-based interventions; managing resistance; framing gender equality within wider concepts and human and financial resources.

Chapter 6 developed by Mihajlović Trbovc then goes on to describe the CoP for Alternative Infrastructure for Gender Equality in Academic Institutions (Alt+G) that brings together researchers from Slovenia. Building on a history of efforts to achieve gender equality in Slovene academia, the CoP gathers researchers (and some academic staff) dedicated to promoting women in science, improving gender equality in their institutions and the sector as a whole. The chapter demonstrates how the focus of transformative efforts shifted from the level of national regulations to the academic institutions, due to systemic conditions. Furthermore, it shows that the CoP approach is particularly beneficial for spreading and multiplying structural change within HE institutions and research organisations, and that it can help overcome certain systemic fallacies. The CoP structure and sense of community is able to provide a framework that turns unforeseen challenges into windows of opportunity for institutional change and creates space for mutual learning. Since the CoP approach operates on the fuel of personal motivation and depends on individual rather than institutional commitment, its ability and reach in enhancing concrete institutional change is contingent on favourable structural context.

Chapter 7 reflects on how disciplinary-specific CoPs can be a useful vehicle to share knowledge, experience and practices to further gender equality in R&I organisations. Reiland and Kamlade share their experiences of setting up two CoPs with specific disciplinary focuses, one on physics (GENERA) and the other on life sciences (LifeSciCoP). There is a dearth of academic literature that looks at how disciplinary based CoPs can foster institutional change for gender equality in R&I institutions. By charting the similarities and differences of their approaches to sharing knowledge, experience and practices for gender equality, important insights emerge on how disciplinary context factors shape the CoP approach and provide entry points for gender equality work.

Chapter 8 by Axelsdóttir, Steinþórsdóttir and Einarsdóttir reflects on the opportunities and obstacles of CoPs in developing and implementing gender budgeting to challenge gender biases in decision-making of research performing organisations. Through “Targeted Implementation Projects”, the CoP aims to develop shared knowledge on how to implement gender budgeting in order to further the objective of gender equality in decision-making within RPOs. Drawing on a case study based on the GenBUDGET CoP, which includes 21 representatives in 14 RPOs, the analysis explores the potential for an international CoP to harness inter-organisational cooperation and create knowledge about gender budgeting when CoP members’ knowledge about that strategy is very diverse from the outset.

Chapter 9 by Damala, Mour and Godfroy presents the underlying motivations and inner workings of the Strategies for Sustainable Gender Equality CoP. They provide an overview of how and why STRATEGIES was launched, offering both an empirical as well as an experiential account of what has been achieved, bringing into the picture conceptual, theoretical and practical underpinnings from the life of the CoP, from its inception to the end of the ACT project and its transitioning to a new network. The focal point and interest of the collaboration initiated by STRATEGIES is “sustainability”, a concept defined in relation to recent developments in sustainable development as well as in project management. They describe the philosophy, methodology and all concrete steps they have followed to set up and launch the CoP, and stimulate the exchange of knowledge, policies, know-how and lessons learned both onsite – as well as in the post-COVID-19 world – online.

Chapter 10 opens the third and final section of the book. Reidl, Baranek and Holzinger investigate the added value of CoPs for the implementation of gender equality strategies for their members and member organisations based on the evaluation carried out during the ACT project. By applying Wenger’s concept of value creation (Wenger et al, 2011) they demonstrate which different values and benefits are created through participating in CoPs. Based on interview data and self-reporting data across seven CoPs, they show the immediate, potential and applied values of CoP participation. Members were seen to benefit from CoPs in many ways, for example, through new contacts, new knowledge, empowerment, active implementation support and much more. In addition to an analysis of the added value of CoPs, in this chapter, the authors explore the question of whether the added value that has been identified is sufficient to promote gender equality in research performing and research funding organisations, or whether additional activities are needed to achieve this. They also reflect on the limitations of the CoP approach to institutional change towards gender equality.

Chapter 11 highlights how knowledge sharing between and beyond the CoPs has been achieved specifically in relation to the three ERA objectives for gender equality and mainstreaming: careers, decision-making and integrating the gender dimension in teaching and research content. In scaling up the CoP approach, ACT established three so-called ERA

priority coordination groups which identified and addressed cross-cutting issues related to each of the objectives. These groups brought together ACT Consortium partners, members of different CoPs, ACT advisory board members, experts, representatives of ERA level players and other relevant R&I representatives from the CoPs' contexts – including local, regional, national and disciplinary networks. Through collaborative working, and the sharing of cutting-edge good practices, each of these groups have made substantive contributions to the debate on how to make progress in each of these areas. This chapter details the main debates in each of these three areas and tries to shed light on the priorities for future collaborative work.

The concluding chapter by Rachel Palmén and Jörg Müller revisits the conceptual issues outlined in the introduction in the light of the individual chapters and spells out some of the implications in view of the wider CoP and gender equality literature.

Notes

1. “Communities of PrACTice for Accelerating Gender Equality and Institutional Change in Research and Innovation across Europe” Horizon 2020 project, grant number 788204 is referred to throughout this book as “The ACT project”. See also <https://www.act-on-gender.eu>.
2. The EU-15 countries include: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and United Kingdom.
3. The EU-13 countries include: Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.
4. See GEPs as eligibility criterion for accessing Horizon Europe funding (European Commission, 2021a).

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