

Webinar Report

Equality and Inclusion: Strengthening Excellence in Research

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'Equality and Inclusion: Strengthening Excellence in Research'

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Authors: **Adrien Braem** (Science Europe)

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Editors: **Lidia Borrell-Damián** (Science Europe)

Design: **Klaudia Sroka** (Science Europe)

For further information please contact the Science Europe Office: office@scienceeurope.org

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Introduction

Science Europe has a long-standing commitment to promoting and supporting Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion in research environments. Following the achievement of the first milestone, with the launch of the [Practical Guide to Improving Gender Equality in Research Organisations \(2017\)](#), the organisation has participated in numerous initiatives and campaigns supporting women in science, including those in [2023](#) and [2024](#); and the organisation of a webinar on '[Women in Science: Celebrating Inclusion and Shaping the Future of Research](#)' on 28 February 2025. This approach is holistic and guided by the [Vision and Framework for Research Cultures](#).

In February 2024, Science Europe published a [Practical Guide to Supporting Diversity in Research Environments](#). The Guide showcases good practices and provides practical recommendations across topics such as positive action measures and the collection and use of diversity data, to support institutions in defining processes to reinforce positive environments and address misconduct. The Science Europe Briefing Paper on the ERA Policy Agenda 2022-2024 provides, in Section 5, a concise overview of Science Europe's advocacy priorities in this area.

Science Europe currently contributes to various forums to advance equality in the research ecosystem, in Europe and globally, in particular the [EDI Working Group of the Global Research Council](#) and the [European Commission Expert Group on Inclusive Gender Equality in the ERA](#). EDI is supported in connection with other major policy initiatives that are driving national and international research cultures in positive directions, such as the new European Framework for Research Careers and the recent frameworks for research assessment promoted by the [San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment](#) (DORA) and the [Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment](#) (CoARA).

In particular, Science Europe aims to support the implementation of the [Zero-tolerance Code of Conduct on Gender-based Violence and Sexual Harassment](#), as well as promote the integration of EDI considerations into research content and priorities. EDI not only has a human resources dimension, but it can also influence scientific methodological approaches in research projects.

On 20 March 2026, Science Europe organised a webinar titled '[Equality and Inclusion: Strengthening Excellence in Research](#).' The webinar aimed to discuss the crucial importance of integrating EDI measures in research systems and processes. The discussion also explored the role of research funding and performing organisations in supporting inclusive practices that encourage diverse research environments and empower under-represented groups to drive scientific excellence.

Through speaker interventions and a panel discussion, the webinar examined how to improve the conditions related to the mobility of women and under-represented groups in research, focusing on several key areas:

- Key framework conditions affecting equitable access and participation in mobility initiatives and programmes.
- Targeted support schemes.
- Measures promoting gender- and equality-sensitive policies at host institutions
- Addressing safety concerns and gender-based violence.
- Care responsibility policies.

The outcomes of this discussion are summarised in this report and highlight possible avenues for research funding and research performing organisations to improve research working environments by addressing equality, diversity and inclusion. They will be used by Science Europe to support its Member Organisations embarking on this mission and to advocate for improved EDI policies at European and international levels. The recording of the event is available on Science Europe's [YouTube page](#).

Panel Discussion

Charlotte Rösel, Equal Opportunities Officer at the [Austrian Academy of Sciences](#) (ÖAW), presented the Academy's approach to promoting equal opportunity measures. She presented an overview of the ÖAW's Equality Plan, which has been in effect since April 2024 and is both binding and permanent. The plan applies to all members of the Academy and is subject to regular monitoring, with meetings held twice a year involving all departments responsible for implementing its measures. This framework, she emphasised, provides the structural backbone for the Academy's equality and diversity work.

Rösel focused on the ÖAW's Working Group on Equal Opportunities, a 12-member body drawn from across different career levels in both scientific and administrative areas. Notably, the group operates independently and serves in an advisory role. Its responsibilities are formally defined in both the Equality Plan and the Target Agreement, covering the development and implementation of specific programmes. She highlighted that the group is organised internally into flexible working groups that can be adapted as needed, currently covering intersectionality and anti-racism; disabilities and neurodiversity; a mentoring programme; women in science; public relations and outreach; and events and training. The group also represents the Academy at networking events, including those hosted by the Ministry for Science.

