

# A SUSTAINABILITY APPROACH TO HORIZON EUROPE CLUSTER 2

## Horizon Europe

### **PILLAR II: Global Challenges & Industrial Competitiveness**

#### Gender and Sustainability Dimensions of Horizon Europe Cluster 2: Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society

This policy brief by GENDERACTION highlights the importance of integrating a gender dimension in the SDGs, the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as in Cluster 1. This is needed in order to promote economic, social and ecological sustainability throughout EU. **The overall aim is to strengthen the capacity of Horizon Europe to contribute to gender equality and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda.** Further, integrating a gender dimension in the SDGs will enhance ERA development as well as strengthen policy development in R&I within national contexts. The aim of integrating a gender dimension in SDGs is also highly relevant, both as a response to the current design of the Work Programme in Cluster 1 and for developing the Second Strategic Plan 2025-2027.

Horizon Europe sets gender equality as a crosscutting principle and aims to eliminate gender inequality and intersecting socioeconomic inequalities throughout research and innovation systems (European Union, 2021). GENDERACTION acknowledges this as an important development. In particular, this is stressed in relation to Pillar II Cluster 2 - Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society. This is also a development

GENDERACTION welcomes. However, it is important to acknowledge the importance of including a gender dimension in all clusters. In the Second Strategic Plan 2025-2027, **Horizon Europe Pillar II should add the SDGs as a cross-cutting issue for all Clusters and Areas of Intervention. In order to ensure inclusiveness, an inter-sectional approach towards integrating a gender dimension in SDGs is crucial,**

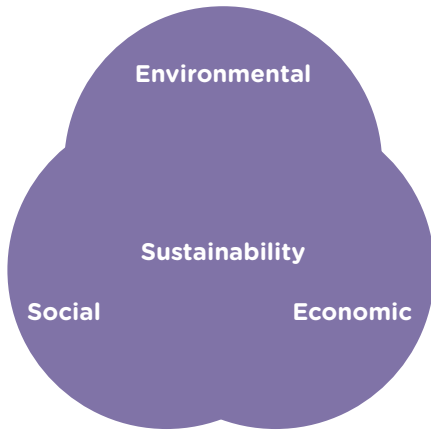
**in line with the overall gender equality strategy for EU** (EC, 2020).

Horizon Europe Pillar II mainly targets the impact of research and innovation, supports the uptake of innovative solutions to address global challenges, and thus fostering change in order to achieve the SDGs. Also, moving the 2030 Agenda forward, interdisciplinary research on sustainability is crucial. Addressing the gender dimension in relation to the SDGs in Pillar II, both as a specific Area of Intervention and as a cross-cutting issue, will especially enhance EU and global policies for attaining SDG 5 (gender equality and women's empowerment). It will help to boost EU's innovation, competitiveness, security and inclusiveness, as it increases the scholarly quality and societal relevance of scientific knowledge. Further, strengthening knowledge on gender and SDGs are at the core of achieving the objectives of the Commission's plan for a new ERA, based on quality of research, especially fostering a green transition and recovery, as well as promoting gender and diversity in science more generally.

Structural change through integrating a gender dimension will be crucial for achieving the SDGs, and this entails several aspects in terms of analysis and policy coordination. Research shows how SDG outcomes are contextual, interdependent, and complex, coupling human, technical and natural systems in multiple ways (Sachs et al., 2019). It is therefore necessary to treat the SDGs as interlinked, rather than isolated, goals. The way SDGs interact is a key question in the implementation of Agenda 2030 itself. Identifying synergies, clashing interests or goals counteracting each other, is therefore highly relevant. The SDG interactions should be analysed with respect to their systemic and contextual character (Weitz et al., 2018). Therefore, the interactions between the goals and their targets, as well as interactions within the Clusters in Pillar II, are in need of an intersectional

gender analysis in order to foster structural change (Widegren and Sand, 2021).

