

A NEW ERA FOR GEPS: AN ACTIVE ROLE FOR THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Introduction

This policy brief outlines recommendations for the European Commission (EC) on the importance of monitoring and evaluation at the national level¹ in relation to the implementation of Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) and their necessary inclusion in gender equality measures going forward. This brief is particularly important now, as gender equality risks being deprioritised. The GENDERACTIONplus project has previously highlighted that European policymaking around gender equality does not progress in a linear way (Linková and Mergaert 2021) and this creates a risk of backsliding. The role of GEPs as a primary instrument for advancing gender equality is recognised in their position as an eligibility criterion of Horizon Europe. As such it is fundamental not to lose the momentum gained in their implementation to date and ensure their practical long-term sustainability. In addition, intersectionality must be an integral part of the work for inclusive gender equality in the European Research Area (ERA) and must also be monitored and evaluated to ensure its effective integration into GEPs. This policy brief strongly encourages the introduction of monitoring and evaluation guidelines by the EC, which will have a cascading effect for national authorities and institutions.

Definitions

Monitoring is a continuous process of data collection and subsequent analysis. The information gleaned from monitoring can be used to understand how, for example, an institutional GEP is progressing and to identify any areas that require immediate action. The information gained from Horizon Europe GEP compliance checks can be used to form the basis of an effective monitoring system for GEPs. This information can then be used to inform further decision making by the EC and to identify areas of common challenge that can be addressed. The quality of data collection depends on useful and considered indicators which need to be context specific.

1 | We use the terms national and national authorities throughout, but this policy brief also addresses regional authorities and their responsibility in advancing gender equality and monitoring and evaluating GEPs.

Without effective monitoring in place at institutional level, there is no understanding on how GEP implementation is progressing within the European Union (EU) or how their impact is being felt. Monitoring implementation is one of the key success factors for GEPs and part of the professional implementation of GEPs as a key instrument of institutional change.

Evaluation seeks to understand if the outcomes and outputs of an institutional GEP are having the impact expected by comparing the outputs with the initial aims and objectives of the GEP. Evaluation should be completed by institutions in a systematic way using strong indicators. Evaluation ensures reflection on the success of a project and allows space to consider lessons learned for the future. Without a practical and sustainable evaluation system at the European and national levels, there is a risk of making ineffective gender equality policies. As such, the EC needs to support the development of a European evaluation system. Without understanding and analysing the impact of policies in place, any future policymaking will be made without proper context and will, therefore, lack impact. The GENDERACTIONplus project recognises that **intersectionality** (Crenshaw 1989) should be considered crosscutting through multiple dimensions of inequality. An individual's identity is shaped across different dimensions and should not be defined by one. Intersectionality also considers identity in how privilege and oppression can have an impact in research and innovation (R&I). Understanding this is key to moving towards a more inclusive GEP. Inclusion is often used with intersectionality and refers to structural and cultural changes that facilitate integration and belonging.

A statement of the issue

The Council Conclusions of 1 December 2020 called on the EC and Member States (MS) 'for a renewed focus on gender equality and mainstreaming, including through the instrument of gender equality plans and the integration of the gender dimension into R&I content'. The Pact for Research and Innovation in Europe, adopted on 26 November 2021, specifically highlights the need for monitoring and evaluating national gender equality policies and plans in R&I to ensure strong evidence-based policymaking. This policy brief underlines the endorsements undertaken by MS of the Ljubljana Declaration on Gender Equality in Research and Innovation 2021, which affirms the EU's commitment to advancing gender equality in the ERA. The Ljubljana declaration specifically references the need to:

"develop tools for the monitoring and evaluation of national gender equality policies in R&I and gender equality actions, including Gender Equality Plans. Such tools are essential to evaluate actions aimed at achieving institutional change, collect information on Gender Equality Plans uptake rates at national level, and consider intersectional data".²

2 | Council of the European Union, *Virtual Conference 'Deepening the ERA Through Gender Equality' (8-9 July 2021) and Ljubljana Declaration on Gender Equality in Research and Innovation, 12044/21, 2021*, retrieved 14 October 2024 <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-12044-2021-INIT/en/pdf>.

