

## Gender Equality: Approaches and Strategies in University Context

**Valentina Milenkova**

Department of Sociology, South-West University "Neofit Rilski"-Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria

## Равенство на половете: подходи и стратегии в университетски контекст

**Валентина Миленкова**

Катедра Социология, Югозападен университет Неофит Рилски“-Благоевград, България

### Author Note

Valentina Milenkova  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7592-1475>

The author has no conflict of interest to disclose.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Valentina Milenkova.  
Department of Sociology, South-West University "Neofit Rilski"-Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria, Email:  
[vmilenkova@swu.bg](mailto:vmilenkova@swu.bg)

### Бележки за автора

Валентина Миленкова  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7592-1475>

Няма конфликт на интереси.

Кореспонденцията, свързана с тази статия следва да бъде адресирана до  
Валентина Миленкова, катедра Социология, Югозападен университет „Неофит Рилски“-  
Благоевград, България, Email: [vmilenkova@swu.bg](mailto:vmilenkova@swu.bg)

### Abstract

This article is aimed at presenting a series of activities and systematic efforts that have found a place in the development of a Plan for Gender Equality in Research and academia. This endeavor is part of SPEAR project "Supporting and Implementing Plans for Gender Equality in Academia and Research" under the EU Horizon 2020 Program: to develop specific approaches, activities, and measures systematized in Plans for gender equality to be implemented in the university environment, taking into account the specific national and regional characteristics of universities and structures. The SPEAR project involves universities and non-governmental organizations from 9 European countries: Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Sweden, Austria, Croatia, Portugal, Lithuania, and Bulgaria (SWU "Neofit Rilski" and PU "P. Hilendarski"). The article reveals the purposeful actions of the team from SWU "N. Rilski" in the direction of creating such a plan, which refers to several structural and organizational aspects. As a basis for the development of the Plan, the article shows the results of a quantitative online survey, which presents attitudes and opinions on the topic of gender equality in social activities and research, as well as the results of in-depth interviews with the SWU deans' and rector's authorities under the topic of women's participation in management and research activities. The article shows the importance of gender equality as an opportunity for active participation in research and teaching of capable and proactive people.

*Keywords:* gender equality, university, women's career prospects, gender research

### Резюме

Настоящата статия е насочена към представяне на поредица от дейности и систематизирани усилия, намерили място в изработване на План за равенство на половете в изследователската дейност и образованието. Това начинание е част от SPEAR проект „Подкрепа и прилагане на планове за равенство между половете в академичните среди и научните изследвания“ по програма „Хоризонт на ЕС 2020“: разработване на специфични подходи, дейности и мерки, систематизирани в Планове за равенство между половете, които да се прилагат в университетската среда, като се вземат предвид специфичните национални и регионални характеристики на университетите и структурите. В проекта SPEAR участват университети и неправителствени организации от 9 европейски държави: Дания, Германия, Унгария, Швеция, Австрия, Хърватия, Португалия, Литва и България (ЮЗУ „Неофит Рилски“ и ПУ „П. Хилендарски“). В статията са представени целенасочените действия на екипа от ЮЗУ „Н. Рилски“ по посока създаването на такъв план, който визира различни структурни и организационни

аспекти. Като основа за разработването на Плана, в статията са представени резултати от количествено онлайн изследване, което показва нагласи и мнения по темата за равенство на половете в социалните дейности и науката, както и резултати от дълбочинни интервюта, проведени с деканските и ректорското ръководство на ЮЗУ по темата за равенството на половете и участието на жените в управленски и изследователски дейности. Статията показва значимостта на темата за равенство на половете, като възможност за активно и равнопоставено участие в изследователската и преподавателската работа на способни и проактивни хора.

*Ключови думи:* равенство на половете, университет, перспективи в кариера на жените, изследване на половете

**ARTICLE INFO:**  
**Original Article**  
**Received: 10, 10.2021**  
**Revised: 30, 10.2021**  
**Accepted: 10, 11.2021**

## **Gender Equality: Approaches and Strategies in a University Context**

### **Introduction**

Great dynamics characterize the modern research community over time. If the share of women professionally engaged in research was small in the past, today, we are persistently talking about various policies aimed at active gender involvement in research and academic activities. This trend is not granted, it is the result of a managerial understanding of gender's participation in research and awareness of their positive role and contribution in research and academia. It is therefore very important to have a clear policy vision of creating conditions for gender support (Gender equality strategy), to have an understanding of the multifaceted and diverse activities that gender carry out, and at the same time to encourage them as key actors in academia and research (Spear).

