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Submission to the
European Commission
'Call for Evidence' on
the EU's action plan for
women in research,
innovation, and
startups

SUBMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION 'CALL FOR EVIDENCE' ON THE EU'S ACTION PLAN FOR WOMEN IN RESEARCH, INNOVATION, AND STARTUPS

- **Do you think that women in research, innovation and startups encounter specific challenges and barriers? If so, which ones?**

Yes, women are often disadvantaged in research, innovations and startups. They are evaluated more critically, taken less seriously, and frequently receive less recognition for the same achievements as their male colleagues. For comparable work, they are often paid less. Women are significantly underrepresented in leadership positions. Their scientific publications sometimes spend longer in the peer-review process. In addition, they are often mistaken for administrative staff or assumed to be the assistant of a male colleague. In leadership roles, women often seem unable to “do it right.” When they are assertive, they are perceived as not conforming to stereotypical expectations of female behavior and may be labeled as “too dominant” or “difficult.” When they are collaborative and reserved, they are criticized for lacking leadership qualities. This places them in a classic double bind—facing contradictory expectations that are difficult, if not impossible, to fulfill simultaneously. Their expertise is also more frequently questioned. In meetings, their contributions may be overlooked or only acknowledged when repeated by a male colleague. Their successes are more likely to be attributed to external factors such as luck or teamwork, while men are more often credited with competence and talent for similar achievements. Women are also underrepresented in the allocation of research funding, prestigious awards, and keynote speaking opportunities. Professional networks, which are crucial for academic advancement, have historically been male dominated, making access to informal support structures more difficult. Mentorship and especially sponsorship – active advocacy by senior figures – are less frequently available to women. Structural conditions further reinforce these inequalities. Temporary contracts in early career stages often coincide with the period of family formation.

Care responsibilities continue to be disproportionately assigned to women, limiting their time, mobility, and flexibility. Lack of childcare support is the most difficult for single mothers or those who are primary caregivers. International research stays, which are often important for career progression, can therefore be more difficult to realize – more support should be provided to support women attending meetings and conferences, such as access to childcare. Implicit biases also play a significant role. Unconscious

assumptions influence hiring processes, performance evaluations, and appointment procedures –often without those involved being aware of it. As a result, inequalities can persist even where formal equality policies are in place.

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- **Why do you think young girls choose not to pursue a STEM career when they go to university?**

From an early age, girls are often exposed to the idea, subtle or explicit, that STEM fields are “male domains.” Toys, media representations, classroom dynamics, and even well-intentioned comments can reinforce the stereotype that boys are naturally better at math, physics, or technology. Over time, these messages can shape interests and self-perceptions. When girls rarely see women as professors, researchers, engineers, or tech leaders, it becomes harder to imagine themselves in those roles. Representation and role models matter visible female scientists and engineers can normalize the idea that STEM careers are attainable and welcoming. Research shows that girls often underestimate their abilities in math and science, even when they perform as well as or better than boys. Boys tend to overestimate their competence. This difference in self-confidence can strongly influence study choices at the point of university enrollment. Societal expectations around caregiving and family roles can influence career planning. Some STEM paths are perceived as demanding long hours, requiring high mobility or precarious job contracts, which may conflict with anticipated life goals.

- **Taking into account research showing that greater diversity makes companies more competitive, better performing and more resilient, how do you think the under-representation of women negatively affects outcomes and competitiveness in research, innovation and startups?**

When women are underrepresented, systems fail to fully make use of available talent. Highly qualified individuals may leave academia, avoid entrepreneurship, or never enter STEM fields in the first place. This represents a direct loss of skills, creativity, and leadership potential. In research contexts, under-representation of women can influence what questions are asked, which methods are prioritized, and whose experiences are considered relevant. For example, medical research historically centered male subjects, leading to gaps in knowledge about women's health. Without women, research groups may become more uniform and prone to groupthink, which weakens their problem-solving capacity and leads to less breakthrough research.

- **Taking an intersectional approach, do you think that there are specific challenges and barriers (e.g. racial and ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, LGBTIQ+ people, and diverse age groups) in research, innovation and startups? As a researcher, are there specific challenges or concerns related to academic freedom that you have encountered in your work, particularly when working on integrating the gender dimension into your work, or focusing on gender or women's studies, and if so, how do you think they could be addressed in the context of this initiative?**

As previously noted, women face a range of additional barriers in the STEM field, however, intersecting identities can exacerbate these challenges. For example, LGBTQIA+ scientists must also navigate fear of being open about their identity, hostile or exclusionary environment, and geographic mobility constraints due to legal risks in certain countries. Younger researchers may face precarity, short-term contracts, and power imbalances. Meanwhile, older researchers may encounter age bias, particularly in tech-driven innovation sectors or for grant and job application (application often allowed only for a limited number of years after PhD completion). Scientists with disabilities must navigate inaccessible labs, buildings, conferences, and digital infrastructure. In addition, there are rigid productivity expectations that do not accommodate chronic illness or different working patterns.

- **What specific actions do you recommend that the EU and/or its Member States take to promote equality, diversity and inclusion in research, innovation and startups?**

To promote equality, diversity, and inclusion in research, innovation, and startups, the EU and its Member States should take targeted actions. They could implement **mandatory diversity and inclusion training for all researchers and entrepreneurs, including men**. Also implement **mandatory diversity and inclusion strategies** in funding programs to ensure fair representation of women, racial and ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, LGBTIQ+ individuals, and other underrepresented groups. **Double-blind funding programs**, where both applicants' and reviewers' identities are hidden, could help reduce bias and ensure proposals are evaluated purely on merit. In addition, introducing **quotas for women and marginalized groups in leadership and professorship positions** can increase representation, provide role models, and improve decision-making and innovation outcomes. The EU should mandate and enforce Gender Equality Plans (GEPs). The EU's Horizon Europe requirement for GEPs is a great start. To make it effective, GEPs should be data-driven, include specific, measurable targets (e.g., for female leadership, pay gaps), and outline clear penalties for non-compliance or lack of progress. Finally, they should **increase mentorship, sponsorship, and networking opportunities** for marginalized researchers and entrepreneurs, while auditing evaluation and recruitment processes for bias and ensuring transparent criteria that value diverse contributions and non-linear career paths.

- **Do you think that a coordinated EU response could help to address gender-based violence, including psychological and sexual harassment, in the research and innovation sector? If so, what form should this response take and how could it add value to what is already in place?**

We need to start somewhere. While some measures exist at national or institutional levels, an EU-wide approach could ensure protection, reporting mechanisms, and accountability standards across all member states. This could include mandatory policies and codes of conduct for all research institutions and startup, clearly defining harassment and the consequences for perpetrators.

- Centralized reporting and support mechanisms, such as EU-wide hotlines, ombudspersons, or digital platforms, so victims can safely report incidents regardless of institution or country.

- Training and awareness programs for all staff and leadership, including mandatory sessions for men, to recognize, prevent, and respond to harassment.
- Monitoring, evaluation, and funding incentives tied to compliance, encouraging institutions to actively implement preventive measures.