



EUROPEAN POLICYBRIEF



HORIZON-WIDERA-2022-ERA-01-81

**TOPIC: SUPPORT TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF
INCLUSIVE GENDER EQUALITY PLANS**

PROJECT: SUPPORTER

DATE: 05/06/2024

INTRODUCTION

Drawing on the knowledge and experiences gathered from projects funded in the frame of the FP7 and H2020 funding programmes with reference to gender equality and gender equality plans (GEPs), the European Commission (EC) has proceeded to specific follow-up actions within Horizon Europe (HE), where gender+ equality is a strengthened commitment. Indicatively, having a GEP is now an eligibility criterion for all public bodies, higher education institutions and research organisations from EU Member States (MS) and Associated Countries (AC) seeking to participate in the funding calls. Measures against gender-based violence (including sexual harassment) is one of five recommended content-related requirements.

Since the launch of HE, there have been two dedicated calls for “Support to the implementation of inclusive gender equality plans” (HORIZON-WIDERA-2022-ERA-01-81 & 2024-ERA-01-11). These calls specify that proposed actions should address inclusion, intersectionality, innovation and generate impact particularly in less advanced institutions from widening countries. **The SUPPORTER project (2023-2025) was set up in response to HORIZON-WIDERA-2022-ERA-01-81 and committed to advance inclusive gender+ equality within the European Research Area (ERA) by supporting the development of intersectional, innovative, inclusive and impactful gender equality plans (4I-GEPs) tailored to sports higher education institutions, and explicitly addressing gender-based violence.** Specifically, SUPPORTER engages eight sports higher education institutions in widening and associated countries in the Central and Eastern European region (CEE) – from now on referred to as Implementing Organisations (IOs) ¹– to address their challenges on gender+ (in)equality, inclusiveness, and the prevention and

¹SUPPORTER consortium description: <https://www.supporter-project.eu/consortium/>

response to gender-based violence, and ultimately leading to systemic gender equality-related institutional change.

The SUPPORTER IOs reflect the existing diversity in the availability of gender equality policies in CEE countries. While some of the IOs already had their institutional GEPs, institutional gender equality policies and experience in gender equality-related projects at the proposal preparation stage, others had no policies in place and only developed their first institutional GEP to comply with the related Horizon Europe eligibility criterion. In addition, all the IO-GEPs were overarching documents, setting general gender equality actions at the institutions at large (macro-level), and were not specifically fitted to the specific needs of sports higher education (meso-level).

This policy brief focuses on three observations made during the first year of the SUPPORTER project at three different dimensions interlinked by the SUPPORTER context: institutional-dimension, sports education-dimension and the 'widening'-dimension. It emphasises the need for contemplating the intersection of these dimensions in policy-making and the need for contextualising the assessment and progressive development of GEPs across Europe. Additionally, given the crucial role of sports in social inclusion², it also highlights the potential of sports, and correspondingly sports higher education as part of it, as a catalyst for gender+ equality societal changes. The aim of the policy brief is to communicate SUPPORTER's policy-related observations and implications thereof to the EC.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

Sport is based on the notion of fair play, which can take a new enhanced meaning when infused with the principles of gender equality and intersectionality. Such enriched concept promotes inclusivity and diversity, ensuring all individuals are treated with fairness and respect. By fostering a more inclusive sports culture, it also strengthens societal cohesion and inclusion, having the potential to drive societal changes for the integration of these principles. However, considering that sport operates in 'inequalities silos' (age, disability, gender, etc.), effectively addressing intersectionality issues proves difficult. Additionally, the high prevalence of gender-based violence in sports³ underscores the urgent need for comprehensive and targeted interventions. Therefore, the transformation of norms and practices in sport higher education needs innovative measures.⁴

Leveraging on this, the SUPPORTER methodology evolves through three distinct, but interlinked, and complementary processes: the analytical process, the reflective process, and the implementation process. The first year of the project was dedicated to the analytical and reflective processes, which were carried out both by the expert organisations and the IOs. For the expert organisations, the work consisted of mapping the state-of-the-art of gender equality including gender-based violence in the context of sport education and research⁵, mapping existing training materials, tools, and trainers⁶, and developing the project's capacity building scheme⁷. For the IOs,

