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Equality Plans in Andalusian Universities: Professional Promotion Policies

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Abstract

In recent decades, Equality Plans have played a pivotal role in promoting substantive gender equality in academia, particularly in terms of professional advancement and the reduction in gender gaps. Despite notable progress, structural inequalities persist in restricting access, retention, and equitable career development in higher education. This study examines the Equality Plans of nine Andalusian public universities, identifying the key pillars, measures, and actions explicitly targeting professional promotion. Employing a qualitative approach and content analysis, the study assesses both the progress made and the challenges that persist in implementing these policies. The findings indicate that, over the course of a decade of developing equality strategies, universities have adopted and implemented plans that have generated significant initiatives to advance gender equality. Nevertheless, notable disparities remain concerning the updating, terminology, structure, and, particularly, the scope of the measures implemented. This article highlights the need to strengthen assessment strategies and broaden the scope of intervention in Equality Plans to ensure equitable and sustainable career advancement within the Andalusian university system, offering a transferable framework for promoting gender equality in other higher education contexts.

Keywords: equality plans; professional advancement; gender; university; academic career

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, gender equality in the workplace has increasingly become a focal point of attention and regulation for both national and international organizations. In the Spanish context, Organic Law 3/2007, of 22 March, on the Effective Equality of Women and Men, commonly known as the Organic Law on Equality (OLE), establishes Equality Plans as a key instrument for achieving real and effective equality in companies, which has been progressively extended to universities through the institutionalization process. In this sense, the OLE, together with the Organic Law of the University System (OLUS), regulates the creation of equality units within the university structure and establishes Equality Plans as fundamental tools for institutionalizing equality policies in universities (Pastor & Acosta, 2016).

OLE defines Equality Plans as "an orderly set of measures, adopted after conducting a situation assessment, aimed at achieving equal treatment and opportunities between

women and men in the company and eliminating discrimination based on sex" (Article 46, Section 1 of Law 3/2007). Within this set of evaluable measures, professional promotion is one of the key areas, as it is essential for retention and advancement in the academic environment. Professional or academic promotion can be understood as the set of mechanisms that allow university staff to advance in their careers. In general terms, it is based on meritocratic and objective criteria. However, although the university system presumes that all individuals have equal opportunities to progress in their careers according to their merits (Gallego-Morón & Montes-López, 2021; Reynolds et al., 2018), the scientific literature questions the objectivity of these criteria and highlights the persistence of structural inequalities that mainly affect women (Gallego-Morón & Montes-López, 2021; Pastor & Acosta, 2016), since, in practical terms, this system constitutes an obstacle for women to retain their academic positions and achieve promotion (Villar-Aguilés & Obiol-Francés, 2022).

Specifically, it has been argued that policies and evaluation systems, often presented as neutral and meritocratic, perpetuate gender segregation in academic promotion. Caregiving responsibilities, implicit biases, and structural barriers limit women's opportunities to advance in their academic careers, hindering both their retention and their access to positions of greater responsibility (Villar-Aguilés & Obiol-Francés, 2022). In this context, the promotion systems not only ignore existing inequalities but frequently reinforce them.

This study aims to identify the institutional actions that affect the professional careers of female academics in terms of their professional promotion. To this end, it analyzes the content of the Equality Plans implemented in Andalusian public universities, examining the progress made in academic promotion and their capacity to mitigate gender inequalities.

By addressing this issue, this study advances the understanding of the effectiveness of Equality Plans within the Andalusian university system. The results provide evidence that can reinforce gender-sensitive career advancement policies and practices not only in Andalusian universities but also in other higher education institutions. In this regard, the findings are expected to inform and guide future institutional initiatives aimed at promoting more robust and sustainable gender equality measures, with the potential to generate broader societal impact.

1.1. Gender Segregation in Academic Promotion

The evolution of the contemporary university system, shaped by the implementation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and grounded in the Humboldtian model of 1810, has substantially redefined the academic profession. In addition to the traditional pillars of teaching and research that have historically characterized academic work, a growing emphasis on academic management has emerged, now formally recognized and assessed in institutional evaluation processes. This comprehensive understanding of academic activity constitutes a central element of professional promotion within the Spanish university system, where access to and promotion in academic careers are determined by rigorous assessments encompassing teaching, research, and management performance.

However, this transformation has had a disproportionate impact on the careers of female academics. Although Organic Law 2/2023 of 22 March on the University System (OLSU) and the evaluations conducted by the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (NAQAA), as well as regional agencies such as the Agency for Scientific and University Quality in Andalusia (ASUQA), are intended to make professional promotion more objective, in practice they perpetuate structural inequalities that predominantly affect women. Female academics are particularly disadvantaged by the limited consideration given to care responsibilities in evaluation processes, which constrains their ability to compete on equal terms with their male counterparts. This is especially evident in the demands related to research productivity and participation in administrative and manage-

ment activities—areas that require time and dedication difficult to reconcile with family responsibilities, which are still assumed mainly by women (Pastor et al., 2020; Pérez Orozco, 2006; Villar-Aguilés & Obiol-Francés, 2022).

