

Science Europe Response to the Call for Evidence on the Action Plan for Women in Research, Innovation and Startups

Despite progress, many challenges still hinder progress towards equality, diversity, and inclusion in Europe, including in research and innovation. According to [She Figures](#) data, while women make up 47% of the graduate talent pool, they occupy only a third of senior research positions and a quarter of the positions of heads of Higher Education Institutions. This gap is even starker in STEM and business fields. In addition, according to data from [UniSAFE](#), high rates of gender-based violence (GBV) persist in academia. Up to 62% of surveyed research professionals experienced GBV, with those who identify as LGBTQ+ (68%), reported a disability or chronic illness (72%), and belong to an ethnic minority group (69%) being more likely to have experienced GBV.

In the context of the current backlash against equality, highlighted in a [2025 report from UN Women and the UN Research Institute for Social Development](#), Science Europe and its Member Organisations consider it essential to adopt and implement robust policies that promote Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) and protect women and under-represented groups. A successful European Research Area must ensure equality, diversity, and inclusion and actively combat all forms of discrimination.

Recent [proposals](#) to weaken the EU's Gender Equality Plans, as well as insufficient provisions protecting EDI in the Framework Programme 10 proposal, raise alarm as to whether the current EU policy ambitions are fit for purpose, as argued in Science Europe's [Recommendations On Shaping the Close Connection Between Horizon Europe and the European Competitiveness Fund](#). European countries and research organisations have usually put in place, to varying degrees, legislative frameworks, policies, and rules that protect gender equality, combat discrimination, and promote equal opportunities. However, the implementation of EU- and national-level legislation and policies remains fragmented and incomplete. Similarly, political and administrative pressures are endangering the progress made so far and further challenge the promotion of equality, diversity, and inclusion.

To that end, Science Europe welcomes the development of an ambitious action plan on women in research, innovation and startups. For the action plan to succeed, Science Europe proposes the following guiding principles in relation to the questions included in the Call for Evidence.

General considerations and challenges for women in research and innovation

- Advancing gender equality and contributing to developing research ecosystems where everyone can realise their full potential and be rewarded for the quality of their scholarly

contributions, independently of their gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, disabilities, ethnic origin, or social background.

- Equality policies should extend beyond grant applicants to encompass all researchers, as well as research professionals such as managers, technicians, and administrative personnel. Including the private sector in these efforts to improve EDI is also essential.
- Training peer reviewers and evaluators is still an essential aspect of ensuring fairer research assessment processes, including reducing conscious, unconscious, and systemic biases, and promoting gender-sensitive evaluations. This also includes ex-post evaluation of funded projects. Training should not be limited to reviewers and should be tailored to the different target groups; it should also target managerial staff.
- Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) should be further strengthened throughout EU policy and legislation, including by maintaining the GEP eligibility criterion, reinforcing the monitoring of GEPs implementation, and integrating all aspects of discrimination, bias, and targeted violence.
- Awareness-raising campaigns – which can include workshops, seminars, social media initiatives, and information packages – should be conducted, with the aim of informing both the public and concerned research professionals. Communications should also inform women and under-represented groups of their rights and the available policies and mechanisms.

Challenges related to data collection

- Collecting reliable data related to equality and discrimination remains a challenge due to a lack of information, legal restrictions on what data can be collected, and concerns from research professionals that accurately reporting on their personal characteristics might not be safe. It is important to look deeper and beyond data (un)availability and consider scientific research and testimonies as evidence of the challenges.
- Collaborating with concerned groups should be promoted as an effective way to gather data and identify potential challenges and pitfalls. It is also crucial to ensure these consultations are comprehensive and address often-overlooked issues such as non-visible disabilities.

Addressing gender-based violence

- Taking the necessary steps to ensure researchers' safety should be a priority for research organisations. In particular, mobility and networking activities carry risks, especially for women and LGBTQ+ people, who are more likely to be exposed to harassment and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in these situations. Violence and harassment targeted at or impacting minority and underrepresented groups should be included in efforts to address SGBV.
- Ensure that dedicated actions are included to address sexual and gender-based violence in academic settings, aiming at supporting the implementation of the [Zero-Tolerance Code of Conduct](#). This includes adopting a victim-centred approach that provides spaces and mechanisms that prioritise victims' safety and support. These actions should address the

heightened risks of SGBV associated with mobility, networking activities, fieldwork, and the supervision of early-career researchers.

Intersectionality and a holistic approach to equality

- Combat discrimination and inequality related to characteristics other than gender (such as race, religion, or disability), where progress has been more limited, and promote an intersectional approach to advancing equality and inclusion in research and innovation.
- Mobility, in all its forms (inter-sectoral, inter-disciplinary, geographical, virtual, etc.), should be promoted wherever beneficial, but care and consideration must be given to differentiated effects across population groups, and mobility should not be a requirement for career progression. Careful promotion of mobility opportunities might include the option to divide mobility periods into smaller posting periods rather than a single continuous period, for example.
- Develop and implement appropriate activities to promote progress on EDI in the content of research and innovation, in particular to support the integration of Inclusive Gender Analysis, including through the implementation of the [Framework](#) created by the ERA subgroup on Inclusive Gender Equality, both in policies developed and implemented by research organisations and research projects.

Overall, the development of the action plan for women in research, innovation, and startups offers a good opportunity to further address persistent challenges hindering the full realisation of equality in the European research and innovation ecosystem. An ambitious action that would include concrete measures to promote EDI would greatly contribute to improving the framework conditions for research in Europe.

[Science Europe](#) is the organisation representing major public organisations that fund and perform excellent, ground-breaking research in Europe. It brings together the expertise of some of the largest and most respected European research organisations to jointly push the frontiers of how scientific research is produced and delivers benefits to society.