



# GENDERACTIONplus Recommendations for the ERA Act Consultation: A Whole System Approach to Inclusive Gender Equality in R&I

The European Research Area (ERA) must embed **inclusive gender equality** as a core principle across all its structures and processes. A whole system approach is needed, linking EU framework programme, national policies and funding, and institutional practices, so that coordinated actions reinforce each other to drive cultural and institutional changes. The recommendations below are interlinked and mutually reinforcing, aiming to create an ERA in which excellence and inclusiveness go hand in hand. This integrated approach will help bridge the widening gaps among Member States and institutions – ensuring that no country or sector lags behind – and prevent backsliding on fundamental values. By strengthening policy coordination and accountability at all levels, the ERA Act can solidify progress made and address persistent challenges, securing a truly inclusive, safe, and equitable research and innovation environment for Europe.

## 1. Gender Equality Plans (GEPs)

The ERA Act offers an opportunity to advance gender equality in research and innovation through a cohesive, system-wide strategy. Horizon Europe has already demonstrated the effectiveness of requiring GEPs as an eligibility criterion for participation, prompting higher education institutions, research organisations, and other actors to strengthen their institutional practices<sup>1</sup>. However, this progress remains uneven, with variations between Member States and across different types of institutions, particularly in the private sector.

**GENDERACTIONplus recommends that the ERA Act:**

- Require all research actors – including higher education institutions, research organisations, and private companies – to adopt GEPs as a condition for funding. The scope of the GEP requirement should expand to include private sector participants, allowing for an appropriate transition period to allow on-boarding and capacity building<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> GENDERACTIONplus (2024a); Knapinska & Chrobak-Tatara (2023).

<sup>2</sup> ERA Forum Sub-group 'Inclusive Gender Equality in the ERA' (2024).



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- Extend the GEP requirement to national R&I funding systems to ensure consistent ERA-wide standards.
- Reinforce the requirement with dedicated support at the EU and national levels for implementation, thereby spreading best practices and elevating gender equality efforts in less advanced contexts.

This universal criterion will allow the current requirements to take root, support higher quality implementation, and contribute to ensuring equitable working conditions in the Business Enterprise Sector, where the proportion of women researchers remains marginal and has not improved significantly over time despite educational gains across all scientific fields.

## 2. Inclusive, intersectional GEPs

The ERA Act should promote inclusive, intersectional GEPs. Current evidence shows that addressing intersectional inequalities in R&I policy is still at an initial stage, with limited understanding and insufficient data both constraining effective action<sup>3</sup>. These gaps limit the ability of institutions and policymakers to move beyond one-dimensional or additive approaches to gender equality. Additionally, capacity for implementation varies among Member States, as some face political resistance to equality and inclusiveness initiatives<sup>4</sup>. Without clear definitions and adequate capacity-building, many GEPs risk overlooking intersecting inequalities (how gender intersects with other grounds of inequality) such as those based on ethnicity, disability, or other factors. As a result, policies often fail to create fully inclusive academic cultures, leaving some groups of researchers invisible or unsupported.

### **GENDERACTIONplus recommends that the ERA Act:**

- Promote inclusive, intersectional GEPs that explicitly tackle intersecting inequalities in line with data protection laws.
- Require Member States to incorporate intersectional objectives in their national criteria for GEPs.

To achieve this in practice, additional support will be needed at both EU and national level, particularly through funding for capacity building, development of tools, and improved data collection.

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<sup>3</sup> GENDERACTIONplus (2024b).

<sup>4</sup> GENDERACTIONplus (2024b).



### 3. Integration of the gender dimension in R&I content

The integration of a gender dimension in research and innovation content must be strengthened. Inclusive gender analysis – considering sex and gender differences, intersectional factors, and the inclusion of diverse end-users – should become the norm in R&I projects<sup>5</sup>. Evidence shows that accounting for gender and inclusiveness in research content enhances quality, rigour, and social relevance, while neglecting it can result in blind spots or biases in results and, in the worst situation, causing harm to human health and life<sup>6</sup>. There remains a need for stronger evaluation mechanisms and expertise: many researchers and evaluators still lack training in this area, and proposals sometimes treat the gender dimension perfunctorily<sup>7</sup>.