As Jornet-Meliá (2021) notes, abrupt modifications to accreditation requirements, together with their limited transparency and predictability, add further complexity to academic evaluation processes. Although such criteria are nominally accessible, their vague and overly generic formulation prevents academics from confidently determining whether they meet the promotion standards. This ambiguity becomes particularly evident when leadership is incorporated as an evaluative dimension, revealing a framework developed without a gender-sensitive perspective, or when years of professional experience are considered in ways that penalize women who have taken maternity leave. Consequently, the system risks reproducing implicit biases and reinforcing existing structural barriers within academic institutions. These conditions intensify the uncertainty disproportionately experienced by women, who already navigate persistent obstacles such as vertical segregation and the glass ceiling.

Moreover, the prevailing notion of "excellence" in academic careers—primarily centred on research performance—reproduces gender inequalities by failing to adequately value teaching and administrative responsibilities, roles in which women tend to be overrepresented and which are often bureaucratic in nature, while men are more likely to access higher-status leadership positions (Burke, 2021). The literature further indicates that women are frequently confined to these lower-valued domains; for instance, they may be allocated heavier teaching loads, more subjects, or courses with greater complexity, or relegated to tasks of lesser prestige—such as secretary—which ultimately hinder their promotion to senior academic ranks.

The neoliberal governance of academia, characterized by its emphasis on meritocracy and individual performance, also contributes to job insecurity and reinforces power dynamics that disproportionately benefit men (Pérez Orozco, 2006). Because they are more frequently positioned in higher-status roles, men occupy decision-making spaces in which promotion criteria are interpreted and applied, thereby generating vertical and uneven power relationships between the sexes. Although the principles of equality, merit, and ability are formally embedded in promotion regulations (Eurydice, 2024), traditional hierarchical structures continue to privilege male-dominated career trajectories, thus constraining women's promotion within the academic system (Gallego-Morón & Montes-López, 2021).

This imbalance within the promotion system, as evidenced by investigations conducted across universities worldwide, perpetuates the gender gap at the upper echelons of academic careers, resulting in the persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership and decision-making positions (Falco et al., 2023). Even in feminized fields, women remain concentrated in the lower tiers of the academic hierarchy, with their presence diminishing sharply in senior ranks. Although universities often portray themselves as meritocratic and gender-neutral institutions, in practice they continue to reproduce structural inequalities that constrain equitable professional development for both men and women, thereby undermining the principles of fairness and equal opportunity on which the academic system claims to rest (Gallego-Morón & Montes-López, 2021).

1.2. Impact of Equality Plans on Academic Promotion

Career promotion within the Spanish university system continues to exhibit pronounced gender inequalities, despite the existence of international and national frameworks designed to promote equality. Occupational segregation by sex has intensified in recent decades, with women concentrated in a limited range of sectors and occupations (horizontal segregation) and facing restricted access to positions of authority and decision-making

(vertical segregation), a trend particularly evident in developed countries (Gallego-Morón & Montes-López, 2021). This situation is especially visible in academia, where women encounter multiple structural barriers that constrain their professional progression.

The problem of vertical segregation in academia is closely linked to factors such as gender stereotypes, direct and indirect forms of discrimination, and work–life balance conflicts, all of which disproportionately affect women. These barriers give rise to the so-called "scissors effect" or "pincer effect," whereby women are overrepresented in the lower ranks of academic careers while their representation declines sharply at the higher levels (Jiménez Rodrigo et al., 2018; Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación, 2023).

A detailed analysis of research careers in Spanish universities during the 2020–2021 academic year reveals that, although gender parity exists at the initial stages of academic entry (50%), the proportion of women progressively declines as careers advance. In positions associated with consolidation and stabilization within the university system, female representation decreases to 44.5%, and it drops sharply to 25.6% at the rank of Full Professor—the highest category within the academic civil service (Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación, 2023). This pronounced underrepresentation of women in senior academic positions clearly illustrates the persistence of vertical segregation and the enduring gender imbalance in academic leadership.

The Study on the Situation of Young Female Researchers in Spain (2021), published by the Women and Science Unit, indicates that, in addition to job insecurity and instability, women report significantly higher levels of dissatisfaction than their male counterparts, alongside a more pessimistic outlook regarding their professional future. Female researchers perceive fewer opportunities to attain professorships or senior research positions, and these inequalities are further exacerbated among those with family responsibilities. Structural factors embedded within organizational culture—including challenges related to the reconciliation of professional and personal life, gender bias, and discriminatory practices—play a decisive role in perpetuating this persistent imbalance (Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación, 2023).

With regard to efforts aimed at addressing these inequalities, Equality Plans constitute a fundamental policy instrument; however, their effectiveness largely depends on their proper implementation. As Rojas (2019) argues, such plans must transcend anti-discrimination measures and incorporate proactive actions designed to promote women's access to positions of responsibility and leadership.

In this context, universities are required to adopt a more comprehensive and systematic approach that fully integrates a gender perspective across all institutional structures, policies, and procedures, ranging from the organization of working time to the identification and correction of biases in academic evaluation and accreditation processes. Although equality plans are formally in place in Spanish public universities, only 60% have implemented effective measures aimed at ensuring gender equality in recruitment, promotion, and evaluation processes (Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación, 2023).