This is the focus of the SPEAR project "Supporting and Implementing Plans for Gender Equality in Academia and Research" under the EU Horizon 2020 Program: to develop specific approaches, activities and measures systematized in Plans for gender equality to be implemented in the university environment, taking into account the specific national and regional characteristics of universities and structures.

The SPEAR project involves universities and non-governmental organizations from 9 European countries: Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Sweden, Austria, Croatia, Portugal, Lithuania, and Bulgaria (SWU "Neofit Rilski" and PU "P. Hilendarski"). The project focuses on four general objectives:

- increasing the number of organizations that have adopted and implemented gender equality plans;
- removal of barriers and improve the women's career prospects in academia;
- improving the gender balance in decision-making bodies;
- strengthening gender issues in research trajectories.

The article presents several analytical aspects: identification of the Gender Equality Plan as a vision for specific measures for gender equality. The second line of analysis shows the existing gender distribution in the university structure of students, doctoral students, lecturers, management. The third substantive focus includes empirical information based on online research and interviews with university leadership representatives on gender equality in research, teaching, and university management. Combining these three aspects of analysis allows us to draw the main guidelines and conclusions for gender equality at Southwestern University.

### **The Gender Equality Plan (GAP)**

The Gender Equality Plan (GAP) is a system of actions aimed at:

- identifying approaches and measures to overcome gender bias;
- setting targets and monitoring through progress indicators.

The Gender Equality Plan goes through four stages:

- *Analysis*: related to the collection of data on the gender structure of the respective institution; for the processes that take place in it.
- *Planning*: refers to the formulation of goals and ways to achieve them in the form of specific actions.
- *Implementation*: related to the implementation of the planned actions and measures.
- *Monitoring*: focuses on identifying progress and evaluating regularly.

The success of the Gender Equality Plan depends on two basic preconditions:

- *Organizational level*: connected with the support of senior management in the form of human and financial resources; identification of stakeholders and cooperation with them for their active involvement;
- *Procedure level*: refers to the formulation of clear goals and objectives, availability of data on gender structure, monitoring, and evaluation of ongoing processes, ensuring sustainability over time.

For the GEP to be successfully implemented, it is necessary to understand the context in which the respective institution exists and develops: history, size, leadership styles, politics, culture, regional location, and economic environment. In addition, it is crucial to find potential stakeholders who are part of the regional and national networks to support the implementation of the planned activities financially and organizationally.

### **South-West University and the Gender Equality Plan**

South-West University is an example of an institution that maintains gender equality at all levels.<sup>1</sup>:

- Students: women - 65.8%; men - 34.2%;
- Doctoral students: women - 63.1%; men - 36.9%;
- Teachers: women - 59.7%; men - 40.3%;
- Heads of departments: women - 59.5%, men - 40.5%;
- Heads of research centers and laboratories: women - 58.1%, men - 41.9%;

---

<sup>1</sup> The data are for the school year 2020/2021

- Deputy Deans: women - 86.7%, men - 13.3%;
- Deans: women - 55.6%, men - 44.4%;
- Rector's management: Rector and vice-rectors: women - 50%, men - 50%.

In this sense, it can be said that the first stage of the GEP, related to the collection of up-to-date information on gender structure, ends with a positive result.

To support the *Second stage - "Planning,"* interviews were conducted with the dean's and rector's authorities of the university in the period July-September 2021 to outline key topics and approaches to promote gender equality in research activities. The interviews aimed to integrate the governing structures of the university as active partners and stakeholders in the development and implementation of the Gender Equality Plan (GEP).

Here are some of the main results of the interviews, which became the basis for the development of the GEP:

All respondents shared that "women are equal and are encouraged to participate in research activities in each faculty."

The interviews emphasized that: "*equality would bring about a complete development of science in general. In my opinion, teamwork and interdisciplinary research, which includes the views of men and women, would bring a lot to the development of science and society in the future*" (female).

In most faculties, women have "*more publications, participate in more projects, in more forums than male lecturers*" (female).

"*Women are much more patient, much more executive and much more eager to do a job to succeed. Men are usually discouraged more quickly if an article is returned to them for revision*" (female).

It was clearly expressed that gender equality has contributed to maintaining the leadership style of management activities, and this can be seen prominently in the university environment.