**GENDERACTIONplus recommends that the ERA Act:**

- Mandate applicants for EU and national research funding to incorporate inclusive gender analysis by default, with the expectation to provide a rationale if deemed irrelevant<sup>8</sup>.
- Establish clear requirements for addressing the integration of sex and gender analysis in research and innovation proposals, and integrate these into evaluation criteria for excellence, to ensure gender, inclusiveness, and diversity considerations are addressed adequately.

The requirement for the integration of the inclusive sex and gender analysis in R&I content must be supported at the operational level with adequate tools, guidelines, and training for researchers, National Contact Points, and evaluators. It is also important to ensure that evaluations are carried out by experts trained in gender analysis, so that proposals receive quality feedback and accountability is strengthened.

### 4. Research assessment reforms and early-career researchers

Excellence in science can only be achieved when evaluation systems are fair and inclusive. Yet many research assessment practices – in hiring, promotion, and grant selection – remain misaligned with inclusion goals. They often undervalue diverse career trajectories and ignore

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<sup>5</sup> European Commission (2025a); GENDERACTIONplus (2025a).

<sup>6</sup> ERA Forum Sub-group (2024).

<sup>7</sup> European Commission (2025a); Rogg Korsvik et al (2023).

<sup>8</sup> ERA Forum Sub-group (2024).



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contributions to gender equality or open science, disadvantaging those (disproportionately women and other underrepresented groups) who may have non-linear careers or make key contributions not recognised in current assessment schemes<sup>9</sup>. Early-career researchers face additional vulnerabilities, often bearing the brunt of precarious conditions and limited opportunities for progression<sup>10</sup>. Without reform, current systems risk reinforcing bias and driving talent away.

## **GENDERACTIONplus Recommends that the ERA Act:**

- Adopt new Europe-wide assessment principles aligned with the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) and San Francisco Declaration On Research Assessment (DORA)<sup>11</sup>, broadening excellence criteria to include open science, teamwork, societal impact, and Equality, Diversity and Inclusiveness efforts (e.g. responsibility for implementing a GEP or mentoring underrepresented researchers could be recognised in evaluations).

Operational support should also underpin research assessment reform. Exchanges of best practice on bias-free recruitment and promotion (for example via ERAC) can help make assessment systems fairer and more transparent.

Targeted measures are equally important for early-career researchers. ERA-level guidelines or targets could improve working conditions by reducing reliance on short-term contracts, ensuring access to social benefits, and providing grants that allow career breaks. Member States and institutions should report on equality-focused measures, including the uptake of parental leave by all genders and support for reintegration after breaks. Equality criteria should also be incorporated into talent programmes so that diversity is valued and the next generation of researchers can thrive in secure and inclusive environments.

## **5. Institutional obligation to address gender-based violence in R&I and HEIs**

Despite increased attention, gender-based violence in academia remains widespread and has been addressed unevenly across Europe<sup>12</sup>. Nearly **62%** of respondents in a recent EU-wide survey reported experiencing some form of gender-based violence in academic settings, yet

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<sup>9</sup> GENDERACTIONplus (2024c).

<sup>10</sup> ERA Forum Sub-group (2024).

<sup>11</sup> For more information see <https://sfedora.org/>.

<sup>12</sup> GENDERACTIONplus (2024d).



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an overwhelming majority did not report the incidents<sup>13</sup>. This demonstrates the urgent need for a systematic victim/survivor-centred approach. The ERA Forum has responded by developing a new Zero-Tolerance Code of Conduct, which provides a common framework of definitions and principles to eliminate gender-based violence in research environments<sup>14</sup>. A stronger mandate is now needed to ensure safe working environments across all ERA institutions – a prerequisite for true academic freedom and gender equality<sup>15</sup>.