At the regional level, all Andalusian public universities have demonstrated a notable commitment to gender equality through the establishment of Equality Units and the development of Equality Plans (ACCUA, 2024). However, the depth and scope of these measures vary considerably (Jiménez Rodrigo et al., 2018; Soto-Arteaga, 2019). Soto-Arteaga (2019) highlights the progress achieved by the University of Seville and the University of Málaga in this domain, whereas Jiménez Rodrigo et al. (2018) note that, overall, equality policies at Andalusian universities are predominantly focused on employment-related measures (53%), followed by educational initiatives (33%) and research-oriented actions (14%).

Despite these efforts, data from the 2022–2023 academic year reveal low female representation in senior academic ranks and leadership positions at Andalusian public universi-

ties: only 26% of women occupy the rank of University Professor, compared to 74% of men, and 45% of all Full Professorship positions are held by women. In terms of single-person governing bodies (as of January 2024), female representation remains limited, with women accounting for only 11.1% of rectors compared to 88.9% of men (ACCUA, 2024). These figures underscore the masculinization of academic networks and its detrimental impact on the careers of female academics (Gallego-Morón & Montes-López, 2021; Pastor et al., 2020).

To advance toward a more inclusive and equitable university system, institutions must implement ambitious measures that extend beyond the resolution of labor-related issues and promote deep structural transformations encompassing the entire academic community. Such measures would enable universities to fully leverage all available talent and contribute to academic excellence, positioning them as leaders in promoting equality for future generations. Within this framework, it is essential that Equality Plans, as established under Law 3/2007, not only define specific equality objectives but also incorporate effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure their effective implementation.

2. Materials and Methods

This study aims to examine the professional promotion initiatives implemented through Equality Plans in Andalusian universities. To achieve this objective, the research employs a qualitative approach grounded in content analysis, understood as a procedure that "transforms the content of specific documents or communications into data that can be systematically analyzed and processed" (López-Noguero, 2002, p. 173). According to López-Noguero (2002), content analysis falls within the scope of descriptive research, primarily aimed at identifying and disentangling the essential components of a phenomenon through the rigorous examination of a documentary corpus. A commitment to precision and objectivity in measurement characterizes this process.

2.1. Sample

The sample comprised the Equality Plans in force in 2024 for the nine public universities in Andalusia with a stable teaching and research staff, ensuring the right to professional promotion. These universities are University of Almería (UAL), University of Cádiz (UCA), University of Córdoba (UCO), University of Granada (UGR), University of Huelva (UHU), University of Jaén (UJA), University of Málaga (UMA), Pablo de Olavide University (POU), and University of Seville (US) (Ministerio de Universidades, n.d.). Although the International University of Andalusia is a public institution, its faculties are drawn from the Andalusian university network and thus develop their professional careers at their home institutions. For this reason, International University of Andalusia was excluded from the analyzed sample.

2.2. Analysis Instrument

An ad hoc analytical framework was developed to assess the Equality Plans of Andalusian universities with respect to professional promotion. The framework comprises 13 quantitative and qualitative items distributed across two dimensions (see Table 1), enabling the systematic compilation of information related to the description of the Equality Plan, its structure, and the content of institutional actions associated with professional promotion at each university. This instrument was selected for its capacity to systematically organize elements into distinct categories, represented as items that collectively constitute the object of study from a comprehensive perspective (Romero-Oliva et al., 2021).

Table 1. Analytical structure of the Equality Plans: dimensions, categories, and metacategories related to professional promotion.

Dimension	Category	Subcategory	Metacategory
I. Description of the Equality Plan	Name of the institution		
	Responsible unit or committee (Dependence within the equality structure)		
	Number and title of the plan		
	Period of validity		
II. Structure and Content of the Equality Plan	Total number of axes	Number of axes on professional promotion	Description of axes on professional promotion
	Total number of objectives	Number of objectives on professional promotion	Description of objectives on professional promotion
	Total number of actions	Number of actions on professional promotion	Description of actions on professional promotion

2.3. Procedure and Data Analysis

The first phase of the study consisted of compiling the Equality Plans of Andalusian universities from their respective institutional websites. Each document was subjected to a thorough review in order to achieve an in-depth understanding of its content and to develop an ad hoc framework. In the second phase, this framework (analysis grid) was systematically applied, and data were extracted in accordance with predefined criteria. To ensure the reliability and validity of the analysis, two researchers independently reviewed a subset of the analyzed documents, leading to subsequent refinements of both the analytical framework and the coding scheme.

Following data collection, a frequency analysis was conducted for the quantitative data. Regarding the qualitative data, a descriptive and interpretive analysis was performed, whereby the content was organized and structured according to its relevance to different areas of interest. The categorization of the collected information facilitated more efficient and coherent data management. For the analysis of information related to the axes, objectives, and actions concerning professional promotion, first-level coding—both open and axial—was applied, enabling the systematic labeling and organization of the content into meaningful categories.

The statistical software Microsoft Excel 365 was used for the representation and descriptive analysis of the collected data.

3. Results

An analysis of the Equality Plans implemented across the nine public universities in Andalusia reveals a set of measures designed to promote gender equality in academic career promotion. The specific actions adopted by each university within their respective Equality Plans are detailed below.

3.1. Description of the Equality Plan

All nine public universities in Andalusia have established an Equality Plan. However, the scope and frequency of these plans vary considerably across institutions, reflecting differences in both the approaches adopted and the continuity of the strategies implemented.