An important topic in the interviews was the "interest of students and doctoral students in research work." Our understanding is that young people at the university are the future of research. It is important to create values and attitudes for gender equality and their involvement in research activities. In general, it can be said that in Bulgarian society, research and academic work are paid less than in business. However, the regional context of Blagoevgrad and the district, due to the not very high employment of the population, make the profession of

university lecturer and researcher attractive and desirable. There is interest in doctoral studies, and the university has accredited dozens of doctoral programs in various professional fields that are of interest to young people. In percentage terms, women Ph.D. students have a clear advantage (as already noted).

A special place in the conducted interviews is the review of the comparative context of the South-West University to other universities and faculties. From the given answers, it is summarized that the dean's and rector's authorities know the structure by gender in different academic institutions, and the positioning of the South-West University from the point of view of gender equality is at a high level.

For formulating concrete actions in the GEP, the following question was stated in the interview: "How do you think women's participation in science can be expanded? Would you point out specific measures?"

Here we list some specific recommendations that the respondents shared, and these measures are indicative of the fact that the direction is gender equality in research and different ways are sought to maintain and stimulate it:

- *"We believe that women's participation in science could be expanded by:*  
- *creating conditions at the workplace for the children of the employees;*  
- *creating conditions at the workplace for shopping;*  
- *requiring equal participation of women and men in research teams in research projects"* (female).

- *"What needs to be optimized is to increase public funding for universities, funding for innovation and research. This will allow the use of scientific resources for economic development and, accordingly, the raising of the level of salaries, as well as the allocation of more funds for research, respectively, will be a more attractive profession among women"*. (male)

The presented views indicate that important principles and approaches related to gender equality have been established in the academic space. It can definitely be said that the Gender Equality Plan is a prerequisite for this practice to continue in the future, which affirms the value of gender equality in research and university governance as an important principle.

The GEP not only asset measures and goals but also as the implementation of planned actions and monitoring of implementation that becomes a key tool for structural change and overcoming various obstacles to gender participation in academic and research work. The GEP would contribute to European regulations (Report on gender equality in the EU 2021) and

national policies (Report on gender equality in the EU 2021). The GEP would help social dialogue and cooperation with stakeholders, quality of research and teaching, career management, creating a structured professional community, and its development.

To fulfill the third phase, *Implementation*, related to the carrying out of the planned activities and measures, it was important to follow the attitudes of the people from the university - students, teachers, employees to the topic of gender equality in social context and academia. To this purpose, the online survey "Gender Equality in Social relations and Research activity" was conducted.

### Results and analysis

The survey was carried out online, in the period 15.07 – 30.08.2021, with 428 respondents from SWU "Neofit Rilski."<sup>2</sup>

The research questionnaire includes the following content areas: values, family, education, profession, research activities. The emphasis is on the place of women in these areas, as our understanding is that women's careers in research and academia are an integral part of the overall social context and relationships.

The general impression from the obtained results is that in the South-West University, there is a spirit of gender tolerance, support to gender, their achievements and participation in research and academic activities, and support for gender career in research structures and management. All this is an indicator of modern values, of understanding and sharing the principle of gender equality.

The online survey results show that the most important values are: health, family, and education. From the point of view of the general context, it is stated that there are still prejudices in society about women's participation in business and politics, but there is a clear and definite