The key services co-ordinated by the Working Group were also presented. These include biannual Gender and Diversity Lectures - a fixed requirement under the Equality Plan - which serve as a platform for presenting research in the field, featuring either panels or individual speakers from within the Academy or externally. On the topic of work-life balance, the "Academy and Family" provisions include reimbursement of travel and accommodation costs for children and caregivers, coverage of childcare costs for work-related events after 5 pm, and support for caregiving for family members in Austria. Equal Treatment Representatives play an important role in gathering feedback from institutes, ensuring that information about support services is available at all locations, participating in recruitment hearings for positions above a certain level, and drawing attention to unconscious bias during selection processes.

Finally, she introduced the Clearing Office against Discrimination, which serves as a point of contact for affected individuals, provides support through information and analysis, documents all cases, and recommends remedial measures, such as mediation. Its rules of procedure are available on the ÖAW's intranet, and the office is represented at all of the Academy's institutes. The presentation concluded with an overview of further programmes and collaborations, including regular monitoring measures such as Gender Pay Gap and Glass-Ceiling Index analyses; fellowships for women in STEM fields, such as the Berta Karlik Fellowship and the VWA Mint Prize; co-operation with [myAbility](#) on business and inclusion; and representatives for employees with disabilities.

Laurence Guyard, Equality Advisor, Scientific Integrity Advisor and Head of Relationships with Scientific Communities at the French National Research Agency (ANR), presented the Agency's commitments and initiatives related to gender equality. She emphasised that Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) are mandatory in French public research institutions and have been in place for three years. The GEPs, she added, are structured around several axes such as career advancement, equal pay, reducing discrimination, or training. The overall objective is to help women maintain a balance between their professional and personal lives and to reduce the gap in career advancement between men and women. She explained that the ANR's [Code of Ethics](#) and [2024-2027 Gender Equality Plan](#) reflect this commitment to gender equality and combating sexual and gender-based violence and discrimination.

Guyard highlighted the French National Agency's two main areas of action. The first is anchoring gender equality at the ANR through a dedicated mission, staff training, egalitarian human resources measures, and support for parenthood and work-life balance. The second is embedding gender equality within research schemes and programmes. This is achieved by ensuring that calls for proposals are written inclusively; integrating the sex and/or gender dimension into the research content; evaluating projects inclusively and equitably, through training evaluators and analysing submission and selection data; and measuring the impact of funded projects on careers.

She further explained that the Agency draws a strong link between research integrity and gender equality. Taking the sex and gender dimension of research into account is part of the social responsibility of research and an essential element of scientific rigour. She added that researchers should adopt a reflexive approach to gender equality to avoid bias in knowledge production and to anticipate the potential health, social, and political consequences of applying their research results, which could have different effects on men and women.

Finally, she highlighted specific initiatives to support women's mobility in research. This includes [France 2030](#), under which programmes supporting researcher mobility may receive government funding that is managed by ANR.

Kateřina Svíčková, Head of the Gender Sector at the [Directorate-General for Research and Innovation at the European Commission](#), opened her intervention by tracing the evolution of gender equality policy at the EU level, noting that co-ordination had been underway since 1999 and that gender equality and mainstreaming in research and innovation have been European Research Area priorities since 2012. She highlighted the [ERA Policy Agenda for 2025-2027](#), under which gender equality and inclusiveness are among the structural policies, with specific tasks targeting Gender Equality Plans, the gender dimension in R&I content, gender-based violence in research and innovation, intersectionality, and gender budgeting. She also underscored that gender equality provisions are embedded in the Horizon Europe framework.

Turning to [Gender Equality Plans](#) specifically, she explained that a GEP is a set of commitments and actions aimed at promoting gender equality within an organisation by integrating it into regular rules, procedures, and practices. An inclusive GEP, she stressed, goes further by addressing how gender intersects with other identities such as ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, or social origin, aiming to achieve structural change and equality for all.

She outlined five recommended content areas for GEPs: work-life balance and organisational culture; gender balance in leadership and decision-making; gender equality in recruitment and career progression; integrating the gender dimension into research and teaching content; and measures to prevent and address gender-based violence, including sexual harassment.

On the question of why GEPs matter, she pointed to increased fairness and talent retention; enhanced creativity and innovation through diversity; improved competitiveness; and improved research quality through the integration of sex and gender analysis. She then detailed the four mandatory requirements for GEP eligibility under Horizon Europe: the plan must be a formal public document published on the institution's website and signed or adopted by senior management; dedicated resources and expertise must be committed to implementation; sex- and gender-disaggregated data on personnel must be collected and reported on at least every two years based on indicators; and awareness-raising and training on gender equality, including on unconscious gender biases, must be provided for staff and decision makers.