Each of these universities have a unit responsible for developing their respective Equality Plans, commonly referred to as the "Equality Unit". However, some institutions use alternative nomenclature: the University of Cádiz designates it as the "Unit for Equality between Women and Men," the University of Granada as the "Equality and Diversity Unit," and the Pablo de Olavide University as the "Equality Office." Each of the "Equality Units"

is typically assigned to a single administrative body, the Vice-Rector's Office. In contrast, the University of Almería, the University of Córdoba, and the University of Granada report to the Vice-Rector's Office for Equality, Inclusion, and Social Commitment. The remaining institutions are affiliated with vice-rectorates with different official titles.

In terms of nomenclature, the University of Almería, the University of Granada, the University of Málaga, and the University of Seville use the generic designation "Equality Plan." In contrast, the University of Cádiz, the University of Córdoba, the University of Jaén, and the Pablo de Olavide University have adopted the title "Plan for Equality between Women and Men." While the University of Cádiz and the Pablo Olavide University retain this designation across all versions of their plans, the University of Almería presents a variation with its "Third Master Plan for Equality and Integration of Sexual and Gender Diversity," and the Pablo Olavide University also publishes its "Third Strategic Plan for Gender Equality." The University of Huelva, on the other hand, initially used the title "Equality Plan" and later adopted "Plan for Equality between Women and Men" in subsequent versions.

All the universities analyzed have approved and implemented an Equality Plan. The University of Seville and the University of Málaga were the first to adopt their initial Equality Plans. In contrast, the University of Almería has progressed more slowly, as it is still in the process of implementing its first plan. Meanwhile, the University of Cádiz, the University of Granada, and the University of Huelva are currently implementing their second Equality Plans, whereas the University of Córdoba, the University of Jaén, and the University of Seville have already advanced to their third. Notably, the University of Málaga is now implementing its fourth Equality Plan. It is also important to highlight the irregularity in the renewal of these plans, with gaps that in some cases exceed four years (including extensions) (see Table 2).

Table 2. Period of validity of the Equality Plans.

University	I Equality Plan	II Equality Plan	III Equality Plan	IV Equality Plan
UAL	2020–2024	-	-	-
UCA	2011–2018	2019–2023	-	-
UCO	2014–2018	2018–2022	2023–2026	
UGR	2011–2014	2020–2024	-	-
UHU	2012–Undated	2020–2024	-	-
UJA	2011–2015	2016–2019	2021–2023	-
UMA	2010–2014	2014–2018	2019–2022	2023–2026
POU	2012–2015	2017–2020	2022–2026	-
US	2009–2012	2014–2018	2022–2024	-

3.2. Structure and Content of the Equality Plan

The Equality Plans were analyzed in terms of both their structural design and the specific content related to professional promotion. In general, these plans are organized across several hierarchical levels: they begin with axes (meso level), which are developed into specific objectives (macro level), and are subsequently detailed through actions (micro level). The structure and terminology used to define these levels vary among universities. For instance, the University of Jaén employs a distinct nomenclature. In this case, the so-called "Master Plan Objectives," identified by the codes IDO1, IDO2, and so forth, were treated as axes in this analysis. The objectives are further elaborated through lines, coded with the letter "L" followed by a number (e.g., L1, L2), and culminate in actions, designated with the letter "A" and their corresponding numbering (e.g., A1, A3). At the University of Córdoba, however, the items referred to as *Actions* were considered *Objectives* for the

purpose of this study, while their Objectives were interpreted as *Actions*. The University of Málaga structures its IV Equality Plan around two levels: the meso level (*axes*) and the micro level (measures). In all cases, the structure of the Equality Plans was analyzed by level, irrespective of the specific terminology employed by each institution.

The number of pillars included in the universities' Equality Plans ranges from five to six, except for the University of Almería, which comprises four pillars, and the University of Granada and the University of Málaga, each of which includes nine. Concerning the pillars addressing professional promotion, this number fluctuates between three and nine. It is noteworthy that at the University of Almería, the University of Cádiz, and the University of Málaga, all pillars explicitly address professional promotion. They are followed by the University of Jaén and the Pablo de Olavide University, where all but one pillar focus on this dimension. Conversely, the University of Granada is the institution that places the least emphasis on professional promotion, with only three of its nine pillars devoted to this area (see Table 3).

Table 3. Distribution of axes, objectives, and actions related to professional promotion in Equality Plans.

University	Total Number of Axes	Number of Axes on Professional Promotion	Total Number of Objectives	Number of Objectives on Professional Promotion	Total Number of Actions	Number of Actions on Professional Promotion
UAL	4	4	15	8	56	13
UCA	6	6	19	13	42	24
UCO	5	3	18	12	48	16
UGR	9	3	34	4	151	6
UHU	6	4	13	8	56	27
UJA	5	4	16	17	48	16
UMA	9	9	0	0	77	36
POU	6	5	18	11	46	20
US	5	3	18	3	125	28

With regard to the objectives outlined in the Equality Plans, their number varies considerably across universities, ranging from 13 to 34. At this level, there is a marked decline in the proportion of objectives related to professional development when compared with the total number of objectives. This pattern is particularly pronounced at the University of Granada, where only 4 out of 34 objectives address professional development, and at the University of Seville, with 3 out of 18. In proportional terms, objectives and actions related to professional promotion vary substantially among institutions. The University of Cádiz ranks highest, with 59.52%, followed by the University of Huelva with 48.21%, the University of Málaga with 46.75%, Pablo de Olavide University with 43.47%, the University of Córdoba and the University of Jaén with 33.33%, the University of Almería with 23.21%, the University of Seville with 24.8%, and finally the University of Granada, with only 3.97% (see Table 3).

