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Women in research, innovation and startups

Input from the Coimbra Group to the European Commission call for evidence Ares(2026)775035

Context

In response to the European Commission's January 2026 call for evidence on the "Women in research, innovation and startups - action plan", the Coimbra Group (CG) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the forthcoming EU action plan.

Progress in equality, diversity and inclusion strengthen research and innovation (R&I) systems, economic growth and collective well-being. Despite recent improvements, gender participation gaps in R&I remain significant as evidenced by the [She Figures 2024](#). Women continue to be underrepresented in certain fields, especially in STEM, and in senior research and professorial positions.

As emphasised in the 2023 [Council Recommendation](#) on a European Framework to Attract and Retain Research, Innovation and Entrepreneurial Talents in Europe, "specific efforts are needed to address gender inequalities in research careers inequalities in research careers and women's underrepresentation in the STEM fields in research and innovation".

The Coimbra Group, Europe's oldest network of universities, brings together 42 comprehensive, research-intensive institutions across 22 countries, including two recipients of the EU Award for Gender Equality Champions (sustainable and newcomer categories). The network has long advocated for the full implementation of the European Research Area (ERA). After contributing actively to the ERA policy agenda on inclusive gender equality (2022-2024), the CG is currently engaged in the ERA structural policy action "Strengthening gender equality and inclusiveness in the ERA, notably with an intersectional approach." In December 2025, the network's Equality and Diversity Working Group published the volume "Why EDI Matters - Equ(al)ity, Diversity and Inclusion in European Universities."

The Coimbra Group, and in particular its Equality and Diversity Working Group, stands ready to support and collaborate with the European Commission in the next phases of this initiative.



Do women in research, innovation and start-ups encounter specific challenges and barriers?

Yes. Women continue to face structural, cultural and institutional barriers.

Academic and research careers often follow trajectories misaligned with women's life cycles and caring responsibilities. Early-career precarity, expectations of constant availability, and the absence of gender-sensitive career design disproportionately disadvantage women. Persistent gender stereotypes, unequal distribution of care work, and biased norms further undermine equal participation.

Gender bias affects recruitment, assessment, recognition and promotion, as well as the access to top leadership roles, contributing to the significant and persistent underrepresentation of women in permanent roles and senior leadership. Informal procedures and opaque networks favour men, while women benefit from transparent structures and systematic institutional support.

Additional barriers include **gender-based violence**, the **undervaluation of women-dominated disciplines** (for example, some in the SSH) and the fact that **women or gender-sensitive investors and business angels** are still a minority in the start-up sector.

Gender pay gaps persist at all levels, especially at the professorship level.

Why do young women often choose not to pursue STEM when they go to university?

STEM fields remain strongly shaped by **historical stereotypes, gendered expectations and masculine cultural norms** that make girls feel unwelcome, **long before they enter higher education**. Influences from families, schools, media and even children's toys rarely encourage girls to pursue technical or scientific careers.

STEM pathways are often structured in a highly linear way, offering few opportunities and bridges for re-entry at later stages for girls or women who develop an interest later in their education.

The STEM fields also often continue to cultivate a **"hard" and highly competitive culture**, which reinforces an unwelcoming atmosphere.

The lack of diversity, insufficient career guidance at school level, experiences of discrimination and the scarcity of visible female role models further discourage young women from entering the STEM fields.



How does underrepresentation of women affect outcomes and competitiveness in research, innovation and startups?

Excluding women from research, innovation and startups leads to **higher institutional costs**, including those associated with discrimination cases, staff turnover, loss of talent and reputational damage.

Furthermore, gender biased research reduces **social relevance of research outputs** and compromises the validity and usefulness of innovation derived from them.

Homogeneous networks **hinder team creativity and the emergence of breakthroughs**. The lack of diversity restricts scientific and technological progress by excluding alternative perspectives and values.

Intersectional barriers and academic freedom

Women belonging to racial or ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, LGBTIQ+ individuals and people of different age groups face compounded challenges. These barriers include **underrepresentation, inaccessible environments, methodological biases, communication barriers, stigmatisation, gender-based violence**, including online harassment, and **invisibility in data collection**.

Scholars in feminist, gender and postcolonial studies increasingly experience **antifeminist attacks** in social and traditional media, within academia and even in the classroom, where these disciplines can be stigmatised as ideological rather than academic. Such pressures directly threaten academic freedom and the ability of scholars to work safely and without intimidation.