The GENDERACTIONplus project outlines the current state of play of monitoring and evaluation of GEPs at the national level. Responses came from 16 GENDERACTIONplus partners (from 15 countries/regions). The key findings of the analysis were:

1. GEPs are mandatory in the majority of countries/regions that participated in the survey, mainly applying to the public sector. These are: Austria, Croatia, Greece, Ireland, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and the Flemish Region of Belgium. National GEP requirements (or the lack thereof) highlight the divide among EU members that joined before or after 2004. This highlights the need for **continuing gender equality policy coordination to prevent backsliding**.
2. There is a **gap between requirements for public and private institutions** in relation to their obligations to develop a GEP, and there are differences in requirements for different sectors (higher education, government, NGOs, etc). In some MS, institutions are encouraged to implement gender equality activities, but this is often not a requirement.
3. **The Horizon Europe GEP eligibility criterion has had a catalytic effect on gender equality work at the national level, including an increase in approved GEPs in R&I. This shows the importance and need to continue the GEP requirement in the next Framework Programme.**
4. With the introduction of the GEP requirement in Horizon Europe, it is necessary to **move beyond encouragement and voluntary activities**, which are often undertaken on top of existing work without adjustment of pay/workload.
5. In some MS, Research Funding Organisations (RFOs) played a role in the implementation of national GEP requirements and encouraged Research Performing Organisations (RPOs) to adopt GEPs. There is a need for **continued reflection and consideration of the role of RFOs in GEP implementation**.
6. There are challenges related to integrating intersectionality and expanding the understanding of the multiple equality dimensions. **This highlights the need to move towards more inclusive GEPs.**
7. The increase in GEPs in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and R&I is challenged by the lack of consistent national monitoring and evaluation systems. Only six of eight MS requiring GEPs have a national system for GEP monitoring. Only one country (Sweden) indicated having a national evaluation system; however, this encompasses national priorities relating to gender equality more broadly, rather than solely focusing on GEPs. **This indicates a strong need for the EC to provide monitoring and evaluation guidance.**
8. The Horizon Europe GEP process-related requirements and recommended areas can provide the minimum requirements for GEP content as well as for GEP monitoring. **Strong monitoring based on the compliance checks of Horizon Europe requirements can serve as a baseline for annual reviews at the European level.**

9. There is a need, however, to **move beyond the minimum of the Horizon Europe GEP compliance check** in order to highlight the links between different areas and to move towards intersectional approaches to equality work. Moving beyond the minimum levels of compliance underlines the importance of driving change through more ambitious monitoring frameworks.
10. In the MS/AC that have GEPs and monitoring systems in place, the responsibility may lie with a number of different offices/bodies, each with a differing focus on gender equality. This may make reporting challenging and onerous with different and possibly inconsistent reporting systems, the siloing of information, a lack of mutual cooperation, and a lack of smooth communication in relation to GEPs.

Emerging practice

While previous EC-funded projects have included evaluation frameworks for institutional GEPs, it is imperative to provide guidance on monitoring and evaluation at scale, at the European level, to assist MS/AC in understanding the impact of the gender equality work carried out through GEPs and in developing a national evaluation system.

Monitoring

Czechia

Higher Education Institutes (HEI) are required to report annually to the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports on how (and if) gender-based violence and sexual harassment is being addressed and combatted. The Centre for Gender and Science at the Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences conducts annual analyses of these reports and provides the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports with the necessary data for policy development in this area. For individual colleges, the analysis provides a benchmark and inspiration.

Norway

The Committee for Gender Balance and Diversity in Research (KIF) undertakes an annual review of which Norwegian institutions from the sector of higher education and R&I have a GEP. The Norwegian system of GEP monitoring is based on the reports with gender-disaggregated data on research careers, including on women in grade A positions, and students. These reports are commissioned by the Ministry of Education and Research on an annual basis and every other year data is gathered on equal pay (gender pay gap).

Spain

Spain does not consider itself to have a national GEP monitoring system as such but rather a constructive dialogue with the institutions involved in the coordination of gender equality policies. In addition, protocols against sexual harassment and gender-based harassment are required to be developed and are monitored on an annual basis.

The Women and Science Unit of the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation is responsible for the coordination of the gender equality policies of RPOs, national level initiatives, and the *Científicas en cifras* biennial report, which is an important monitoring tool. Monitoring GEPs is one of the actions recommended by the Women and Science Unit to improve the situation regarding gender equality structures.

Evaluation

While no respondents indicated having an evaluation system that solely focuses on GEPs, there are examples of evaluation practices that consider gender equality policy implementation more broadly.

Sweden

All public sector bodies in Sweden report to the Gender Equality Agency (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten) on gender mainstreaming in their own organisations, with reference to national gender equality goals. Data is collected annually, and organisations also provide a narrative account of their progress based on the previous three years. Public bodies are grouped according to category (e.g. RFOs, RPOs) and analyses are published based on these groupings.

Ireland

In 2016, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) conducted the first National Gender Equality Review of HEIs. A five-person expert group, comprising national and international experts on gender equality, was tasked with making recommendations to HEIs as to how they might enhance their equality policies and their implementation to support gender equality. The group engaged widely with stakeholders across the higher education sector, government, state agencies, trade unions, and women's interest groups. To ensure sustainable progress towards gender equality, the HEA Expert Group recommended reviews of progress at the end of the lifespan of their recommendations.