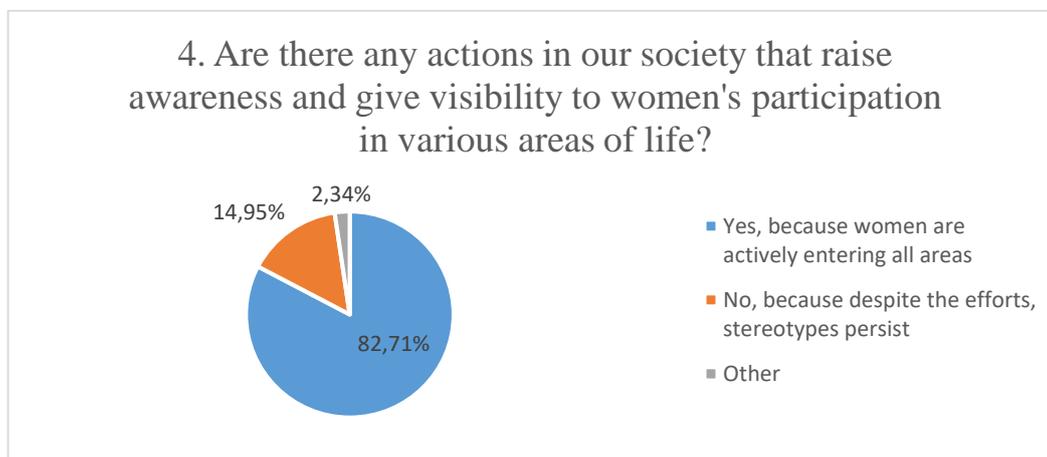
---

<sup>2</sup> The survey questionnaire is based on previous studies on gender equality: The Athena Survey of Science, Engineering, and Technology (ASSET) <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/guidance/equality-diversity-and-inclusion/employment-and-careers/asset-2016> ; Gender Equal. Gender Attitudes. Survey Full Results. (2017). ISBN 978-0-473-43132-7 (PDF) <https://genderequal.nz/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Gender-Attitudes-Survey-FINAL.pdf>; Gender Equality and Quality of Life. The survey questionnaire, University of Oslo. (2013) [http://www.geq.socjologia.uj.edu.pl/documents/32447484/136473799/GEQ\\_Blueprint.pdf/ce00cac3-3852-407e-aded-842d24a99fae](http://www.geq.socjologia.uj.edu.pl/documents/32447484/136473799/GEQ_Blueprint.pdf/ce00cac3-3852-407e-aded-842d24a99fae); Questionnaire "Non-discrimination and equality with regard to the right to health and safety." [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/WG/righthealth/States/MALTA\\_1.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/WG/righthealth/States/MALTA_1.pdf); Gender Equality Capacity Assessment Tool. 92014; UN Women tRaining Center. ISBN 978-1-936291-89-2. [https://trainingcentre.unwomen.org/pluginfile.php/453/mod\\_page/content/1/Capacity\\_AssessmentTool\\_En.pdf](https://trainingcentre.unwomen.org/pluginfile.php/453/mod_page/content/1/Capacity_AssessmentTool_En.pdf) ; UNESCO Questionnaire on Gender Equality and Culture. [http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CLT/pdf/Canada\\_UNESCO\\_Questionnaire\\_on\\_Gender\\_Equality\\_and\\_Cultu.pdf](http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CLT/pdf/Canada_UNESCO_Questionnaire_on_Gender_Equality_and_Cultu.pdf); Gender Equality in the workplace questionnaire. (2019). <https://equileap.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Equileap-Questionnaire-2019.pdf>

opinion (according to 82.7% of people) about the "visibility of women's participation because women are actively entering all areas" (**Graph 1**).

### Graph 1

*Women's participation in the social context*



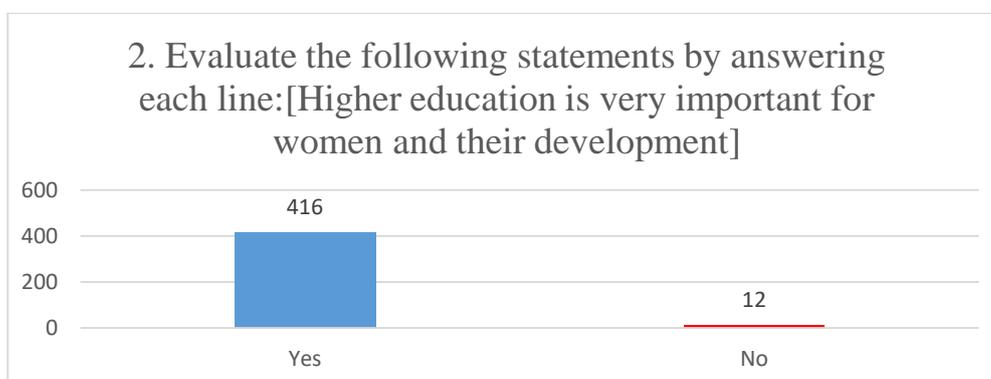
It can be said that within the family, the woman remains the main figure involved in the housework according to 52.8% of respondents, but almost all respondents - 97.2% say that housework should be "distributed among the family members." In this context, again referring to the principle of gender equality, it is emphasized that "decisions in the family are taken by mutual agreement":

- in terms of costs, indicated by 81.8%;
- in relation to children, indicated by 77.1% of the persons.

The expressed position for gender equality is also manifested in the attitudes towards education and training opportunities. In this context, it is emphasized that "higher education is very important for women and their development" (**Graph 2**).

