

USING THE LEVERAGE EFFECT OF MONITORING: STRONG MONITORING TO SUPPORT EFFECTIVE GENDER EQUALITY POLICY

Introduction

Gender equality has been one of ERA's priorities for more than a decade. In 2021, most EU Member States and Associated Countries renewed and reinforced their commitment to gender equality by endorsing the [Ljubljana Declaration](#). With the Ljubljana Declaration, the main stakeholders in R&I (EC, MS/AC) agreed on the directions of further development: to address gender-based violence, to move from a gender-oriented to an intersectional approach to gender equality, and to focus on GEPs as the most significant instrument to achieve sustainable progress towards gender equality in R&I. Specifically, the Ljubljana Declaration formulates a commitment to 'support active monitoring and evaluation to ensure continuous improvement'.

The [Council Conclusions on Strengthening the competitiveness of the EU, reinforcing the European Research Area and overcoming its fragmentation](#) (16179/24) of November 2024 also highlights the importance of monitoring the progress of developments in realising the ERA. Furthermore, it is assumed that the ERA Monitoring Mechanism provides facts and insights on progress.

Both documents assume that monitoring and evaluation will show progress towards a European Research Area and lead to the effective implementation of policies. The Ljubljana Declaration formulates the hypothesis that the lack of meaningful monitoring also contributes to the fact that development towards equality has fallen short of expectations. „Monitoring and evaluation of gender equality policies has received less attention than policy design, and this may be one of the reasons why progress has been slower than it should.“

Monitoring is therefore assigned a supportive role in the effective implementation of gender equality policies. This is partly due to the possibility of improving the achieve-

ment of objectives through monitoring and its use to build a policy discourse. It is also associated with efficiency potential, as countermeasures can be taken at an early stage if measures are not implemented optimally. Below we call for strong monitoring to support a European Gender Equality Policy in R&I.

A statement of the issue

Monitoring is ‘the planned, continuous and systematic collection and analysis of program information able to provide management and key stakeholders with an indication of the extent of progress in implementation, and in relation to program performance against stated objectives and expectations’ (Markiewicz, Patrick 2016: 12).

The core function of monitoring is to provide information about policy implementation (e.g. the number of policies implemented, the number of participants in training programmes, the budget spent on specific measures) and on related outputs (e.g. the share of RPOs in a country with a GEP in place). In an ideal case, the indicators used in a monitoring system should also provide the basis for policy steering. This would require that the targets for specific policies be formulated in a way that corresponds to the indicator(s) (e.g. when the performance agreement between a government ministry and a university contains a target for increasing the share of women in professorships, and the monitoring includes a corresponding indicator).

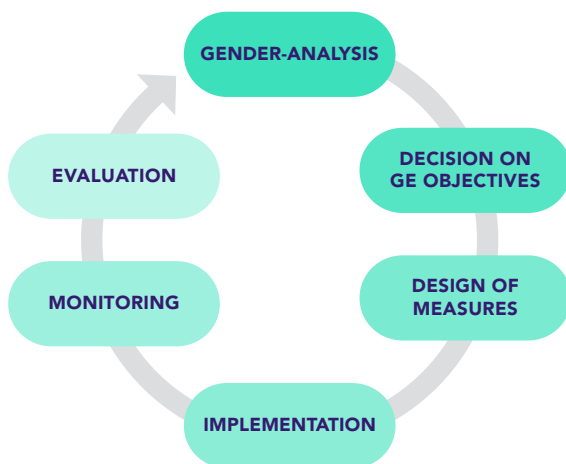
Monitoring that addresses these core functions supports policy steering because it (1) makes the accountability of stakeholders transparent, (2) provides the first indications of suboptimal policy implementation, and (3) helps to identify deviations from planned implementation and, consequently, the need to adapt policies or their implementation at an early stage. Thus, monitoring supports goal achievement and the efficient use of resources. Moreover, the implementation of monitoring provides a foundation for an evidence-based policy discourse on the advancement of gender equality, which helps to identify best practices and areas of failure. This, in turn, enables mutual learning and the further development of strategies to promote gender equality.

Our understanding of discourse follows a constructivist view and assumes that all social and political order is constructed and reconstructed in communication (Wodak 2008). We therefore start from the position that ‘gender equality’, ‘gender-based violence’, and ‘intersectionality’ are discursively constructed forms of social knowledge. ERA Action 5 policies are a part of this productive process – for example, in terms of how the problem of gender inequality is presented and which types of solutions are proposed (Bacchi 2000). The discourse on gender equality in R&I aims to ensure a shared understanding of the status quo in gender equality (where do we stand?), of the challenges that need to be addressed (what are our priorities?), and of the objectives that need to be reached (what do we want to achieve?). This requires the involvement of a broad range of stakeholders. If we take the perspective of a national authority, it is important to have a shared understanding within the organisation as well as a shared understanding with other relevant national authorities and ministries to avoid a situation where other policies pursued contradict gender equality objectives and to ensure that synergies are used. Furthermore, it is important to have a shared understanding with those who design and implement concrete measures and those who are addressed by these measures.