² European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, (2007). White Paper on sport, Publications Office of the European Union. <https://op.europa.eu/s/zIUU>

³ Lang, M., Mergaert, L., Arnaut, C., & Vertommen, T. (2021). Gender-based violence in sport: prevalence and problems. *European Journal for Sport and Society*, 20(1), 57–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16138171.2021.2003057>

⁴ Strid, S., Lundvall, S., Grahn, K., Simonsson, A., & Wuiame, N. (2023). SUPPORTER D2.1 Inclusive gender+ equality policy and practice in sport higher education institutions. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8413754>

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Grahn, K., Lundvall, S., Strid, S., & Wuiame, N. (2023). SUPPORTER D2.2 Training materials and tools for institutional transformation. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10209677>

⁷ Vilarchao, E., Ververidou, F., Tatsioka, Z., Lundvall, S., Zaharis, N., Strid, S., & Ipolyi, I. (2024). SUPPORTER D3.1 Capacity Building Scheme. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10604194>

the work consisted of the assessment of their existing institutional GEP and mapping the existing institutional settings (analytical process), which then led to the co-creation phase (reflective process), in which the IOs co-designed their institutional roadmaps to accommodate the development of their 4I-GEP⁸.

In both processes, the work of the IOs was closely supported by the expert team as part of the capacity building scheme composed of trainings sessions, mutual learning activities, and mentoring and monitoring meetings. As a result, several key observations emerged at three dimensions: institutional dimension, sports dimension, and the widening dimension.

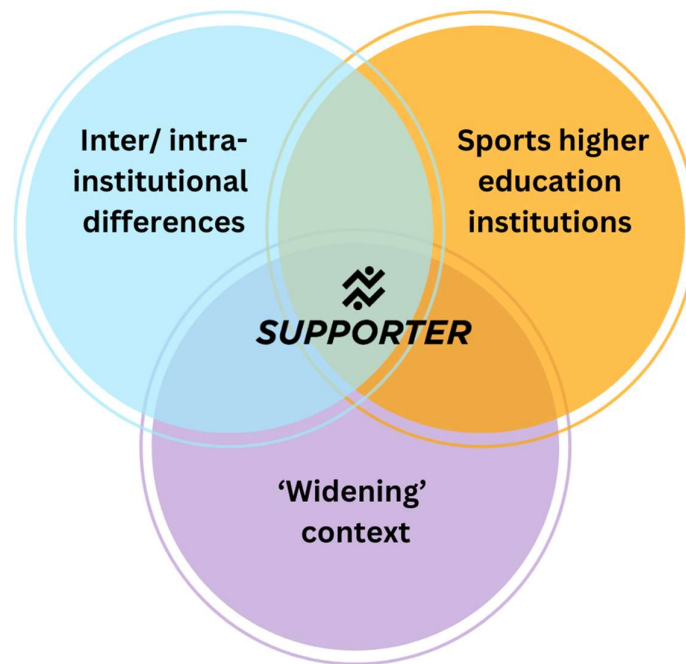


Figure 1: SUPPORTER field of action: Challenges at the intersection of three dimensions.

Institutional dimension: inter- and intra-institutional differences

SUPPORTER IOs present different understandings of gender equality and levels of engagement and advancement in gender equality policies and practices. It is important to note that gender equality is a complex and often contested concept, and a politically controversial subject. While there are different understandings and meanings of gender and gender equality across Europe, there is a general tendency in policy-making to conflate gender equality with a focus on women. While some institutions have robust policies and initiatives in place, others significantly lag behind; their participation in SUPPORTER being the first official opportunity where gender equality, gender equality policies, and gender-based violence are discussed at the institution⁹. Even though these inter-institutional differences are present across Europe, in the landscape of the widening countries, and in particular the CEE region where there may be specific national socio-political

⁸ Ververidou, F., Tatsioka, Z., Vilarchao, E., Strid, S., & Ipolyi, I. (2024). SUPPORTER D4.1 Report on the design of the institutional roadmaps. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11109192>

⁹ See footnote 5.

resistances to inclusive and transformative gender equality policies, these differences are more prevalent.

