

The Gender Dimension in Research and Innovation Content

Why the default requirement must be retained in Framework Programme 10 (2028–2034)

DISCLAIMER

This position paper was created under the leadership of Marcela Linková, the Member State co-chair of the Sub-group on Inclusive Gender Equality in the European Research Area (ERA)¹ of the Commission's expert group on the ERA Forum.² The Sub-group supports the implementation of ERA Structural Policy 'Strengthening gender equality and inclusiveness in the ERA, notably with an intersectional approach' of the ERA Policy Agenda 2025–2027.³

This Position paper has been endorsed by Sub-group members and most observers acting in advisory capacity and should not be interpreted as an official stance of, or any obligation upon, the organisations they represent. The European Commission representatives were not involved in the drafting of this document. The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Commission. The European Commission cannot be held responsible for them, nor does the reuse of the content constitute an endorsement by the Commission.

1. Context and purpose of this paper

As negotiations on the next Framework Programme (FP10) are under way, the future approach to the gender dimension in research and innovation (R&I) content has become an important policy question. The move from the call-by-call flagging approach in Horizon 2020 to the requirement by default in Horizon Europe was grounded in important lessons about the limits of selective integration and the conditions needed for R&I to be excellent, robust and responsive to the needs of diverse populations. It also reflected more recent policy and methodological developments, which emphasise the importance of addressing the gender dimension in an inclusive way and with attention to intersectional factors. This position paper explains why the requirement by default should be continued in FP10. Building on more than a decade of policy development and research evidence, it argues that this approach is necessary to safeguard research excellence, strengthen innovation and competitiveness.

Statement of principle: Why early integration matters

Addressing the gender dimension only at the monitoring stage cannot compensate for a gender-blind research design. If sex-disaggregated data and gender-relevant variables are not built into the research design from the outset, the necessary data will not be produced. The omission therefore cannot be corrected retrospectively: the project will not have been designed to generate the required data, apply the appropriate methodology, allocate the necessary resources, and address unconscious or unexpressed biases and evidence gaps (Korsvik and Rustad, 2022). For this reason, the gender dimension is a core component of research excellence.

2. Key recommendations

FP10 should:

- Continue the integration of the gender dimension in R&I content as a default requirement, evaluated under the Excellence criterion.
- Require an explicit justification for any claimed non-relevance, rather than allowing non-integration to operate as a passive default.
- Build on the 2025 Framework by strengthening monitoring indicators to assess the quality, not only the quantity, of the integration of the gender dimension in R&I content.
- Ensure that evaluation panels include appropriate gender expertise to assess the excellence of the proposal.
- Embed targeted capacity-building measures to equip research-performing organisations with the expertise and operational support required for the effective and systematic implementation of inclusive sex- and gender-analysis, including its inclusive and intersectional application where relevant.
- Maintain coherence between the default requirement to integrate the gender dimension in R&I content and institutional Gender Equality Plans (GEPs), including by ensuring that GEPs support and reinforce the systematic consideration of the gender dimension in R&I.

3. The Horizon 2020 flagging system: what the evidence shows

The move to a default requirement in Horizon Europe was based on the evaluation of the Horizon 2020 flagging approach. The evidence demonstrated that this approach did not ensure either consistent coverage or high-quality integration of the gender dimension in R&I content.

On quality:

- The H2020 Interim Evaluation on gender equality as a crosscutting issue (European Commission, 2017) found that among 111 projects examined, only 17 demonstrated a well-integrated gender dimension, with systematic consideration of sex and gender throughout the project design and implementation. This confirms that the flagging approach used in Horizon 2020 was not sufficient to ensure consistent or high-quality integration.
- Of 62 projects identified by project officers as having gender content, only 11 were assessed as integrating the gender dimension well, while 31 did so only partially, indicating that even among flagged projects quality was often limited or uneven.
- Evaluation Summary Reports further revealed inconsistent treatment of the gender dimension in the evaluation process. Of 111 reports analysed, only 40 (36%) contained any comment related to gender. Whether gender issues were considered depended largely on the presence of evaluators with relevant expertise, demonstrating that the Horizon 2020 approach did not ensure systematic or reliable assessment.

On coverage:

- Overall, 23% of Horizon 2020 projects were reported as including a gender dimension. However, this figure is based on the monitoring of gender-flagged topics and project self-reporting, rather than on a qualitative assessment of how sex and gender analysis was actually integrated into the research content, limiting the reliability of the indicator (European Commission, 2024).
- More robust indicators point to significantly lower uptake. Only around 1.7% of all Horizon 2020 project publications integrated the gender dimension (European Commission, 2025).
- Just 0.2% of projects integrated an intersectional perspective, indicating extremely limited uptake of more advanced forms of gender analysis.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate the structural weakness of the flagging system. It allows sex and gender analysis to be required in some projects and ignored in others, assessed inconsistently across evaluation panels, and not systematically carried through during project implementation.

4. Horizon Europe: the lesson applied

Based on this evaluation, Horizon Europe made integration of the gender dimension into R&I content a **requirement by default**. The *2025 Framework for the Integration and Evaluation of Inclusive Gender Analysis in R&I Content*, developed by the ERA Forum Sub-group on Inclusive Gender Equality and endorsed by representatives of 22 Member States, three associated countries, and 14 ERA stakeholder organisations, builds directly on this approach. **It calls for the default requirement to be maintained and strengthened**, for monitoring and evaluation frameworks to be expanded to assess the quality as well as quantity, and for inclusive gender analysis, including an intersectional perspective, to be implemented across the ERA as a whole-sector approach (European Commission, 2025). This default requirement is also supported by a growing body of methodological tools (Cederroth et al., 2024) and training resources, including those developed through EU-funded projects such as GENDER-NET Plus and PATTERN.