The 41 areas of the Equality Plans related to professional promotion were classified into seven categories (see Table 4). The most prevalent category is *Teaching, Research, and Knowledge Transfer* (n = 10), which appears in all universities except Pablo de Olavide University. This category seeks to integrate a gender perspective into teaching and research, fostering academic equity and promoting the dissemination of knowledge on equality throughout society. Another key category is Co-responsibility and Conciliation (n = 9), which is included in all plans except that of the University of Córdoba. Within this domain, the universities commit to facilitating the conciliation of personal, professional,

and academic life by promoting co-responsibility policies that encourage an equitable distribution of domestic and professional duties.

Table 4. Categorization of professional promotion axes in Equality Plans.

Categories of Axis	UAL	UCA	UCO	UGR	UHU	UJA	UMA	POU	US
Culture of equality and non-violence	1	1	1	0	1	0	3	2	0
Teaching, research, and knowledge transfer	1	1	2	1	1	1	2	0	1
Governance, management, and representation	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	1	1
Co-responsibility and work–life balance	1	1	0	1	1	2	1	1	1
Access and professional promotion	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0
Gender-based violence	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
Monitoring and evaluation	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0

In contrast, the categories Professional Access and Promotion and Gender-Based Violence (n = 3) are less frequently addressed; whereas Monitoring and Evaluation (n = 1) appears exclusively in the plan of the University of Málaga. This latter category underscores the importance of systematically assessing the impact of the actions implemented and ensuring that the necessary adjustments are introduced based on the results obtained.

The University of Málaga plan encompasses pillars influencing professional promotion across all categories except "governance, management, and representation," with particular emphasis on "a culture of equality and non-violence" (n = 3) and "teaching, research, and transfer" (n = 2). Similarly, the University of Cádiz addresses all categories except "monitoring and evaluation." By contrast, the University of Seville and University of Jaén structure their professional promotion pillars into "teaching, research, and transfer," "governance, management, and representation," and "co-responsibility and work–life balance." The University of Córdoba, in turn, focuses exclusively on "a culture of equality and non-violence" and "teaching, research, and transfer."

The 76 objectives identified in the Equality Plans related to professional promotion have been classified into ten categories (see Table 5). In this context, universities concentrate a greater number of objectives in the categories "Promotion of the Gender Perspective in Teaching, Research, and Transfer" (n = 19) and "Reconciliation and Co-responsibility of Work, Academic, and Family Life" (n = 17). Conversely, the least represented categories are "Promotion of Equality through Affirmative Action" (n = 1), "Strengthening Equality Units and Institutional Governance in Equality" (n = 2), and "Culture of Equality at the University" (n = 2).

Table 5. Categorization of professional promotion objectives in Equality Plans.

Categories of Objectives	UAL	UCA	UCO	UGR	UHU	UJA	UMA	POU	US
Training, visibility, and awareness on inequality	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	3	0
Promotion of the gender perspective in teaching, research, and knowledge transfer	2	3	5	1	2	3	0	2	1
Promotion of women's leadership and participation in academic and scientific management	1	1	3	0	0	3	0	1	0
Gender balance in representative and decision-making bodies	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Work–Life balance and co-responsibility in academic, professional, and family life.	2	1	1	1	1	8	0	2	1
Equal opportunities in access and professional promotion.	1	3	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
Prevention of harassment and gender-based violence.	0	2	1	0	0	3	0	1	0

Table 5. *Cont.*

Categories of Objectives	UAL	UCA	UCO	UGR	UHU	UJA	UMA	POU	US
Strengthening of equality units and institutional governance in equality.	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
Promotion of equality through positive action.	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Culture of equality in the university.	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0

A disaggregated analysis by university reveals that the University of Córdoba leads the category "Promoting a Gender Perspective in Teaching, Research, and Knowledge Transfer," with the highest number of objectives (n = 5), followed by the University of Cádiz and the University of Jaén, both with three objectives. In the category "Work–Life Balance and Co-Responsibility at Work, Academic, and Family Levels," the University of Jaén stands out, with the highest number of objectives (n = 8) (see Table 5). Furthermore, as previously noted, the University of Málaga presents a two-level structure (macro and micro) in its Equality Plan, which precludes its representation in this specific categorization of professional promotion objectives.

A total of 186 actions related to professional promotion was identified and distributed across 37 subcategories corresponding to the eight previously defined categories (Table 6). Although some actions could reasonably be categorized under more than one category, each was assigned to a single category and subcategory for the purposes of analysis.

The actions addressing professional promotion are primarily focused on research and gender equality (n = 45) and work–life balance and co-responsibility (n = 42). These are followed by actions related to representation and leadership in gender equality (n = 23), training and awareness-raising on gender equality (n = 19), equality in recruitment, hiring, and career promotion (n = 17), harassment prevention and the implementation of related protocols (n = 12), and, finally, the dissemination and visibility of gender equality (n = 9).