In order to contribute to a policy discourse and to support mutual learning, it is essential that monitoring and its use are considered integral components of the policy development and implementation process. GENDERACTIONplus is based on the assumption that the effective implementation of policies follows a complete policy cycle at the European, national, regional,¹ and institutional levels. Ideally, gender equality policies begin with a baseline assessment of the status quo in gender equality. What are the main challenges to be addressed? Which mechanisms produce inequalities? How could these inequalities be tackled? Based on the results of the gender analysis, gender equality objectives are formulated. These objectives are the starting point for the development of concrete measures. These measures are implemented, monitored, and, in an ideal world, evaluated.

Figure 1

The complete cycle for the development and implementation of gender equality policies



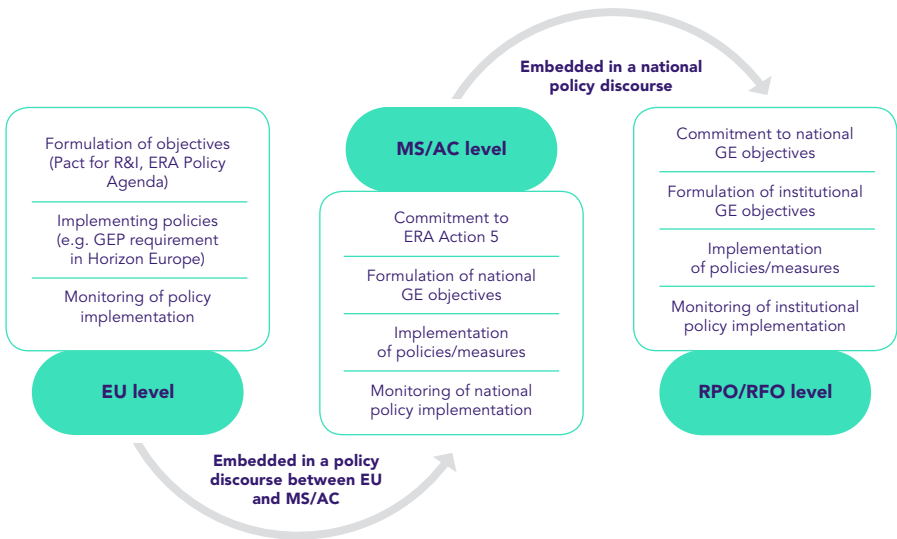
Source: Author, based on May and Wildavsky (1978).

In the context of the common European strategy for the establishment of a European Research Area, it is essential that the policy cycles at the European, national, and institutional levels are integrated. The overarching ambition of the ERA is to establish a unified, borderless market for research, innovation, and technology across the EU, through the concerted alignment of the research policies and programmes of Member States and Associated Countries. It is therefore imperative that the common objective formulated at the European level is transferred to the national and institutional levels.

1 | For the sake of simplicity, the regional level will not be discussed further in what follows. It should always be considered an additional level between the national and institutional levels.

If policies at different levels are interlinked, they influence and strengthen each other. Being interlinked means that the objectives formulated or the measures taken at the European level are adopted at the national level or, if necessary, adapted to national circumstances. Similarly, national gender equality objectives are adopted at the institutional level and priorities for gender equality are set according to the respective framework conditions. In this ideal world, the national goals would not contradict those at the EU level, nor would the institutional goals contradict those at the national level. Any resistance or reservations are raised and discussed in the corresponding policy discourse.

Figure 2 The interplay between EU, national, and institutional gender equality objectives and policies – the ideal situation



Source: Author.

At each of these levels, the key stakeholders – namely, the European Commission, national authorities, and RPOs as well as RFOs – are tasked with similar responsibilities. These consist of deriving concrete objectives from the overarching goals, discussing and coordinating the defined goals with the respective subordinate level, providing resources for achieving the goals, and establishing a monitoring system that tracks policy implementation as well as progress towards achieving the goals.

Work Package 5 in GENDERACTIONplus provided a set of indicators to monitor policy implementation at the national level. These focus on (1) the commitment to gender equality and the formulation of a national strategy or policy on gender equality in R&I, (2) the formulated gender equality objectives, (3) the implemented gender equality measures/policies, and (4) the existing monitoring of gender equality or gender equality policy implementation.