At the same time, implementation experience (Dvořáčková, 2025) shows that the effectiveness of the default requirement depends on the policy and operational conditions that support it. Recurrent challenges include uneven understanding of the gender dimension in R&I, its conflation with gender balance in research teams, assumptions that it is relevant only in a limited range of fields, and concerns about administrative burden or formalistic compliance where guidance and evaluation capacity are weak. These challenges are not an argument for retreat; they point to the need for clearer guidance, stronger capacity-building, appropriate evaluator expertise, and more robust monitoring of project excellence and implementation, including inclusive and intersectional dimensions where relevant.

5. The gender dimension is a quality criterion, not an afterthought

Drawing on six societal challenge areas, Korsvik and Rustad (2018) demonstrate that sex-disaggregated data and gender-relevant variables are not the endpoint but the starting point for a meaningful analysis. They provide the necessary basis for identifying differences, testing assumptions, and developing more accurate and innovative solutions. This is consistent with the evidence from the EU-funded *Gendered Innovations* and *Gendered Innovations 2* projects (European Commission, 2013; 2020), which show that integrating sex and gender analysis leads to more robust, innovative, and societally relevant research outcomes. Gender-blind research does not produce neutral results, but systematically incomplete knowledge.

The gender dimension in R&I content refers to the systematic integration of sex and gender variables throughout all stages of research, including research design, data collection, analysis, and the interpretation of results, where relevant. In line with recent ERA developments (European Commission, 2025), the gender dimension should be understood as requiring attention, where relevant, to the ways in which sex and gender intersect with other factors that shape research needs, outcomes and impacts.

It is essential to distinguish this from gender balance in research teams. While gender balance concerns who conducts the research, the gender dimension concerns what is being researched and how. It is a methodological requirement that directly affects the validity, accuracy and applicability of research outcomes, not a measure of representation or equality in participation.

This matters because the relevance of the gender dimension is determined not by whether a project explicitly studies gender, but by whether sex, gender or intersecting factors may shape the object of study, the research process, or the applicability of the results.

Consider two formulations of a cardiovascular research proposal:

Without gender dimension:

"The project will study the prevention of myocardial infarction in a sample of 500 patients using standard diagnostic criteria."

With gender dimension:

"The project will study the prevention of myocardial infarction in a sample of 500 patients using standard diagnostic criteria, including female and male patients. It will take into consideration that there might be sex-differentiated symptom profiles and treatment outcomes for myocardial infarction between women and men, recognising that female patients typically present with different symptoms, such as nausea, fatigue, and back pain rather than chest pain, which has historically contributed to systemic under-diagnosis and higher mortality in female patients."

The second formulation is of higher scientific quality. It is better designed to produce valid, reliable and applicable results, while the first risks reproducing a well-documented evidence gap. Omitting sex and gender variables does not produce neutral knowledge; it introduces systemic bias and limits the validity and generalisability of findings and increases the risk of harmful societal impacts.

The same logic applies across research fields. In artificial intelligence, gender and intersectional biases enter at every stage of the research process, from data collection to algorithm design to model training, yet remain invisible without explicit sex/gender analysis. Research that does not account for these factors risks producing systems that reinforce existing and create new inequalities at scale. Such research also risks failing to uncover the gender stereotypes and intersectional inequalities reproduced in AI development.

6. The negative consequences of reversion

Dismantling the default requirement in FP10 would have immediate and systemic negative consequences:

- Reduce coverage immediately, as flagging historically applied only to a subset of topics and relied on work programme editors who often lack systematic gender expertise.
- Remove gender analysis from the Excellence criterion, signalling to applicants and evaluators that it is optional rather than integral to high-quality research, and disregarding more than a decade of accumulated policy development and research evidence.
- Undermine national and institutional frameworks built around the Horizon Europe requirement, including GEPs and researcher training programmes across the ERA.

- Disproportionately affect key research fields, including biomedical research, AI and technology, social sciences, and climate research, where the risks and consequences of gender-blind approaches are most acute and well documented.
- Reduce innovation and market potential, as research and innovation that fail to account for sex and gender differences risk overlooking user needs, limiting uptake, and missing opportunities to develop products, services and solutions that are effective, safe and relevant for the whole population.
- Weaken the EU's capacity to address societal challenges by reducing the ability of R&I to generate knowledge and solutions that are valid and applicable across the whole population.
- Undermine confidence in the stability and coherence of the EU policy framework by reversing a requirement around which Research Performing Organisations, Research Funding Organisations, and national authorities have already built strategies, capacities, training, and implementation frameworks across the ERA.
- Weaken the EU's credibility as a standard-setter in research policy, by signalling retreat from an area where scientific evidence and international practice increasingly support the systematic integration of sex, gender and intersectional analysis in R&I.
- Significantly undermine research quality, resulting in overgeneralised findings, lower accuracy, reduced transferability of results, and weaker reproducibility across studies.

References

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¹ Specifically, the Sub-group on Inclusive Gender Equality in the European Research Area is tasked with facilitating the exchange of experience and promoting mutual learning; providing advice and support to the Commission to address policy challenges related to gender equality and inclusiveness in R&I; facilitating coordination and cooperation on the structural policy; liaising with national and European stakeholders and networks as well as related projects and actions; and interacting closely with other ERA Policy Agenda actions. For more information see <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/expert-groups-register/screen/expert-groups/consult?lang=en&fromMainGroup=true&groupID=103813>.

² For more information see <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/expert-groups-register/screen/expert-groups/consult?lang=en&groupID=3833>.

³ For more information about the structural policy see <https://european-research-area.ec.europa.eu/era-structural-policies-2025-2027>.