In addition, the SUPPORTER IOs are either sports universities or sports faculties. While the universities aim at upgrading their institutional GEP to a 4I-GEP, the faculties aim to develop a faculty-level 4I-GEP consistent with the institutional GEP while accommodating the specific needs of sports education. The sports faculties face the challenge of aligning their faculty-level 4I-GEP with the overarching GEP of the institution, which involves more complex stakeholder interactions and negotiations compared to sports universities. However, the sports faculties have the opportunity to collaborate with other faculties, such as social sciences or humanities, which can provide in-house gender equality knowledge and support, potentially facilitating the 4I-GEP development and implementation. Therefore, the challenges and the opportunities that both groups face differ, and so do the strategies that the IOs need to take to accommodate these changes. In the case of the faculties, there are also potential intra-institutional differences to take into account. The level of gender equality-awareness in general, including the implication of the available institutional GEP, may significantly differ among the faculties, depending on faculty's orientation, links to other faculties, the presence of change agents and participation in collaborative endeavours, e.g.: EC-funded projects, etc.

Overall, these observations underscore the need for tailored approaches to address the specific challenges and opportunities faced by each institution at the participating sports universities/ sports faculties in advancing gender equality within their unique institutional context.

Sports dimension: sport higher education versus general higher education state-of-the-art

One of the main challenges in developing 4I-GEPs in sport education institutions arises from addressing intersectionality in sports. Competitive sport disciplines are typically divided into binary gender categories (male and female) with the rationale behind of ensuring “fairness”, yet perpetuating the patriarchal status quo and excluding individuals whose gender identity or physiology does not neatly align with these binary categories, such as transgender, intersex and non-binary individuals¹⁰. Discussing intersectionality in this context therefore entails, not only raising awareness of its importance and expanding institutional knowledge on the subject, but most importantly, questioning the longstanding and present participant categorisation in competitive sports and dealing with the corresponding resistances.

In addition, the sports ecosystem is still largely male-dominated, especially in leadership positions. This male-centric culture, combined with the highly competitive environment, limited transparency, hierarchical structure, and greater focus on maintaining sports traditions, integrity and profitability rather than on inclusion and individual safety, creates an environment that can contribute to gender-based violence. Despite its high prevalence^{11,12}, only a few countries have specific legislation to address some types of gender-based violence in sports¹³, and most sports

¹⁰ Piggot (2020). Transgender, Intersex and Non-binary people in sport and physical activity. University of Hertfordshire. Sport+ Recreation Alliance. <https://sramedia.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/f0a71dc4-c08b-43f9-a4c2-0968ecb8e331.pdf>

¹¹ World Players Association 2021 Census of Athlete Rights Experiences (CARE). 2021 Report. <https://uniglobalunion.org/wp-content/uploads/WPA-Census-of-Athlete-Rights-Experiences-Report-2021-2-compressed.pdf>

¹² See footnote 3.

¹³ Lang, M., Mergaert, L., Arnaut, C. & Vertommen, T. (2018). Gender-based violence in EU sport policy: Overview and recommendations. *Journal of Gender-based Violence*. 2 (1), pp. 109-118. Available: <https://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/tpj/jgbv/2018/00000002/00000001/art00008>

organizations (including higher-education institutions) lack or are in the process of developing effective policies or response systems to prevent and respond to violence when it occurs¹⁴.

This lack of customised gender equality policies and practices in the sports arena is clearly reflected in sports higher education. While there is a vast variety of guidelines, training material, and research dedicated to the advancement of gender equality in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and maths (STEM) education and research for example, sports education and research do not have tailored strategies at hand.

Moreover, sports faculties and universities scarcely participate in EU R&I framework programmes, therefore sports higher education is less impacted by the external compliance-pressure of the Horizon Europe funding eligibility criteria.