Table 6. Categorization of professional promotion actions in Equality Plans.

Categories and Subcategories of Actions	UAL	UCA	UCO	UGR	UHU	UJA	UMA	POU	US
TRAINING AND AWARENESS ON GENDER EQUALITY									
Gender equality training for the entire university community	1	1	0	0	0	0	4	1	1
Specific training for the prevention of harassment and gender-based violence	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0
Awareness on co-responsibility and work–life balance	0	2	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
Workshops and programs for female leadership	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Dissemination of educational materials and resources	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
RESEARCH AND GENDER EQUALITY									
Promotion of gender studies and their funding	2	1	2	1	0	1	2	0	1
Recognition of research in gender (awards, mentions)	1	2	1	1	0	0	1	0	0
Inclusion of gender perspective in projects and publications	1	1	0	0	1	0	2	0	0
Categories and Subcategories of Actions	**UAL**	**UCA**	**UCO**	**UGR**	**UHU**	**UJA**	**UMA**	**POU**	**US**
Database and visibility of female researchers and gender studies	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Positive actions in research (leadership and evaluation)	0	0	6	0	5	3	3	1	4
REPRESENTATION AND LEADERSHIP IN EQUALITY									
Promotion of balanced representation in governing bodies and committees	2	2	0	0	1	0	4	1	0
Encouragement of women's participation in prominent roles	0	0	1	0	1	0	2	2	1
Positive action measures to balance representation	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
WORK–LIFE BALANCE AND CO-RESPONSIBILITY									
Dissemination and awareness of work–life balance measures	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	2
Flexible scheduling and adaptation of meetings	0	2	0	1	0	2	4	1	1
Resources for dependents and children (nurseries, lactation rooms)	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	2
Individualized support for specific work–life balance cases	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Specific measures for work–life balance in mobility (research and training)	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2
Agreements with external entities to support work–life balance	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	1
Diagnosis and evaluation of needs	1	0	0	1	2	1	1	2	1

Table 6. *Cont.*

Categories and Subcategories of Actions	UAL	UCA	UCO	UGR	UHU	UJA	UMA	POU	US
PREVENTION AND HARASSMENT PROTOCOLS									
Specific training on prevention of workplace and sexual harassment	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	0
Updating and dissemination of action protocols	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	3	0
Gender perspective in occupational health	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Institutional support in cases of gender-based violence	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
EQUALITY IN SELECTION, HIRING, AND PROFESSIONAL PROMOTION									
Equality criteria in selection and promotion processes	1	1	1	0	2	0	0	0	0
Positive action measures to reduce the gender gap	1	2	0	1	0	0	0	1	0
Balanced composition of committees and tribunals	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Analysis and monitoring of equal opportunities in career progression	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	1
Equality in hiring and subcontracting	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
INSTITUTIONAL MANAGEMENT, PLANNING, AND MONITORING									
Gender diagnostics and studies	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	2
Economic resources and structures for equality	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	2	0
Incorporation of gender perspective in regulations and policies	0	0	0	0	1	2	1	0	1
Strategic planning and evaluation of equality actions	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Categories and Subcategories of Actions	**UAL**	**UCA**	**UCO**	**UGR**	**UHU**	**UJA**	**UMA**	**POU**	**US**
Institutional reflection and analysis on gender barriers	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
DISSEMINATION AND VISIBILITY OF GENDER EQUALITY									
Promotion of equality activities and events (e.g., research night)	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1
Awareness campaigns on equality and gender	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0
Publicity of calls and opportunities with a gender perspective	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2

From a comparative perspective, the University of Málaga ranks as the institution with the highest number of actions related to gender equality training and awareness (n = 7), followed by the University of Cádiz (n = 5). In the category of research and gender equality, the University of Córdoba stands out with nine actions, followed by the University of Málaga with eight. For its part, measures related to representation and leadership in gender equality are concentrated at the University of Málaga (n = 6), while both the University of Cádiz and the Pablo de Olavide University report five actions each.

In terms of actions aimed at promoting professional promotion through work–life balance and co-responsibility, the University of Seville stands out with ten measures, followed by the University of Málaga with nine. The Pablo de Olavide University (n = 5) distinguishes itself by paying particular attention to measures related to harassment prevention and corresponding protocols. In the category of equality in recruitment, selection, and professional promotion, the University of Huelva leads with five actions, followed by the University of Cádiz with three. Likewise, the University of Huelva stands out in institutional management, planning, and monitoring, where it records the highest number of actions. Finally, in dissemination and visibility of gender equality, the University of Seville includes the largest number of measures (n = 3).

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The results of this research allow us to draw fundamental conclusions about gender-focused professional promotion in the Equality Plans implemented in Andalusian public universities. The findings highlight both significant progress and the persistence of various challenges that require priority attention in order to consolidate effective equality in the academic sphere.