### Graph 2

*Gender and its development*

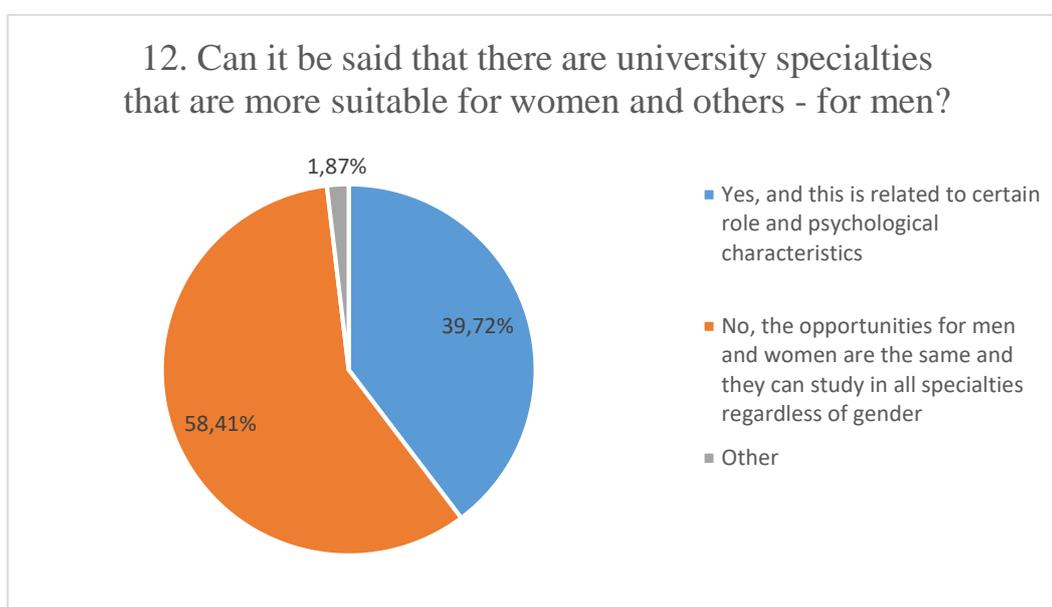


In addition, to the question: "Can it be said that there are university specialties that are more suitable for women and others - for men" (see Graph 3):

- 58.4% of the respondents answered: "No, the opportunities for men and women are the same," and they can learn whatever they want regardless of gender.
- 39.7% say that the division of university majors - as suitable for "men" or "for women" is "related to a certain role and psychological characteristics." On this basis, 63.6% of people say that professions are more suitable for men.

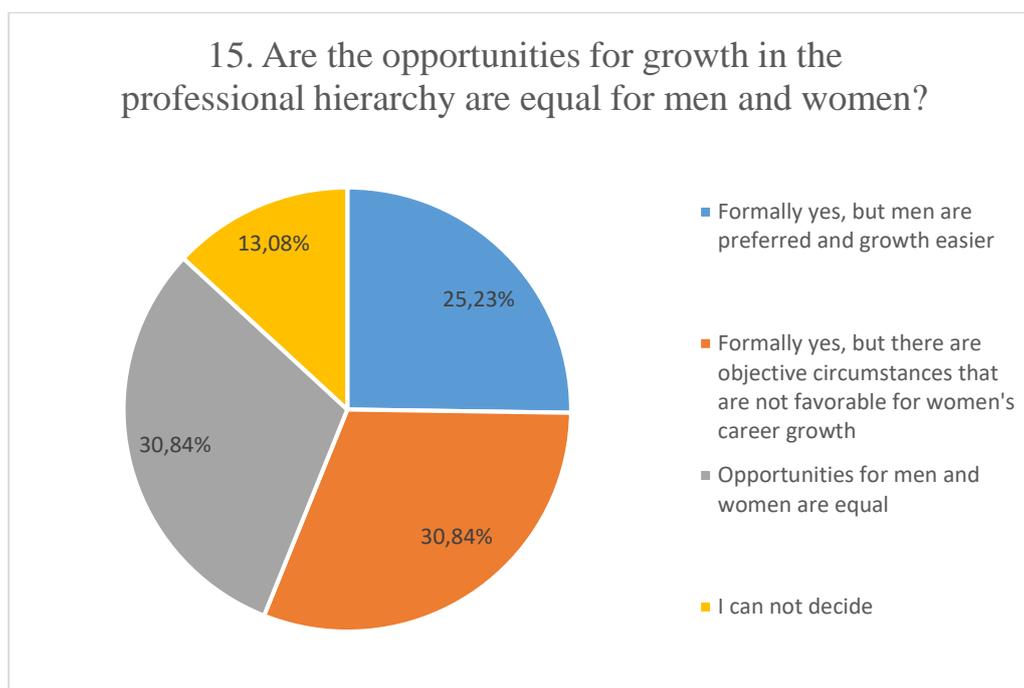
### Graph 3

#### *Gender and Higher Education*



In terms of career and mobility, more than half of the respondents (57%) share that women and men make similar efforts in the performance of their professional duties, but the opportunities for growth in the professional hierarchy are not the same (56%), which requires targeted and systematic efforts towards women's participation and mobility and gives meaning to the overall work on this project: (Graph 4).