Guaranteeing the legitimacy of Women's and Gender Studies as a core academic field, and supporting this with adequate funding and staffing, is essential for the European Union, especially at a time when these disciplines face increasing contestation. This is part of what distinguishes the EU from other research and innovation systems in the world, and must be reinforced rather than weakened.

Women's and Gender Studies are also treated in some countries as second-class fields, facing **chronic**

Structural and operational factors in the investment ecosystem affecting women founders' access to finance

Opaque investment structures, gender-biased decision-making processes and non-diverse selection committees all limit opportunities for women founders.

Insufficient **gender-bias training among investors** and a **lack of systematic outreach strategies** (including active sponsoring of women and minority founders) further reinforce inequities.



Crucial networks that enable access to investor finance often originate in university settings, where they can be highly gendered. In addition, many informal networks require time outside core working hours to develop, creating barriers for those with caring responsibilities and reinforcing **gendered patterns in investor networks**.

To address these structural gaps, investment ecosystems need gender-sensitive evaluation criteria, formalised decision-making procedures and long-term gender-mainstreaming mechanisms. This includes:

- **mandatory gender training** for business angels as well as public and private investors
- **clear criteria**, including guidelines to identify and prevent gender bias in funding decisions
- **formal and transparent structures** that reduce discretion
- stronger **gender-mainstreaming capacity**, including dedicated human resources
- positive actions.

Recommended EU and Member State actions

- **Maintain compulsory Gender Equality Plans** as a baseline requirement for institutions receiving public research and innovation funding.
- **Introduce mandatory protocols against gender-based violence**, embedding the [Zero Tolerance Code of Conduct](#) as a core instrument to ensure coherent implementation across institutions.
- **Provide long-term, structural funding** for gender equality structures, gender studies and gender-based violence research.
- **Ensure year-round accessibility of funding calls**: research and Innovation funding calls, particularly those from the EC, should avoid opening or closing with school holidays and peak childcare responsibilities, which disproportionately disadvantage researchers with caring responsibilities, most often women.
- **Implement training on gender-bias and intersectional gender equality** for funding bodies and investors to ensure fairer decision-making processes and reduce systemic barriers.
- **Strengthen positive action measures**, including quotas or additional evaluation points, until a demonstrable and stable gender balance is achieved.
- **Support ongoing reform of research assessment**: signatories of the [agreement](#) should operationalise commitments to gender equality, equal opportunities and inclusiveness by considering gender balance, the gender dimension, and broader forms of diversity (e.g. racial or ethnic origin, socio-economic background, disability, sexual orientation) in research teams and research content.
- **Include an EDI statement as a standard component in assessment processes.**



Coordinated EU response to gender-based violence

A coordinated EU framework is needed to enhance prevention, reporting and response mechanisms, supported by **comprehensive data collection across Member States**.

The **Zero Tolerance Code of Conduct** should serve as a core reference tool.

Digital gender-based violence targeting women and LGBTIQ+ academics requires explicit and urgent attention.

Accessibility considerations

Accessibility must be central to the EU Action Plan on women in research, innovation and startups.

Women with disabilities face disproportionate digital, physical, communication and organisational barriers. Ensuring universal design, accessible digital platforms (WCAG 2.1+), inclusive communication formats and the meaningful participation of women with disabilities in decision-making is essential to avoid systemic exclusion. Include women with disabilities in consultations, decision-making processes, and evaluation of the Action Plan.

Resources

- “Why EDI Matters - Equ(al)ity, Diversity and Inclusion in European Universities”
Annalisa Oboe, Věra Sokolová, Helena Wahlström Henriksson, Padova University Press,
2025, <https://www.padovauniversitypress.it/en/publications/9788869384820>
- **Position Paper on Framework Programme 10**
ERA Forum Sub-Group ‘Inclusive Gender Equality in the ERA’
2025, <https://shorturl.at/nQs8h>
- “Who chooses science? A longitudinal investigation of the role of primary and secondary school factors in shaping science enrolments in Ireland”
Carmel Hannan, Emer Smyth
2025, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03054985.2025.2558707>
- **Zero Tolerance Code of Conduct**
Guidelines promoting a safe, respectful, and harassment-free environment across research and higher education institutions.
<https://op.europa.eu/publication-detail/-/publication/6ce8aef5-70b3-11ef-a8ba-01aa75ed71a1>
- **Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment**
2022, <https://www.coara.org/agreement/the-agreement-full-text>