## **GENDERACTIONplus recommends that the ERA Act:**

- Mandate a Zero-Tolerance approach to gender-based violence in all R&I organisations as a condition for funding and participation in European programmes.
- Require that all higher education institutions and research organisations implement effective policies to foster safe working environments. This includes confidential and safe reporting mechanisms, trained contact points, and prevention training for staff and students – in line with the recommendations of the Zero Tolerance Code of Conduct.
- Require Member States to incorporate these standards into national regulations or funding criteria for higher education institutions and research organisations.

By enforcing the recommendations of the Zero Tolerance Code of Conduct, the ERA will foster a culture where any form of violence or harassment is unequivocally rejected, enabling everyone to work and learn free from fear<sup>16</sup>. This requires operational support through regular monitoring of compliance, for example via GEP monitoring or reporting requirements. Strong accountability measures must also be in place so that institutions failing to protect staff and students face consequences, such as ineligibility for funding or hosting roles.

## **6. Addressing Intersectional Inequalities in International Cooperation**

European international R&I cooperation should explicitly champion gender equality and inclusiveness. The ERA's global partnerships need to reflect Europe's values. EU ministers have affirmed that Europe must be an "attractive, inclusive, and gender-balanced environment for researchers... around the world," built on shared principles<sup>17</sup>. This implies that when Europe

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<sup>13</sup> UniSAFE consortium (2022).

<sup>14</sup> European Commission (2024).

<sup>15</sup> GENDERACTIONplus (2025b).

<sup>16</sup> European Commission (2024).

<sup>17</sup> Council of the European Union (2021), p. 6.



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engages in international projects or partnerships, it should uphold equality principles and values and use cooperation as an opportunity to share its good practices. Without such commitments, collaboration risks reinforcing inequalities rather than promoting equitable participation and mutual learning.

## **GENDERACTIONplus recommends that the ERA Act:**

- Integrate inclusive gender equality principles into international R&I collaborations
- Require that agreements and programmes with third countries include commitments to gender equality, for example by encouraging or requiring partners to have equivalent GEPs or anti-harassment standards.
- Raise intersectional equality systematically as a shared goal in international science cooperation dialogues.

To ensure that commitments on intersectional equality in international cooperation translate into practice, operational support will be essential. This includes dedicating funding and technical assistance to build capacity on gender and inclusivity in partner countries, supporting joint initiatives on data collection and research for underrepresented groups, and systematically raising intersectional equality as a shared goal in international science cooperation dialogues. Reciprocity arrangements should also be sought to ensure that associated countries adhere to Horizon Europe's gender-related requirements, such as GEPs and the integration of the gender dimension.

## **7. Protection of mobile researchers and students**

Mobility is a cornerstone of the ERA, but the freedom of movement for researchers must be accompanied by guarantees of safety and inclusion. Mobile researchers and students — particularly women, LGBTIQ+ persons, ethnic minorities, and other at-risk groups — often encounter greater risks in settings with weak protections or entrenched bias<sup>18</sup>, exposing them to harassment, violence, or unequal treatment. Standards for host institutions differ across and beyond Europe, and safeguards against discrimination or support for mobile researchers are uneven. Without a coordinated approach, incidents can fall through the cracks, leaving researchers uncertain about their rights and reluctant to report problems.

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<sup>18</sup> ERA Forum Sub-group (2024).



## **GENDERACTIONplus recommends that ERA Act:**

- Stipulate that any institution hosting researchers or students under EU and Member State mobility schemes must guarantee a safe and inclusive environment, in line with the Zero Tolerance Code of Conduct and policies and measures to address gender-based violence.
- Link mobility programmes (e.g. Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, Erasmus+) with the zero-tolerance approach. If an institution does not meet the standard (e.g., lacks a proper code of conduct or fails to enforce it), it should not be eligible to host ERA-funded mobile researchers<sup>19</sup>.

Protecting mobile researchers requires not only a strong zero-tolerance framework but also concrete operational measures. This includes establishing clear procedures for reporting and handling incidents across borders and institutions, with cross-border and cross-institution protocols for handling complaints, and providing tailored support mechanisms to ensure the safety and inclusion of mobile participants.