- A *gender dimension* in research involves a shift in perspective, away from normative and non-reflective notions on gender, e.g. asking new and different questions, collecting data differently and starting out with different theoretical perspectives. Sex and gender are separate, but interrelated, concepts. Sex generally refers to biological characteristics in humans or animals. *Gender* refers to socio-cultural processes that shape behaviors, values, norms, knowledges etc. An *intersectional approach* concerns how categories such as gender, race, sexual orientation, functionality, geography, class etc. interact and create inequalities and oppression. One category of difference is often interlinked with others in several ways, which makes it highly relevant to always use intersectional perspectives when integrating gender dimensions in research.
- Sustainability is another central concept to explore further. The three-pillar conception of sustainability – social, economic and environmental – can be understood in a somewhat similar way as intersectionality, with several dimensions interacting with each other. In order to move forward with the 2030 Agenda, there is an urgent need for more interdisciplinary research on sustainability with intersectional gender analysis that takes power structures into account. The fact that the word 'power' is mentioned only once in the 2030 Agenda, while the more individual-oriented 'empowerment' occurs abundantly, indicates a lack of awareness and knowledge on these important issues. This has consequences for the Agenda's account of gender (as well as gender equality) as SDG 5 lacks analysis of the origin and nature of the gender inequality that should – ideal-



ly – be remedied by policies and actions for gender equality. The importance of keeping track of different understandings of gender cannot be stressed enough (Widegren and Sand, 2021).

## Examples of how sex and gender interact in relation to the SDGs and Cluster 2: Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society

### Social and economic resilience and definitions of work

In order to strengthen social and economic sustainability, there are several reasons to pay close attention to how these concepts relate to gendered experiences. The relation between human labor and economic development has since, at least, the industrial revolution been divided along gendered lines, leading to a division of labor labelling some forms of work as productive and others as reproductive (Federici, 2014). Socially reproductive work, also called “unpaid care work”, is work needed in order to raise new human beings, to reproduce everyday life in households, providing nutrition, refuge and possibility for

recuperation for the human body (Beier, 2018). Feminist scholars have shown how gender equality, when defined as women entering the productive labor market, leads to commodification of care work and exploitation of women from the Global South (Hochschild, 2000). Some argue that Agenda 2030 therefore represent major contradictions in relation to social, reproductive work (Beier, 2018). On the one hand, it is a push for a “release” of women from reproductive work, so that they are available for exploration on the labour market. On the other hand, this leads to a demand for a commodified care work, mainly exploited for “emancipated” women in North/West, creating new inequalities, based on race, ethnicity, class and geography (Widegren and Sand, 2021). In order to better understand the social, ethical, political and economic impacts of drivers of change, such contradictions and consequences have to be addressed with an intersectional approach.

### The gender dimension in social and economic transformations

In Agenda 2030, critique can be pointed at the reduced notion of power, only entailing economic power, and the implicit assumption that all development is driven by industrialization and growth. One study takes a critical stance against the weak language of Agenda 2030, which does not take the impact of power relations into consideration for its “transformative work” (Esquivel, 2016). When women’s power is defined as predominantly economic power, it gets invested into an economic ideology. Esquivel identifies “embedded liberalism” as the ideological foundation of Agenda 2030. For example, the normative understanding of work, making reproductive work more or less invisible, can be seen as part of a dominant discourse on empowerment, starting with

productive labor and self-sufficiency in terms of economic resources and a (neo) liberal ideology of individualism. This is partly understandable from a feminist perspective: stereotyping women as mothers and caregivers are in line with notions that women's lives and purpose are to submit themselves to other's wellbeing, sacrificing one's own health, resources, and freedom for the benefit of for example the generation to come. However, it is important to take the critique against limitless exploitation of women's work into consideration, not reproducing neoliberal economic arguments about growth in the name of gender equality (Widegren and Sand, 2021).

### **An intersectional approach to Europe's resilience and crisis recovery**

In times of crisis, already marginalised groups carry the heaviest burden of the consequences, which is evident at the moment in the case of the COVID pandemic. Increased rates of domestic violence, when communities go into lockdowns to reduce the spread of infection, is one of many concrete examples of this development. Lockdowns also make it more difficult for domestic violence victims to find help. Also, in terms of working life and the economy, men and women have been affected differently. People with a migrant or minority background and people with disabilities are especially vulnerable. Young people, especially marginalised youth, whose education has been affected negatively, is also a group that should be paid special attention to. In order to strengthen Europe's social and economic resilience and sustainability, an intersectional approach is therefore needed. This is important, both in the process of recovery after COVID-19, and to stand stronger and better prepared for crises in the future.

### **Sustainability through civil society and active and inclusive citizenship**

Social sustainability can be described as a state where formal and informal processes, systems, structures, and relationships support the capacity of current and future generations to create communities that provide good quality of life for its members. Social sustainability thus includes institutions, such as educational organizations for children as well as for adults, and civil society's different interventions. In welfare states, childcare, housing policy, care of the elderly and health systems represent societal interventions to secure quality of life. However, non-institutional organizations, activism and civil society also play crucial roles for social sustainability as well as for democratic governance. Social sustainability, then, is a means in itself as well as a prerequisite for both ecological and economic sustainability; sustainable, social societies foster economic and ecologically responsible communities (Widegren and Sand, 2021).