- Formally they are the same, but "men are preferred and growth easier" - according to 25.2% of respondents.
- Formally they are the same, but "there are objective circumstances that are not favorable for women's career growth," - according to 30.8% of people.
- 1/3 of the people (30.8%) state that "the opportunities for men and women to grow in their careers are equal".

**Graph 4***Gender and Growth in the Professional hierarchy*

An indicator of the effectiveness of active female involvement is that 51.4% of the sample prefer a leader of the organization in which they work or learn to be a woman. In this regard, the majority of respondents state that management positions are held mainly by women because:

- They have more ideas;
- They are more ambitious;
- They have better organizational skills.

Concerning the work of women in research and academia, the following characteristics come to the fore:

- 67.8% (from the respondents) say that "women participate equally in science activities (research, projects, forums, publications);
- 60% say that women are "highly professional";
- 37.2% say that "women have the necessary erudition and culture";
- 58.4% say that there are still "stereotypes regarding the payment of women's labor, but you are gradually experiencing."

An important topic in the study was related to the qualities of women working in research and academic activities. Most of the respondents indicated the following qualities: "confidence", "hardworking", "independence", "adaptability", "responsibility". In addition, the

following factors are of the greatest importance in choosing a profession in research and academia:

- Possession of skills and qualities necessary for the respective activities;
- Career growth
- The prestige of the scientific profession.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it can be said that, in general, gender equality is a guiding principle in social relations, academic and scientific work in Bulgarian society. At the same time, the opportunities for growth for men and women are not completely identical, and that there are still stereotypes about women's pay; and this raises the topic of more effective and focused efforts in science policy and the management of research structures in terms of the place of women, gender equality, and the recognition they receive. Definitely, South-West University can be identified as an organization that respects women's rights and promotes their mobility and initiative based on non-discrimination, a prerequisite for a progressive vision of gender equality in academia and research. The SWU project team highly appreciates the possibility of affirming gender participation in scientific activity and in the management of scientific and academic structures.

In this regard, the developed GEP in SWU is focused on creating a system for the institutionalization of activities aimed at achieving gender equality. It is planned to establish a Commission for Gender Equality and a Center for Research and Advanced Training of University Staff.

The plan includes four main areas for *understanding, systematizing, institutionalizing, and implementing* the policy for gender equality in South-West University "N. Rilski":

1. Establishment of a system for management and development of the environment, affirming and developing gender equality;
2. Institutional support for achieving gender equality in research and education;
3. Combining personal and professional life;
4. Conducting a systematic study of the situation and trends in terms of gender equality.

In each of these areas are included 22 activities with specific deadlines and indicators for evaluating the results obtained.

The Plan includes the stakeholders, structures, and bodies responsible for the implementation of the envisaged activities. The planned activities represent a symbiosis between the specifics of the university as a research and educational institution, reflect the characteristics of the region as including different ethnic groups, ethnocultural communities, people with other social and economic affiliations. The overall GEP and the planned activities are in line with national specifics and, at the same time, follow the common European values and understandings, which contribute to the complex orientation of university education and its institutional trajectory.

### References

Gender equality strategy | European Commission (europa.eu)

[https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/gender-equality-strategy\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/gender-equality-strategy_en)

Report on gender equality in the EU (2021)

[https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/aid\\_development\\_cooperation\\_fundamental\\_rights/annual\\_report\\_ge\\_2021\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/aid_development_cooperation_fundamental_rights/annual_report_ge_2021_en.pdf)

SPEAR <https://gender-spear.eu/about-spear>

National Strategy for the Promotion of Equality between Women and Men 2021-2030

[https://www.mod.bg/bg/doc/ravnopostavenost/20210119\\_National\\_strategy\\_2021-2030.pdf](https://www.mod.bg/bg/doc/ravnopostavenost/20210119_National_strategy_2021-2030.pdf)