Svíčková also presented the [Zero-Tolerance Code of Conduct on Gender-based Violence and Sexual Harassment](#), in the European Research Area, which is organised around twenty principles spanning three pillars: commitment, action, and accountability. She encouraged organisations to join the [GenderSAFE pledge](#) for zero tolerance. Regarding care responsibilities, she referenced the [European Research Council's \(ERC\) approach to parental leave](#) and noted that exceptional care costs directly linked to the implementation of an ERC project are eligible, such as support for parents travelling to conferences or project meetings.

Closing with a forward-looking perspective, she outlined two major upcoming initiatives. The first is the European Research Area Act, planned for adoption by the European Commission in the third quarter of 2026, which she emphasised would include national commitments to increase R&D investment towards 3% of GDP, better coordination of research and innovation policies, improved conditions for researchers including career paths and mobility, and strong protection of core values such as scientific freedom, research ethics and integrity, gender equality, and equal opportunities. The second is the Action Plan for Women in Research, Innovation and Startups, also planned for adoption in the third quarter of 2026, with the goal of making the EU the most attractive place for women in these fields by 2030, through supporting structural change for a safe and inclusive environment; advancing gender equality in career choices and progression; and closing gaps in STEM and the innovation ecosystem.

Kristin Engh Førde, Director of [Kilden](#), introduced her organisation as a national knowledge centre and independent unit of the Research Council of Norway (RCN), established in 1998. She explained that Kilden's primary mission is to promote gender perspectives and gender balance in research through dissemination, compilation of research, and to provide an advisory function within the Research Council.

She highlighted the work of the [KIF Committee](#), which is appointed by the Ministry of Education and Research, and aims to advance understanding of how gender, social, and ethnic backgrounds affect critical transitions in research careers, from entry to senior leadership. She noted that from 2026, the Committee's scope would expand to include students and the higher education sector, and she directed the audience to [Kifinfo.no](#), a resource platform commissioned by the Committee since 2004, for news, research, and tools on gender balance and diversity.

Førde then presented findings from a [new survey](#) commissioned by the KIF Committee regarding the implementation of Gender Equality Plans in Norwegian research institutions. She reported that questionnaire responses and interviews revealed that only a few institutions have concrete plans to follow up on their measures, and even fewer include action plans detailing how these measures will be assessed. While she acknowledged the value of starting from documentable practice to facilitate measurement, she cautioned that not everything can be counted, making it difficult to assess the impact of certain initiatives. She further observed that diversity is harder to measure than gender equality and that equality officers often feel isolated in their implementation efforts.

Her intervention also covered key findings from a comprehensive 2022 [review](#) of 129 studies on gender equality and diversity in Norwegian research between 2010 and 2021. Førde noted that while scholarship in the field is growing, significant gaps remain, particularly regarding the intersection of gender and ethnicity. She explained that the research has shifted its focus from individual discrimination to how structural factors, such as temporary positions, intense competition, mobility requirements, and norms of “excellence,” drive inequality. She highlighted that caregiving responsibilities and invisible tasks disproportionately limit women’s research output, especially for those in temporary posts, and that sexual harassment remains a documented problem, particularly for younger women.

Finally, she pointed out a severe under-representation of Norwegian-born individuals with immigrant parents in the research sector, despite immigrants making up a significant portion of the workforce, and mentioned an upcoming online platform scheduled for autumn 2026 to showcase [case studies](#) on the gender dimension in interdisciplinary research.

Key Messages from the Discussion

The panellists’ interventions were followed by an open discussion with the audience. The exchanges covered a wide range of topics and issues, and the conclusions are summarised below.

There is a recognised gap between having GEPs and ensuring their effective implementation.

Participants noted that simply having a plan on paper does not guarantee impact, especially if measures like workshops have low participation rates. There are calls to make certain measures mandatory within institutions rather than optional, and to strengthen monitoring, evaluation, and follow-up mechanisms to ensure plans lead to tangible change. In particular, GEPs are mandatory eligibility criteria for EU funding under Horizon Europe, but the current assessment approach is primarily “trust and verify,” checking only for the existence of a plan and fulfilment of mandatory process-related requirements rather than evaluating the quality, ambition, or content of the plans themselves. Sample-based checks are conducted post-grant award to verify compliance, but national contexts and specific content are not assessed in depth at the application stage.

Intersectionality is increasingly emphasised but lacks standardised operationalisation.

While the EU encourages a shift toward inclusive, intersectional gender equality plans through funded projects and awards (such as the annual prize for gender equality champions), there is no mandatory intersectional requirement for GEPs at the EU level. Speakers and participants stressed the need to develop shared language and clearer definitions for intersectionality to ensure it is properly integrated into policies and practices.

