

GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN THE ESF AND ERDF

This GENDERACTION Policy Brief provides strategic advice for the integration of gender into the content and evaluation of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) operational programmes for Research and Innovation (R&I), as part of advancing gender equality in the European Research Area (ERA). It is based on the results of the [GENDERACTION Mutual Learning Workshop on Gender in the ESF/ERDF](#), which was held online on 12 May 2021, organised by the Women and Science Unit of the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation and bringing together experts on these funds from different public administrations from several EU-Member States, as well as key stakeholders involved in the programming and management of these structural funds.

Programming the new structural funds during the COVID-19 era

Member States (MS) and regions are programming the new Funds (formerly known as European Structural and Investment Funds – ESIF) to be implemented in the period 2021-2027 in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery, based on national and regional assessments. For GENDERACTION, it is paramount to raise awareness about the need of **mainstreaming gender at the programmatic level** in the core documents. Equality between men and women, gender mainstreaming, and the integration of a gender perspective in all phases of programming, development and implementation is one of the

four Horizontal Principles included in the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR) of all these Funds¹. Still, comparing with the previous regulation, **gender equality has been merged with other grounds of discrimination** as part of the same Art. 9 (Horizontal Principles), losing its prominence as a single article. Moreover, it has not been transferred to any of the five Policy Objectives².

Gender mainstreaming in ESF and ERDF in previous programming periods

A report by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE)³ about gender equality in 2014-2020 ESIF programmes

1 | Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021.

showed worrying results. For all the funds studied, gender mainstreaming and references were often included in the chapter on «horizontal themes» but had very little impact on the content of specific programmes. This was translated into a lack of gender-sensitive targets and gender indicators (only compulsory for ESF). Comparing with the financial allocations in previous programming periods, complementing gender mainstreaming and specific gender equality policies and measures, including positive measures **(the dual approach)⁴, was disappearing**. Estimations pointed out that only approximately 0,6% of ERDF and 5,3% of ESF budgets were earmarked for gender equality measures (1% of all ESIF).

Another recent **study⁵ among national and regional RFOs of Spain** analysed the status of gender mainstreaming in structural funds. According to results, the **growing importance of having sex-disaggregated data per amount of the grants** is noteworthy, although only half of the organisations have this information disaggregated per number of requested and awarded

projects. Another positive fact is that more than half of the organisations that took part in the survey have already approved a **Gender Equality Plan (GEP)**, although just over half have specific objectives on gender mainstreaming in actions co-financed in the field of R&I. The most relevant result is that **almost all agencies have the intention to integrate the gender perspective in the programming of the ESF+ and ERDF 2021-2027**, although few have previous experience in such integration.

Gender equality in R&I in the new ESF+ and the ERFDF

For the 2021-2027 period the Cohesion Policy (ERDF, ESF+ and Cohesion Fund) is focused on the **transition to a smart, low-carbon economy**, responding to the challenges of the political agenda of the European Green Deal and the Digital Strategy. **For ERDF**, a budget concentration is expected in the Policy Objectives 1 and 2. This means that a big amount of resources from the Cohesion Policy will be dedicated

2 | The ERDF, the ESF+, the Cohesion Fund and the EMFAF shall support the following policy objectives:

- Policy Objective 1: a more competitive and smarter Europe by promoting innovative and smart economic transformation and regional ICT connectivity;
- Policy Objective 2: a greener, low-carbon transitioning towards a net zero carbon economy and resilient Europe by promoting clean and fair energy transition, green and blue investment, the circular economy, climate change mitigation and adaptation, risk prevention and management, and sustainable urban mobility;
- Policy Objective 3: a more connected Europe by enhancing mobility;
- Policy Objective 4: a more social and inclusive Europe implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights;
- Policy Objective 5: a Europe closer to citizens by fostering the sustainable and integrated development of all types of territories and local initiatives (Regulation (EU) 2021/1060).

3 | European Institute for Gender Equality (2018) *Gender budgeting. Mainstreaming gender into the EU budget and macroeconomic policy framework*.

4 | EIGE's Gender Equality Glossary & Thesaurus.

5 | The study was launched together by the Women and Science Unit (Ministry of Science and Innovation), the Network on Equality Policies between Women and Men in the Community Funds and R&I Policy Network in the framework of this GENDERACTION workshop.

to **innovation actions**. For these investments, the enabling condition is that **Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3)** are supported by a set of criteria related to R&I systems, among others. S3 set priorities at national or regional level (or both) and identify the most promising areas for sustainable economic development based on a region's distinctive structures and knowledge base. However, mainstreaming gender is not a requisite when developing the S3. As support from the ERDF under the Policy Objective 1 should be based on building capacities for S3, this lack of gender-sensitive targets can result in the absence of gender budgeting.

Indeed, the **inclusiveness of labour markets and the equal access to education and training** (Policy Objective 4) are apparently the only specific objectives of the ERDF where **gender equality measures** could be relevant (although not explicit). Furthermore, while the development of horizontal skills in R&I is covered by the **ESF+** (e.g. training of researchers), the ERDF addresses only the development of concrete skills linked to the S3, for example, new skills for innovation, with no **reference to gender-specific targets**. As a result, this can lead to ignoring gender disparities in R&I, instead of investing new funds to fill the already existing gender gaps and the new challenges, also in terms of gender equality, caused by the COVID-19 crisis.

On the opposite, it is established that the **ESF+ specifically contributes to the Sustainable Development Goal 5**, among others. Article 6 of the Regulation of this fund addresses «conciliation between working and personal life, combat the feminisation of poverty and gender discrimination in the labour market and in education and training». However, the foreseen actions are directed only at establishing **a gender-balanced labour market**, with no other gender mainstreaming measures.