Should this information be available in a comparable form for the MSs/ACs, it could be used to facilitate discussion on the progress that has been made, the measures that have contributed to this progress, the extent to which these measures of progress could be transferred to other contexts, and, where no progress has been made, what need for action still exists or arises due to current developments.

A discussion based on monitoring results would allow mutual learning, which in turn would prevent having to reinvent the wheel and would make it possible to learn from the experiences of others. Thus, monitoring contributes to the efficient use of resources and coherent policy implementation.

Identified gaps

Even though there is a strong commitment to GE in R&I at the European and national levels – most MSs/ACs endorsed the Ljubljana Declaration and 22 MSs and three other countries expressed a commitment to ERA Action 5 – only limited information on policy implementation is available. The lack of information is also attributable to the fact that, during this ERA period, Member States were under no obligation to formulate a national action plan. This, combined with a lack of robust monitoring, has resulted in the fragmentation of the implementation of measures and has helped to weaken gender equality policy.

To compensate for the lack of information, GENDERACTIONplus WP5 conducted a survey among members of the ERA Forum's Sub-group on Inclusive Gender Equality in spring 2024. Nineteen countries participated in the survey (17 Member States and two Associated Countries), so the situation of countries who committed themselves to ERA Action 5 is well covered. However, it should be noted that the results are not representative of all EU Member States. With 12 responses the survey reflects the situation of the 'old' Member States (former EU 15) quite well, but not that of the widening countries (five responses).

A weakening of gender equality policy is evident from the fact that although many countries have committed themselves to ERA Action 5, only approximately half have also formulated national strategies. However, even in the absence of a strategic document, the majority of countries represented in the survey have formulated gender equality policy objectives based on ERA Action 5. These objectives, however, lack specific, measurable, and time-bound objectives (SMART) and instead represent a **commitment to address specific challenges without the formulation of concrete targets**.

Even though a large number of objectives have been formulated and the topics from ERA Action 5 have been adopted in principle, this is not mirrored in the measures that are planned or implemented in each of these areas. Fourteen countries provide information on at least one measure. Six countries are implementing measures to support structural change in HEIs and RPOs, and measures to strengthen sex/gender analysis or intersectional research. Only a few countries are implementing measures to promote inclusive career paths, to combat gender-based violence, to promote gender balance in decision-making, or to address inequalities beyond gender.

It should be noted that **discrepancies between the formulated goals and their implementation** are not evident only in these measures. The same observation also applies to monitoring. Regarding the areas addressed by the targets, there is only very limited information available.

Referring to the GENDERACTIONplus approach to policymaking presented above, the discrepancy between stated objectives and actual activities represents a significant issue. **It is not prudent to focus on measures in isolation, as an activity without a clearly defined goal is unlikely to achieve the desired outcome. This approach carries the risk of inefficient use of resources and may result in a lack of acceptance or even resistance to the objective.**

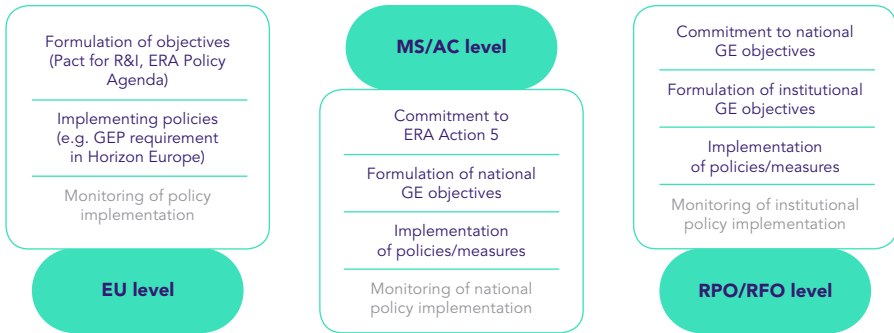
A more significant issue, however, is the **absence of effective monitoring** of the implementation of ERA Action 5, which constrains the potential for a comprehensive European gender equality policy discourse. This refers not only to the lack of information on relevant outcome indicators (such as the number of institutions that have adopted a gender equality plan), but also the lack of information on the national or regional gender equality policy strategy including the priorities, objectives, and measures of such a policy. Even if a lot of information on the status quo of gender equality in science and research is available for individual countries (e.g. via the SHE Figures), this offers little insight into the implementation of ERA Action 5.