## **8. Monitoring and evaluation of ERA priorities on gender**

Reliable monitoring and evaluation are crucial to track progress on gender equality in the ERA and adjust policies where needed. At present, monitoring efforts are fragmented and inconsistent, as there is no consistent monitoring framework across Member States for GEPs or other gender provisions. Additionally, the voluntary nature of reporting under ERA Policy Agenda has resulted in weak accountability. Without stronger mechanisms, achievements risk being uneven and progress difficult to measure.<sup>20</sup>

## **GENDERACTIONplus recommends that the ERA Act:**

- Introduce a comprehensive EU-level monitoring framework with common indicators and benchmarks, including:
  - percentage of institutions with GEPs,
  - proportion of projects integrating gender analysis,
  - gender balance in decision making,

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<sup>19</sup> GENDERACTIONplus (2025b).

<sup>20</sup> GENDERACTIONplus (2025c); Wroblewski (2024).





- proportion of institutions implementing the recommendations of Zero Tolerance Code of Conduct.

Effective monitoring must go beyond compliance and foster continuous improvement. This requires expanding the Commission's She Figures Dashboard<sup>21</sup> to track results transparently, while pairing monitoring with feedback and learning processes that identify best practices and areas needing support. At national level, accountability should be reinforced through National Action Plans or measures integrated in overarching gender equality strategies that set measurable targets and outline concrete measures and funding. Regular reporting and evaluation cycles would help ensure progress is tracked consistently and prevent uneven implementation across Member States. In this way, evaluation becomes a driver of progress rather than a box-ticking exercise.

## **9. Sustainable funding for institutional change and research on gender and intersectionality**

Achieving institutional change requires sustained investment. Many gender equality efforts in R&I – such as setting up GEPs, training staff, combatting gender-based violence, or conducting gender research – have relied on short-term project funding or have been under-prioritised in budgets<sup>22</sup>. At the same time, research on gender remains a tiny fraction of overall R&I investment, with 98% of EU research failing to integrate a gender dimension<sup>23</sup>. The Commission's proposal for Horizon Europe 2028–2034 moves in the right direction by strengthening gender mainstreaming and considering the tracking of gender equality expenditure<sup>24</sup>. Yet without more target actions, commitments risk remaining symbolic rather than driving lasting change.

### **GENDERACTIONplus recommends that the ERA Act:**

- Provide for dedicated and long-term funding streams for gender equality and intersectionality at both EU and national levels.
- Earmark a minimum share of Framework Programme funding (e.g. 10%) for activities that directly contribute to gender equality and inclusiveness using the EU budget's

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<sup>21</sup> GENDERACTIONplus (2025c).

<sup>22</sup> GENDERACTIONplus (2025d); GENDERACTIONplus (2024d); ERA Forum Sub-group (2024).

<sup>23</sup> European Commission (2025b).

<sup>24</sup> European Commission (2025c); GENDERACTIONplus (2025e).





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gender-tracking system to monitor progress<sup>25</sup>. This earmarking should be mainstreamed across all clusters to avoid creating separate silos while strategically driving equality outcomes, and could also be extended to national funding programmes.

- Require Member States to include specific programmes and incentives for gender research funding in national R&I funding programmes.

Operational support will be needed to ensure lasting impact. Successful Horizon-funded pilot projects, such as those on GEP implementation, should be scaled up and integrated into permanent long-term funding schemes. Dedicated resources must also be allocated to address gender-based violence in academia, an area that has been persistently underfunded, so that institutions have the means to implement effective prevention and response measures.

## Conclusion

Together, these areas form a comprehensive package. The ERA Act is an opportunity to move from fragmented, voluntary efforts to a coherent, enforceable framework for inclusive gender equality in European R&I. By linking structural requirements (GEPs, Zero Tolerance codes of conduct to address gender-based violence) with funding and by bolstering monitoring and accountability, the Act can hardwire gender equality and inclusiveness into the ERA's governance. This whole system approach will not only uphold European values but also improve the quality and impact of research and innovation, making the ERA more competitive and socially responsive. We urge the European Commission and Member States to embed these measures at the heart of the ERA Act, securing lasting change and positioning Europe as a global leader in inclusive, excellent research and innovation.

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<sup>25</sup> European Commission (2025c); GENDERACTIONplus (2025e).



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