‘Widening’ dimension: the so-called ‘widening’ gap

The inclusion of the GEP eligibility criterion in Horizon Europe has led to an increase of gender equality initiatives. Nonetheless, there is still a notable heterogeneity in the implementation of GEPs across the EU MS and AC, with particular disparities observed in the widening countries, in this present case, in CEE. Within these countries, GEPs and gender equality institutional policies are less prevalent, and when present, they often exhibit either a ‘sameness’- or a ‘difference’¹⁵- approach to - or understanding of - gender equality (in contrast to a transformative approach), at times directly equalising it with gender-balance and considering gender as binary, much as regulations and rules in sports itself.

This heterogeneity is due to broader socio-economic, political and cultural differences, moreover, recent anti-democratic / anti-gender / anti-feminist discourses that impact the implementation of gender equality initiatives, as also described by AGRIGEP project¹⁶. Paradoxically, while the EC provides dedicated funding to improve the systemic implementation of GEPs and gender equality actions in the widening countries, thereby acknowledging the so-called widening gap in gender equality, the same calls request the proposals to be innovative, intersectional, inclusive and impactful. While these ambitions could be achieved within the limitations of the call for many institutions in Western European countries, for institutions in the widening countries, this is much more challenging. This suggests that closing the widening gap would benefit from specific dedication and corresponding funding sources to cover the efforts needed.

This mismatch between the high ambition of the calls versus the reality of the national and institutional contexts, creates an additional significant challenge to winning consortia: to tackle the existing systemic widening gap, while creating the impact defined as of the ambitious grant agreements.

¹⁴ UNESCO and UN Women (2023). Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls in Sport: A Handbook for Policy Makers and Sports Practitioners. <https://doi.org/10.54678/OIYQ8917>

¹⁵ In the feminist theory, the ‘sameness approach’ emphasizes that men and women are fundamentally the same and should therefore be treated equally, while the ‘difference approach’ emphasizes that men and women have inherent differences that should be recognized and valued. In contrast the ‘transformative approach’ aims for a more comprehensive and radical restructuring of society. It seeks to not only achieve equality but also to dismantle and rebuild the systems and norms that perpetuate oppression, taking into account the full complexity of intersecting identities and power dynamics.

¹⁶ Forest, Maxime.2023.Advancing Gender equality in Widening countries through stakeholders’ mobilisation, AGRIGEP factsheet n°3. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10512416>

The SUPPORTER observations gained from the first twelve months of the project highlight the need for the contextualisation of intersectional, innovative, inclusive and impactful gender equality plans.

- The expectations (i.e. end point), especially in terms of innovation, need to be adapted to the starting point of the implementing organisations, and while not giving up on being ambitious, they need to remain realistic and built on solid grounds. For these reasons, a key point for policy concern in the European R&I area is to review the expected impact, time-period, and allocated funding of related calls.
- The special context of SUPPORTER provides a comprehensive set of examples that the EC support provided through HORIZON-WIDERA-2022-ERA-01-81, 2024-ERA-01-11, and potential follow up funding calls need to allow tailoring to the unique context of target implementing organisations, e.g.: geographical, socio-political, thematic and individual.
- Correspondingly, the advancement of these institutions towards gender equality should only be assessed in view of their own institutional starting point, within their (academic) field, and within their local 'widening' context.

Promotion of gender+ equality in the ERA through sports:

Sports significantly contribute to economic and social cohesion, promoting more integrated societies. Team participation, adherence to principles like *fair play*, rule compliance, respect for others, solidarity, and discipline, along with the organization of amateur sports through non-profit clubs and volunteering, strengthens active citizenship¹⁷.

- Therefore, sports - in particular sports education - could be consciously considered as key catalyst for gender+ equality changes in society. For that, the notion of 'Fair Play' itself could take a new enhanced meaning if it is infused with the principles of gender+ equality.
- With that aim, further Horizon Europe funding calls need to be developed to promote gender+ institutional changes in sports and sports organisations (from grassroots to academic).