Finally, according to the CPR, the Funds

should include **measurable indicators to enable the monitoring of support of gender equality**. Nevertheless, only the ESF+ foresees that common indicators related to personal data should be broken down by gender (women, men and non-binary persons). On the other side, only one result indicator of the ERDF related to Interreg refers to «participations in joint actions promoting gender equality, equal opportunities and social inclusion».

Mainstreaming gender in new ESF+ and ERDF: a window of opportunity

The new programming period brings a window of opportunity for **including specific targets addressing gender inequalities** according to regional needs, which starts with planning S3 with a gender perspective. **All Policy Objectives are impacted by gender**, but managing authorities need specific instruments and resources to plan the allocation of funding with a **dual approach**, this is, combining gender mainstreaming with specific gender equality measures and targets. The same applies to gender equality bodies that support other institutions in their work. Joint collaboration mechanisms should be put into practice to properly accompany these processes, including the re-activation of networks such as communities of practice. In Spain, the **Network on Equality Policies between Women and Men in the Community Funds** fosters a real and effective implementation of gender equality, not only by promoting its mainstreaming in all the fields of action of structural funds, but also by programming specific actions aimed at combating gender discrimination and achieving real gender equality.

To support gender mainstreaming into the new European funds, GENDERACTION strongly advises the use of EIGE's **Gender Budgeting step-by-step toolkit**, which includes 11 practical tools and MS good

practices and examples following the entire funding cycle (available in several languages). The Tool 6 is focused on developing quantitative and qualitative indicators for advancing gender equality, expanding already defined common gender indicators.

Examples to get inspiration

Concrete examples presented during the Mutual Learning Workshop illustrate how gender can be mainstreamed in structural funds:

- The **Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic** led the Operational Programme Research, Development and Education (2014-2020) for the implementation of the ESF and ERDF, where **no specific gender objectives were included**. However, to support gender equality, the authority decided to focus on the improvement of the conditions for **education related to research** and for the development of **human resources in research and development (R&D)**. A pilot call was launched (followed by a second one) to fund activities strengthening the representation of women in R&D, supporting the reintegration of researchers into R&D after a time lag (not only for maternity/parental leave) and training and disseminating knowledge and skills in the field of gender equality. One of the lessons learnt was the need of setting **gender topics as specific interventions in the operational programmes** and as part of **projects evaluation and selection**.
- The **Autonomous Region of Sardinia (Italy)** will integrate gender in ERDF programming thanks to the approval of its first Gender Equality Plan (GEP) in the framework of the Horizon 2020 SUPERA project⁶, which also brought

the **inclusion of gender equality principles in the Regional Development Plan** (the core document at regional level). The last fosters the implementation of positive actions aimed at ensuring compliance with **gender equality in all regional actions, including R&I financed by the ERDF**. Alliances with stakeholders and citizens were key to develop the GEP and the new programme through a **bottom-up approach**. **As a result, equal opportunities will be a cross-cutting principle of each Policy Objective** of the new ERDF programme.

- The **Flemish Managing Authority of the ESF (Belgium)** strongly relies on this fund to achieve gender equality in the labour market. A lot of work has been implemented over the last decades on gender equality, but there was a need to ensure that not only gender equality experts had this knowledge, but that the entire organisation was part of a **structural change towards real gender equality**. For this, they developed an **overall gender strategy and an action plan** to ensure that gender equality is **promoted through the ESF and the financed projects and among the staff of this institution too**. Keeping gender at the Managing Authority's agenda, providing support and evaluating the gender equality strategy are all necessary actions to encourage funding recipients to mainstream gender in their own projects.

Conclusions

- Lack of specific requirements in 2014-2020 led to **gender-blind funding**.
- The crisis caused by the **COVID-19 pandemic** is gendered. GENDERACTION strongly advocates for **gender mainstreaming in all programmes and instruments** to avoid the risk of increasing gender inequalities during the next

6 | <https://www.superaproject.eu/>

seven years in a context of crisis and uncertainties.

- Mainstreaming gender at **the preparation phase of programming** will facilitate the planning of specific **R&I measures and actions including a gender perspective (the dual approach)**.
- Although **ERDF** regulations do not include specific gender equality targets and indicators, the identification **of needs in the field of R&I** at national and regional levels and **its inclusion in S3** bring a unique opportunity to define **specific measures to fill gender gaps**.
- **ESF+** programming should be more ambitious, **going beyond a gender-balanced labour market** and mainstreaming gender through all the planned interventions and phases.
- **Gender impact indicators** are key for monitoring effectiveness of gender mainstreamed programming and should be included in all types of actions, for example, in the investment on infrastructure or training. Defining sex-disaggregated **indicators in S3** and new operational programmes is paramount to ensure correct monitoring. These indicators will ultimately enable monitoring the support to **gender equality in the ERA** (which comprises budget allocations too).
- Within the CFR framework, **EIGE's gender budgeting toolkit** offers excellent guidance to use the given indicators to capture gender impact (without adding new ones).
- **Financial and human resources**, including capacity-building and technical assistance, need to be put in place to **programme, implement, monitor and evaluate the implementation** of the new ERDF and ESF+ programmes all over Europe. Networks and communities of practice offer great opportunities for sharing knowledge and fostering common support.

- The **GENDERACTION** community believes that **mainstreaming gender at the institutional level is essential** to support gender equality measures through the structural funds. A way to do so is to request a GEP as a requirement to receive funds, in alignment with Horizon Europe new policy.

References

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