

## **The Guild's input to the Call for Evidence on Action Plans for women in research, innovation and startups**

The Guild welcomes the European Commission's upcoming Action Plan for women in research, innovation and startups, as it represents a critical opportunity to move from fragmented initiatives towards systemic change across the research and innovation (R&I) lifecycle. Universities are essential promoters of equality, diversity and inclusion, demonstrating how institutional culture can evolve and adapt over the years. More recently, they have made tangible progress in embedding inclusion and widening participation across teaching, research and innovation. We commend the introduction and implementation of the mandatory requirement of the Gender Equality Plans in Horizon Europe. And we believe it is more relevant than ever for Europe to establish a holistic, safe and attractive R&I environment, thereby enabling excellent researchers, regardless of their gender, to pursue excellent research careers.

While this progress is undeniable, and there is growing awareness in European research performing organisations of gender and intersectional policies, there is still a long way to go to achieve a truly safe, equal and inclusive research environment within the European Research Area (ERA). The Guild calls for an Action Plan for women in research, innovation and startups that comprehensively embeds both gender and intersectional approaches in its design, thus creating a competitive and inclusive R&I environment. Gender equality and intersectional approaches are key drivers of research excellence because they expand cognitive perspectives within research teams, fostering creativity and the generation of new ideas (Page, 2007). Underrepresented groups in science produce more novel results (Hofstra et al., 2020), while diversity in groups improves collective problem-solving capacity (Hong & Page, 2004). Indeed, only by truly embracing gender perspectives in all its dimensions - from the composition of research teams to how research problems are defined and addressed - can institutions fully harness the power of equality in gender and intersectionality to strengthen scientific discovery (Nielsen et al., 2018). Beyond these contributions to research outcomes, greater gender balance also plays an important role, strengthening further the talent pipeline (Miller et al., 2014).

The Guild notes that strengthening discussions about gender and intersectionality are even more critical in the current geopolitical context, where different parts of the world, including in Europe, face increasing political pressure on gender and inclusion strategies, with chilling effects on R&I environments.

### **Women's participation and progression in the R&I ecosystem**

The primary challenge for women's participation and progression in the R&I ecosystem is not related to formal access. It stems from wider societal factors hindering gender equality also at the workplace as well as from structural and cumulative mechanisms within R&I systems. Evidence (Dworkin et al., 2020; Holman et al., 2018; Jensen et al., 2018; Squazzoni et al., 2021) shows that gender disparities

persist across various dimensions of research careers, including publication patterns, citation impact, grant success rates, tenure outcomes, leadership appointments, patenting activity. These mechanisms interact along career pathways and accumulate over time. They have a significant impact, especially on early-career researchers who are still often facing precarious career conditions. An OECD study<sup>1</sup> (2021) shows that women are disproportionately affected during the transition from early to mid-career stage as it often coincides with growing family dependencies.

Parenthood, and particularly motherhood, often marks a turning point as parental leave can reduce publication and mobility opportunities during that period. Researchers with childcare responsibility report significant challenges in balancing research careers with family commitments (European Commission, 2025). Although caring responsibilities are closely associated with childcare, they extend beyond this context (Stanfors et al., 2019).

Following EU<sup>2</sup> and national reforms that have attempted to improve women's career progression, it is important to ensure that these are now fully implemented in an institutional context. The Guild underscores the importance of ensuring that research assessment systems truly capture excellence in quality. The Action Plan should, therefore, promote assessment frameworks that measure and reward excellence, appropriately taking into account impediments for those with care responsibilities.

### **Inclusive R&I ecosystems**

Progress towards gender equality will be further impeded if our attempts to achieve inclusive R&I environments do not fully consider [the intersections of multiple dimensions of identity](#). While the need for intersectionality is increasingly recognised in scholarship (European Commission, 2022), this acknowledgement has not yet been fully embedded in institutions and EU strategies on gender equality (Beeckmans et al., 2023).

National legal constraints, which differ among Member States (European Commission, 2017), prohibit the collection and use of sensitive data, including information on religion and/or ethnicity in some countries. Without this granular data, it becomes harder for universities to design safe and effective intersectional strategies. This increases the risk that intersectionality remains a conceptual commitment rather than a practice embedded in the institutional process. A critical example of the importance of disaggregated data shows that different ethnic minority groups may face distinct, sometimes non-overlapping barriers related to language or educational trajectories. A one-size-fits-all approach cannot effectively address these barriers. Intersectionality requires differentiated and context-sensitive approaches.

This leads to the importance of complementing quantitative indicators with qualitative methods. Case-based approaches and direct engagement with affected individuals are necessary to be able to provide an adequate response to the specific situation. It is, therefore, essential that the upcoming Action plan

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<sup>1</sup> OECD. (2021). Reducing the precarity of academic research careers. In OECD Science, Technology and Industry Policy Papers. <https://doi.org/10.1787/0f8bd468-en>

<sup>2</sup> Such reforms include the introduction of Gender Equality Plans, the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment (2022), and the Council Recommendation on a European framework to attract and train research, innovation, and entrepreneurial talent in Europe (adopted in December 2023). See more at European Commission: Directorate-General for Research and Innovation (2025) She figures 2024 – Gender in research and innovation – Statistics and indicators, Publications Office of the European Union, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/592260>, p. 226-227.

encourages universities to foster inclusiveness strategies that are appropriate to their national contexts, and that embrace intersectional approaches towards gender equality.

## Taking stock of the diverse institutional and national contexts

We welcome the Commission's initiative and call for a comprehensive and flexible Action plan that takes into account the diverse backgrounds and histories of Europe's universities. The success of the Action plan for women in research, innovation and startups requires a shared understanding of minimum standards that should be effectively implemented across universities and other research performing organisations. It must also be framed in such a way that it encourages institutions to aim higher than these minimum standards in setting appropriate conditions for gender equality in the context of intersectionality.

In sum, we call for the Action Plan to propose fair standards, encourage Member States to commit (financial and non-financial) support to the development of institutional practices and to ensure alignment with ongoing reforms in research assessment and the ERA.

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