Mobility for researchers faces significant barriers, particularly for women and under-represented groups, due to care responsibilities, safety concerns, and a lack of inclusive design.

The European Commission is developing an Action Plan for Women in Research, Innovation and Startups, as well as the European Research Area Act, to address these issues. Preliminary consultations suggest measures such as supporting female early-career researchers through mobility funding, clarifying which care costs are eligible, and incorporating gender-based violence safeguards into mobility programmes.

Gender-based and sexual violence in research is a widespread but under-reported problem.

A 2022 EU-wide survey of 42,000 respondents across 46 universities found that over 60% of women reported experiencing gender-based violence, with higher rates among those facing multiple forms of discrimination. Many victims do not report due to a lack of trust in systems, fear of repercussions, or normalisation of harmful behaviours.

Reporting mechanisms are inconsistent and often inadequate.

Speakers and participants highlighted the need for anonymous whistleblowing systems, external reporting offices, and transparent follow-up procedures. A major concern is that perpetrators can move between institutions without consequences due to a lack of shared information or co-ordinated systems. EU-level guidance on establishing robust, confidential reporting channels and shared terminology would be beneficial.

Structural and cultural change is required beyond individual reporting mechanisms.

Speakers and participants emphasised that addressing gender-based violence and inequality requires tackling underlying power structures; mandatory awareness training for senior researchers and group leaders; and creating a culture of trust where incidents are taken seriously. The [EU Directive on Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence](#) (adopted in 2024, to be implemented by 2027) provides a broader legal framework that research institutions should align with.

Positive discrimination measures, such as the Austrian Science Fund's [ESPRIT](#) funding programme and [ASTRA](#) awards, are viewed as necessary compensatory measures to address historical inequalities and the under-representation of women, particularly in STEM fields.

These are not considered discriminatory but as essential tools to achieve gender equality and correct systemic imbalances.

Future frameworks, including the next Horizon Europe Programme, should embed strong gender equality provisions; require gender perspectives in research proposals; and ensure researchers have the resources and competence to implement them.

There is also a need to evaluate how gender dynamics evolve during projects, not just at the proposal stage.

Awareness and normalisation remain critical challenges.

Many individuals, particularly women, have normalised discriminatory or harassing behaviours and may not recognise them as violations until exposed to alternative perspectives. Education, a shared language, and safe spaces for dialogue are essential for shifting cultural norms and empowering individuals to identify and report misconduct.

Collaboration and knowledge-sharing among institutions, research funding organisations, and national bodies are vital.

Examples of good practice, such as the Austrian Academy of Science's reporting processes and Norway's statistical tracking of immigrant-descendant researchers, should be widely disseminated. The EU is encouraged to facilitate networks, provide guidance, and promote cross-institutional learning to drive systemic improvement.

Next Steps for Science Europe

The presentations and discussions during the webinar provided valuable insights and recommendations for action to promote EDI in research and innovation. Building on previous activities – in particular, the Practical Guides and the Vision and Framework for Research Cultures – Science Europe will continue to work to support progress in equality, diversity, and inclusion and will use the conclusions of the webinar to inform the development of future activities.

Science Europe will carry out the following actions in particular:

- Commission a study to develop a stronger knowledge base on equality, diversity, and inclusion. The study will particularly focus on combating sexual and gender-based violence, in line with Science Europe's commitment to promoting safer and more inclusive research cultures.
- Develop a comprehensive and actionable plan to implement the [GenderSAFE pledge for zero tolerance on gender-based violence](#). The plan will aim to promote concrete positive change along the three pillars of the Code of Conduct.
- Develop the appropriate connection between EDI and research integrity, especially in the context of the [ERA Action](#) on 'Developing a Coherent and Co-ordinated Framework for a European Approach to Integrity and Ethics in R&I in the Face of Emerging Challenges' in the ERA Policy Agenda 2025-2027, which it co-sponsors.
- Continue to support the development of the ERA Action on Inclusive Gender Equality, and advocate for strong policy actions in the European Research Area to support EDI.
- Continue to promote EDI as a cornerstone of EU Framework Programmes, and support the inclusion of ambitious Gender Action Plans across all programme cycles.
- Continue to raise awareness among its Member Organisations and support them in their efforts to develop policies and actions on EDI, while promoting the priorities and recommendations highlighted in this webinar.

Science Europe will mainstream EDI in its activities and events, notably through identifying and exploring elements relevant to equality, diversity, and inclusion throughout its upcoming Strategy Plan 2027-2032.