### **Recommendations**

It is highly recommended that Horizon Europe Pillar II **add the SDGs as a cross-cutting issue for all Clusters and Areas of Intervention** in the forthcoming Strategic Plan 2025-2027. In Cluster 2, the UN SDGs are not mentioned in the first Strategic Plan. The SDGs as well as a thorough gender dimension are needed to bring into consideration the different baselines in the socioeconomic situation of women and men, as well as gender drivers and gender impacts of the innovative solutions for the SDGs. GENDERACTION strongly advises integrating a gender dimension in order to highlight and analyse the different baselines in the socioeconomic situation of women and men as well as gender drivers and gender impacts of the innovative solutions for

SDGs. In order to take these aspects into account, it is also highly recommended that Cluster 2 and all Areas of Intervention in it are cross-read with SDG 5.

### **All Clusters and Areas of Intervention in Pillar II of Horizon Europe**

- Include the SDGs as a cross-cutting issue for all Clusters and Areas of Intervention.
- Include gender factors as crosscutting issues in relation to all the SDGs by cross-reading all the SDGs with SDG 5 (gender equality and women's empowerment).
- Include an intersectional approach and make sure women and men are not addressed as homogeneous groups but systematically include their heterogeneity.
- Interdisciplinary research on sustainability, integrating the economic, social and ecological dimensions, is crucial for moving the 2030 Agenda forward. Encourage interdisciplinary research through dedicated calls, in order to increase, deepen and broaden the knowledge needed for efficient sustainable development.
- Include a power analysis of the origin and nature of the gender inequality that should be remedied by gender equality.
- Keep track of different understandings of gender and gender equality and foster competence to make distinctions between different accounts of the concepts.
- Include gender scholars in the relevant research domain in the research team where relevant.
- Include gender experts among project evaluators.
- Ensure gender balance and gender training among project evaluators.
- Strive for gender balance at all levels and areas of knowledge in research

teams and in decision-making in the Commission.

- As deep structural changes are required in order to reach the SDGs and since current research funding structures might disadvantage radical ideas with potential to systemic change, alternative ways of reviewing research proposals should be investigated.
- The transformative claim of the 2030 Agenda requires knowledge interactions between relevant stakeholders, involving a wider range of actors than those traditionally involved in knowledge production and decision-making. Collaborative research processes, such as the SDG Synergies Approach or *citizen science* (see Kullenberg et al., 2016) need to be promoted in future calls.
- RPOs/HEIs need to recognize how sustainable conditions for researchers/teachers and students are linked to how knowledge production can contribute to the transition to a sustainable world, given the negative effects of unsustainable working conditions on the quality of R&I. This calls for structural change with an intersectional approach, as developed in previous GENDERACTION Policy Briefs.
- Work programmes promoting the development of gender knowledge on SDGs should encourage analysis of interactions between targets. Efforts for sustainability more thorough than a superficial box-checking require not only in-depth knowledge based on various indicators, but also a systemic understanding of trade-offs and co-benefits between the goals. This needs to be acknowledged in future calls. The assessment of SDG Relevance should be integrated in the evaluation of applications.

### **Cluster 2**

- Include SDG 5 (gender equality and women's empowerment) and as

a cross-cutting issue in Cluster 2 and all Areas of Intervention in it. Cross-read Cluster 2 and all its Areas of Interventions with SDG 5.

- Through dedicated calls, encourage a thorough gender analysis of existing sex-disaggregated data, and of data of other stratifiers of social inequity. This can include, but is not limited to, an analysis of how gendered patterns and cultural norms surrounding masculinities and femininities shape men's and women's lives.
- Monitor and analyse funded projects that produce and cross-analyse sex-disaggregated data and gender statistics and encourage a thorough gender analysis of it.
- Gender research and research on sustainability have in common that they go beyond the boundaries of scientific disciplines, so in order for R&I to be able to contribute to the achievement of SDGs, it is important to promote multi- and interdisciplinary collaborations.
- Encourage and develop research which transgress commonplace divisions between economic productive labor and reproductive work, in order to strengthen analysis of economic growth through gender and intersectional perspectives.
- Ensure integrating a gender dimension and an intersectional approach in policy development in ERA, especially targeting economic growth.

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