The absence of a unified and coherent gender equality policy in the ERA also results in **inefficiencies in the policymaking process**. It is evident that several countries are developing measures in parallel, which results in a lack of coordination, and the potential of gender equality policy is lost. This also allows stakeholders to understand concepts differently, which is at odds with the assumption of policy-makers at the European and national levels that there is a coherent and consistent understanding of the concepts used in European documents.² Furthermore, the lack of exchange when (re)designing measures also means that existing synergies may not be used and mistakes that have already been made are repeated in other contexts.

The GENDERACTIONplus project partly stands in for the lack of a European gender equality discourse and complements the activities of the ERA Forum's Sub-group on Inclusive Gender Equality. However, the success of these endeavours is constrained in at least two respects. Firstly, not all Member States and Associated Countries are represented in the project. Secondly, not all project partners have a direct influence on the strategic alignment and further development of gender equality policies in R&I at the national level. This situation is further exacerbated by the fact that it was not possible to involve high-ranking representatives of ERAC or the European Commission (DG Research) in project activities on a continuous basis.

A comparison of the survey results with the ideal described reveals that the complete policy cycle is not realised. Because of a lack of monitoring and evaluation we have to talk about an incomplete policy cycle. Furthermore, it is impossible to realise the discourse on gender equality policy as described above (see Figure 2). Consequently, a coherent and consistent policy cannot be achieved. Instead, the impression given is that the responsibility for a consistent and coherent gender equality policy is passed from one level to the next, like a hot potato, and that the respective level is not fulfilling its own responsibility.

2 | However, the GENDERACTIONplus benchmarking reports show that concepts are interpreted differently and policies or measures referring to the same concepts are comparable only to a limited extent.

Figure 3**The interplay between EU, national, and institutional gender equality objectives and policies – the current situation**

Source: Author.

The voluntary nature of ERA Action 5 implementation, evidenced by the absence of a formulated national action plan, **represents a central challenge for the achievement of European gender equality goals. Meaningful monitoring can make a significant contribution to an efficient gender equality policy.** In order to utilise this potential, it is essential that action is taken at the European, national, and RPO/RFO levels.

At the European level

- In order to fully leverage the potential of monitoring to steer policy, it is important in the future not only to request that countries make a commitment to an ERA action on a voluntary basis, but also to ensure that this is translated into a concrete national action plan (binding self-commitment with corresponding resources and responsibilities).
- Provide feedback to national action plans as part of a European policy discourse (e.g. highlight innovative approaches, comment on interpretations and the use of concepts that diverge from EC strategy, point out topics recommended but not addressed in the national action plans).
- Intensify the European discourse on inclusive gender equality by involving high-level policy-makers (e.g. ERAC members).
- Provide a platform for mutual learning and exchange already in the phase of policy development. This would support in particular countries with little experience and provide more experienced countries with the possibility to reflect on already implemented measures.
- Systematically collect information on the implementation of European policies from the start of the implementation period and invite MSs/ACs to establish monitoring systems at the national level. To increase the visibility and utilisation of the monitoring, it is recommended that this information be integrated into existing monitoring systems such as the ERA Monitoring Mechanism (ERA Scoreboard, ERA Dashboard) and She Figures.

- Use the results of the monitoring for awareness raising activities (e.g. the public presentation of monitoring at the European level) and for showcasing identified good practices.

At the national level

- Translate the commitment to gender equality into a national action plan with concrete goals, timetables, responsibilities, planned resources, and concrete measures.
- Conceptualise a monitoring for the implementation of measures from the action plan, if possible, in cooperation with the EC and/or other Member States.
- Integrate the monitoring of action plan implementation in existing monitoring systems on gender equality at the national level.
- Participate actively in the European discourse on gender equality (contributing reservations or questions about the European strategy as well as experiences made in the context of gender equality policy development and implementation at the national level).
- Initiate a national gender equality discourse with all relevant stakeholders including the national ERAC members and provide a platform for mutual learning for national stakeholders.
- Use the results of monitoring as input for the national gender equality discourse and to showcase good practices.
- Provide resources to support RPOs/RFOs in the development and implementation of gender equality plans (possibly as part of the national action plan).

At the RPO/RFO level

- Formulate an ambitious gender equality policy that takes up national and European objectives and focuses on the relevant institutional context.
- Develop a comprehensive monitoring on gender equality and gender equality policy implementation.
- Use monitoring results for an internal gender equality discourse (e.g. using a presentation of the monitoring results to increase awareness on gender (in)equality within the institution and stressing the accountability of relevant stakeholders).
- Use monitoring results also for external communication to inform relevant stakeholders and the general public about the gender equality commitment of the institution.
- Actively participate in the national gender equality discourse by presenting RPOs'/RFOs' own experiences and good practices and articulate the need for support.

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