Organic Law 3/2007, of 22 March, on effective equality between women and men establishes the obligation to integrate the principle of equality into all public policies. Article 25 specifies that public administrations must promote teaching and research on equality in higher education, encouraging the inclusion of equality content in curricula, the creation of specific postgraduate courses, and the completion of specialized studies in this area. Within this framework, the creation of Equality Units in universities is a result of

the LOE (Ley Orgánica 3/, 2007, 2007) and aims to guarantee real and effective equality between women and men, eradicating any form of sexism, discrimination, or exclusion on the basis of sex. Its functions include: collaborating in the development, monitoring, and evaluation of Equality Plans; promoting the mainstreaming of the gender perspective in all areas of the university; ensuring the non-sexist use of language; promoting research on gender inequalities; and contributing to the inclusion of gender indicators in institutional planning and evaluation.

From a theoretical perspective, these practices reflect the application of gender mainstreaming, understood as the systematic integration of the gender perspective into all university policies and processes. However, evidence shows that, in the Andalusian context, there is considerable diversity in the structure, scope, and frequency of Equality Plans. This heterogeneity illustrates a form of policy implementation gap, as legal norms and recommendations do not always translate uniformly into institutional practice.

Likewise, the absence of a standardized implementation model contributes to the lack of full institutional isomorphism, i.e., universities do not uniformly adopt the same equality strategies, which can be interpreted positively in terms of preserving the identity and specific needs of each institution. Finally, university human resource management requires an intersectional approach that considers how factors such as gender, age, professional category, or academic discipline interact to generate inequalities. As Avilés-Hernández (2025) points out, gender differences become more pronounced as one advances in one's academic career, affecting job stability and remuneration for female teachers, which highlights the need for comprehensive, cross-cutting, and interdisciplinary policies that address these gaps in a holistic manner.

Although all the universities analyzed have adopted and implemented equality plans, there are notable disparities in terms of their updating, naming, structure, and scope. These differences reflect the coexistence of heterogeneous approaches, which in some cases lead to inequalities in the implementation of measures aimed at promoting gender equality in professional promotion. According to the studies by Pastor et al. (2020) on Equality Plans at the national level, the findings of this research reveal that, in the Andalusian context, there is also considerable diversity in the pace and methods of implementation. As they indicate, this heterogeneity may be influenced by multiple factors. Among them are political factors: the management of these policies, which are implemented in equality units or areas, is often undertaken by teams with little experience or capacity, which hinders the success of equality measures (Van Eerdewijk & Davids, 2014). Those who are responsible for implementing these policies must have in-depth knowledge of the subject and be properly valued for their work (Payne & Bennett, 2015). Likewise, budget factors, such as insufficient resource allocation, can limit the effectiveness of plans (Soto-Arteaga et al., 2020). Finally, the level of commitment of university bodies is an indicator of the willingness of its leaders to adopt, implement, and evaluate Equality Plans (Soto-Arteaga et al., 2020).

There is significant variability in the frequency and renewal of Equality Plans among different institutions. Examples such as the University of Malaga, which is currently implementing its Fourth Equality Plan, stand in contrast to other universities, such as the University of Almeria, which are still implementing their first plan. The irregularity in the renewal of these instruments may limit the effectiveness of the proposed strategies, underscoring the need to promote more coherent and up-to-date planning.

From a structural point of view, equality plans are organized into different hierarchical levels, which, although they differ in nomenclature, respond to a shared logic: axes (meso), objectives (macro), and actions (micro). However, this conceptual uniformity does not translate into terminological standardization, which makes comparability between

universities difficult. The variations identified, while they may represent obstacles to joint analysis, also reflect an effort to adapt the plans to institutional and contextual specificities.

Analysis of the main themes, objectives, and actions of the Equality Plans reveals a marked prioritization of gender mainstreaming in teaching, research, and knowledge transfer, as well as in work–life balance and shared responsibility policies. These areas are consolidated as strategic pillars for reducing structural inequalities and promoting an equitable redistribution of work and academic burdens. However, there is limited representation of the area of access and professional promotion, which is only addressed by three universities. This trend suggests that, despite its relevance, professional promotion is subordinate to other areas, highlighting the need to strengthen specific actions aimed at ensuring equal opportunities in academic career development.

A comparative analysis with previous studies reveals a substantial evolution in the approach to equality policies in the Andalusian university context. While Jiménez Rodrigo et al. (2018) reported that Andalusian universities prioritized measures related to employment (53%) over those related to education (33%) and research (14%), current findings indicate a more balanced distribution between the dimensions of teaching, research, and work–life balance. This change reflects a transition towards a more integrated and holistic understanding of gender equality in academia.

The actions identified reflect an institutional commitment to gender equality, focusing mainly on research, work–life balance, and leadership. This distribution responds to demands arising from academic productivity and participation in management, where the lack of support measures disproportionately affects women (Villar-Aguilés & Obiol-Francés, 2022; Pérez Orozco, 2006).

Despite these advances, the limited presence of measures in areas such as dissemination, visibility, and harassment prevention highlights the need to strengthen these categories, ensuring greater awareness and effective protection mechanisms at the institutional level. These results underscore the importance of adopting a comprehensive approach that not only addresses traditional areas of inequality but also broadens the scope of policies toward greater promotion and prevention.

The limited implementation of equality measures in selection, recruitment, and professional promotion processes, as evidenced in the three dimensions analyzed (axes, objectives, and actions), highlights the persistence of a significant percentage of universities that, despite having implemented measures to ensure gender equality in selection and evaluation processes (Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación, 2023), still face significant challenges in consolidating their effective application. This suggests that, although progress has been made in incorporating formal measures, their practical implementation and real impact on eliminating gender barriers remain crucial areas for improvement in order to achieve a fully inclusive work environment.