SUSTAINABILITY AND LEGACY

SUPPORTER project main outputs:

- **Deliverable 2.1 Inclusive gender+ equality policy and practice in sport higher education institutions.**
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8413754>
- **Deliverable 2.2 Training materials and tools for institutional transformation.**
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10209677>
- **Deliverable 3.1 SUPPORTER Capacity building scheme.**
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10604194>
- **Deliverable 4.1 Report on the design of the institutional roadmaps.**
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11109192>

¹⁷ See footnote 1.

In line with SUPPORTER's commitment to Open Science (incl. Open Data), all project outputs are made available at the SUPPORTER community¹⁸ in the Zenodo repository following their submission to the EC.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

SUPPORTER advances inclusive gender+ equality within the ERA. It supports institutions to develop intersectional, innovative, inclusive and impactful gender equality plans (4I-GEPs), tailored to sports higher education institutions, and explicitly addressing gender-based violence including sexual harassment. Building on state-of the-art knowledge and the expertise of advanced gender+ equality institutions, SUPPORTER co-creates an innovative capacity-building and mutual learning programme, delivering support and mentoring towards the development of the 4I-GEPs. Guided by inclusive and innovative epistemologies and co-creative methodologies SUPPORTER acts:

- horizontally, by fostering institutional capacity and culture based on the principles of Diversity & Inclusion within an intersectional framework, ultimately enhancing the sports institutions' reputation, attractiveness, inclusiveness and research excellence;

- vertically, by triggering a transformative, institutional inclusive and sustainable change to sports institutions to address inequality-driven challenges and advance gender+ equality, focusing on GBV, thus also enhancing the institutions' efforts towards meeting their gender+ equality objectives in the ERA context.

To achieve these objectives SUPPORTER adopts a twinning-inspired approach, methodologically based on three interlinked processes (analytical, reflective, implementation), combining 4I learning and mutual learning schemes with co-creation and dissemination activities, engaging a diverse range of stakeholders, and building on knowledge and expertise from previous projects and tools. The multiplier effect of SUPPORTER, starting from the eight partner institutions and gradually reaching the sports ecosystem, has the long-term potential to trigger gender+ institutional change in a variety of further institutions, reaching society more broadly and contributing to wide-range systemic societal changes in line with the Ljubljana Declaration objectives.

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME	SecUring sPORTs Education thRough innovative and inclusive Gender Equality Plans (SUPPORTER)
COORDINATOR	Ildiko Ipolyi, European Science Foundation, Strasbourg, France
CONSORTIUM	European Science Foundation – ESF Strasbourg, France Georgian State Teaching University of Physical Education and Sport – GSTUPES Tbilisi Georgia Göteborgs Universitet – UGOT Gothenburg, Sweden Lietuvos Sporto Universitetas – LSU Kaunas, Lithuania

¹⁸ <https://zenodo.org/communities/supporter/>

Natsionalna Sportna Akademiya Vassil Levski – NSA
Sofia, Bulgaria
South-East European Research Centre – SEERC
Thessaloniki, Greece
Univerzitet u Banjoj Luci – UNIBL
Banja Luka, Bosnia & Herzegovina
Univerzita Karlova – CU
Prague, Czechia
Univerza v Ljubljani – UL
Ljubljana, Slovenia
Universitatea de Stat de Educație Fizică și Sport (SUPES)
Chisinau, Moldova
Universitatea de Vest din Timisoara – UVT
Timisoara, Romania

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SCHEME**

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DURATION

April 2023 – September 2025 (30 months)

BUDGET

EU contribution: 1,075,092.50 €

WEBSITE

<https://www.supporter-project.eu/>

**FOR MORE
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**FURTHER
READING**

1. SUPPORTER D2.1 (2023). *Inclusive gender+ equality policy and practice in sport higher education institutions*. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8413754>
2. SUPPORTER D4.1 (2024). *Report on the design of the institutional roadmaps*. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11109192>
3. SUPPORTER D4.3 (2025, forthcoming). *Guidelines and recommendations for implementing 4I-GEPs in sports education and in sports organisations*.
4. SUPPORTER D4.5 (2025, forthcoming). *Policy Brief 2: Providing policymakers with recommendations related to the implementation of gender equality plans in Eastern European sports universities, based on the observations made throughout the project*.



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