In this context, a Second Review of Gender Equality in Irish HEIs was conducted over the course of 2022. An expert group evaluated the progress made since the 2016 Review and the perception of gender equality among HEI staff. The Second Review made recommendations to ensure the continued advancement of gender equality in the higher education sector. Initial monitoring based on these recommendations began in 2023.

Recommendations

The European Commission is well-positioned to support MS in the effective implementation of GEPs through monitoring and evaluation. By drawing on good practices, the EC can assist national authorities in developing a monitoring and evaluation system that can be adapted to a country-specific context. This would also help to provide a consistent baseline for benchmarking across the ERA. The Gender Equality Competence Facility to be established by the EC should provide support to national authorities for monitoring and evaluation.

Immediate recommendations relating to guidance from the European Commission

- In the short term, greater emphasis must be placed on the importance of monitoring and evaluation of GEPs by the EC and by national authorities. This is critical to measuring and understanding the impact of GEPs as an instrument for institutional change across policy cycles and ensuring the sustainability of gender equality work.
- The EC needs to provide concrete guidance on monitoring and evaluating GEPs so that national/regional authorities are enabled to adopt a robust monitoring and evaluation system for inclusive and intersectional GEPs. This will promote effective coordination among MS and ensure GEPs are aligned with current and future Horizon Europe/Framework Programme GEP requirements. This guidance should include agreed indicators for monitoring and evaluation, agreed timelines for reporting and agreed accountability measures.
- In developing a European system of monitoring and evaluating GEP implementation, the EC needs to centralise intersectionality and inclusivity in the design of the system to address groups that are at an increased risk of discrimination. With this, there is a need for clear definitions of concepts.
- A number of monitoring and evaluation systems and methodologies have already been created by GENDERACTIONplus and other EC funded projects. The EC should incorporate these when considering their own recommendations.
- Future iterations of *She Figures* should include statistics on national-level GEP implementation.

Recommendations for subsequent Horizon Europe calls

- As part of subsequent Horizon Europe funding calls, the EC needs to emphasise that monitoring and evaluation is an integral part of GEP implementation, underpinned by the commitments of the Ljubljana Declaration and the Pact on R&I.
- The EC needs to ensure the sustainability of the compliance check system and consider lessons learned from non-compliant GEPs being used as baselines for continued monitoring.
- To streamline the compliance check process, applicants for Horizon Europe funding should provide a link to their published GEP during the grant agreement stage.
- Strengthen and increase the pool of expert evaluators involved in the compliance check process to ensure that all evaluators have gender equality expertise and an understanding of intersectionality.
- Provide funding for projects to valorise what has been done and for the exchange of experience at the EU level on GEP implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

Recommendations for Framework Programme 10

- In order to measure the impact of GEPs as an instrument for institutional change and to fully embed gender equality into R&I across policy cycles, GEPs must continue to be an eligibility criterion for Framework Programme 10 (FP10).
- Building on the positive changes that the GEP requirement brought to research and higher education entities, the EC should maintain and extend it and introduce a GEP requirement for the business sector (BES), for medium and large enterprises that are beneficiaries in FP10.
- Framework funding must continue for structural change projects relating to gender equality to ensure sustainable and successful change at the institutional and national levels.
- There is a need to go beyond compliance checks on the Horizon Europe GEP requirements. The Horizon Europe GEP requirements and recommended areas need to be considered a minimum for GEPs and used as a starting point, and not an end point, for monitoring and evaluation.
- It is necessary to follow up on the validated scenarios and policy recommendations of the CASPER project and to implement a quality mark framework/European GEP certification system/GES4R³ with a system of equivalence for Member States that already have a certification system in place.
- Framework funding beneficiaries should be required to publish an annual monitoring report on GEP implementation and for this to be included as part of the project's periodic review. This could be achieved by introducing a monitoring template to ensure reporting consistency and creating a Gender Equality Platform with links to GEPs and monitoring reports.

Recommendations for the upcoming policy cycle

- The ERA Policy agenda 2025-2027 needs to emphasise GEPs as a primary instrument for advancing gender equality, and to underline that monitoring and evaluation is an integral part of GEP implementation and gender mainstreaming in ERA actions, underpinned by the commitments of the Ljubljana Declaration and the Pact on R&I.
- As part of the next European Commission Gender Equality Strategy, the EC should support MS by developing a system for monitoring and evaluation and providing incentives for institutions to evaluate GEP implementation.
- As part of the ERA policy agenda for 2025-2027, the current ERA Forum Action 5 Subgroup needs to be maintained to continue the gender equality discourse. A taskforce within the subgroup should be created to discuss standards for GEP evaluation in European higher education and R&I.
- The monitoring of GEP implementation should form part of ERA monitoring and be complemented by a European system of GEP evaluation.

3 | <https://zenodo.org/records/6325078>

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