In short, although Andalusian universities have made progress in incorporating equality measures into their Equality Plans, there is still a need to achieve greater consistency in the frequency, structure, and scope of actions. This shows that the practices promoted by university governing bodies can still be improved, and there is a wide margin for progress in most universities (Soto-Arteaga et al., 2020). It is also crucial to strengthen evaluation strategies and expand areas of intervention to ensure equitable and sustainable professional promotion.

Our study reinforces the idea that the focus of Equality Plans should be on strengthening career promotion pathways, as these are the decisive mechanism through which gender disparities are perpetuated or mitigated within academic institutions. By identifying the specific structures and practices that hinder equitable professional development, our analysis provides evidence-based guidance on where interventions should be prioritized, thus

translating the general objectives of Equality Plans into viable and measurable strategies capable of generating meaningful institutional change. These findings can serve as a basis for guiding future policies and fostering a stronger institutional commitment to gender equality in the academic promotion of women in higher education.

5. Political and Practical Implications

The findings of this study have clear policy implications for strengthening career promotion indicators and improving inter-university monitoring mechanisms in Andalusian public universities. The considerable heterogeneity identified in the structure, scope, nomenclature and renewal of Equality Plans underscores the need for policy frameworks that promote greater standardization in the definition and application of indicators related to academic promotion, access to leadership, and career progression. Establishing a common set of basic indicators would allow for a more consistent assessment of gender gaps and facilitate evidence-based decision-making across all institutions.

The limited and uneven inclusion of measures aimed at professional promotion highlights the need to explicitly prioritize this area in equality policies. Policy makers should encourage the systematic integration of promotion-related indicators into Equality Plans, ensuring that progress in reducing gender disparities is measurable, comparable, and linked to institutional accountability mechanisms.

At the university level, the development of coordinated monitoring systems would significantly strengthen policy effectiveness. The creation of shared evaluation frameworks and regular reporting mechanisms would enable comparative analysis, the identification of good practices, and the early detection of persistent inequalities. These mechanisms would also reinforce transparency and foster collective institutional learning, thereby supporting more coherent and sustained policy responses aimed at reducing gender gaps in academic career advancement.

In this context, strengthening the role of Equality Units and Vice-Rectorates is a key policy priority. These structures should have stable resources, clearly defined mandates, and systematic access to institutional data in order to support the monitoring, evaluation, and periodic updating of Equality Plans through standardized evaluation cycles. Likewise, the integration of gender equality objectives, especially those related to professional promotion, into the performance indicators of rector's teams, faculties, and departments would strengthen institutional accountability and ensure that equality policies are effectively incorporated into university governance structures.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This study is not exempt from limitations that must be considered when interpreting the results. Two main types of limitations can be identified: methodological and contextual. On the one hand, there are methodological limitations inherent to the document review presented: (1) The study is based exclusively on a document analysis of the Equality Plans, which prevents an assessment of the degree of effectiveness, the quality of implementation, or the real impact of the measures proposed in each institution. (2) Limitations related to the methodological design, as it does not allow causal relationships to be established between specific measures aimed at promoting women's academic careers and reducing gender gaps in the field of professional development. (3) Limitations arising from geographical constraints, as the analysis is limited to Andalusian public universities; therefore, although its results provide valuable information, they cannot be generalized to the national level or to other contexts with different regulatory frameworks, organizational structures, or institutional cultures.

Based on the panorama outlined in this study, several lines of research emerge that invite further advancement in the understanding of academic promotion from a gender perspective. The results obtained make it possible to identify knowledge gaps, as well as emerging opportunities aimed at assessing and understanding the real impact of the measures implemented within Equality Plans. Accordingly, this research agenda proposes the following directions. First, it calls for studies incorporating qualitative approaches, such as interviews with staff from Equality Units, members of university governing bodies, and academic personnel, in order to gain deeper insight into the institutional dynamics that condition the effective implementation of Equality Plans. Second, it would be pertinent to develop longitudinal studies that allow for the examination of the evolution of the impact of equality measures over time, particularly with regard to recruitment, promotion, and access to leadership positions. Finally, comparative analyses across regions or countries would provide a broader understanding of how governance models, resource allocation, and accountability mechanisms affect the effectiveness of equality policies in higher education. Broadly speaking, this research agenda would contribute to building a more comprehensive, evidence-based view of the mechanisms that can strengthen gender equality in academic career advancement.

Finally, comparative analyses between regions or countries would provide a broader understanding of how governance models, resource allocation, and accountability mechanisms affect the effectiveness of equality policies in higher education. Broadly speaking, this research prospect would contribute to building a more comprehensive and evidence-based view of the mechanisms that can strengthen gender equality in the promotion of academic careers.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

OLE	Organic Law on the Effective Equality of Women and Men
OLUS	Organic Law of the University System
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
NAQAA	National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation
ASUQA	Agency for Scientific and University Quality in Andalusia
UAL	University of Almería

UCA	University of Cádiz
UCO	University of Córdoba
UGR	University of Granada
UHU	University of Huelva
UJA	University of Jaén
UMA	University of Málaga
POU	Pablo de Olavide University
US	University of Seville

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