



**European Committee
of the Regions**

COTER-VII/014

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OPINION

The gender dimension of structural and cohesion funds 2021-2027, with a focus on the preparation of the operational programmes

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- stresses that as the COVID-19 pandemic hit sectors employing a high number of women particularly hard, it exacerbated gender inequalities;
- points out that gender equality benefits not only women but society as a whole, as it is a powerful driver for social and economic development, as also described in the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, which emphasises that gender equality helps to increase employment and productivity;
- recognises and appreciates the efforts made by the European institutions to promote gender mainstreaming, as well as the great importance attached to achieving the objectives of the European Pillar of Social Rights in the 2021-2027 cohesion policy legislative and programming framework, with particular regard to the enabling conditions and tracking system in spending programmes relating to specific objectives;
- regrets, furthermore, that the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 does not include specific measures for mainstreaming gender equality into all EU policy areas, and points to the need to increase the use of effective indicators to measure and assess the gender impact of implementing the strategies;
- urges the European Commission to propose methodology for assessing the gender impact of programmes funded by the European Union, making available gender-specific data and indicators, in line with what was agreed in the latest Interinstitutional Agreement on budgetary discipline; therefore calls on the Commission to put in place appropriate training measures to help managing authorities implement these new methodologies better;
- calls for tools such as gender impact assessment and gender budgeting to be incorporated more widely into European programmes, as they are currently still too rarely used.

Rapporteur

Donatella Porzi (IT/PES)

**Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions –
The gender dimension of structural and cohesion funds 2021-2027, with a focus on the
preparation of the operational programmes**

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

Background and general comments

1. reiterates the importance of cohesion policy, whose general objectives are to further the European Union's economic and social development and to lessen disparities in development between the various regions in order to pursue economic, social and territorial cohesion;
2. stresses that, in this context, gender equality must be properly understood as: (1) a fundamental principle when legislating on cohesion policy; (2) a cross-cutting criterion for the drawing-up of cohesion policy programmes, (3) a goal to be pursued by the programmes, and (4) a powerful factor that is necessary to achieve cohesion policy's sustainable and balanced development;
3. gender equality is still addressed in a general manner and limited to the policy domains of the European Social Fund Plus, as well as in the context analysis and programming phase, while more attention is needed in the legislative, implementation, monitoring and evaluation phases on a regular basis;
4. points out that gender equality benefits not only women but society as a whole, as it is a powerful driver for social and economic development, as also described in the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, which emphasises that gender equality helps to increase employment and productivity;
5. firmly believes that gender equality and equal opportunities, in addition to bolstering welfare systems, especially those parts involved in maternal and child welfare and care, will make it easier to combine a career with family, which could in turn help to increase the participation rate of women in the labour market and tackle the serious demographic crisis that Europe is facing. Increasing support for European families and female labour market participation are important measures to mitigate the sustainability problems of welfare systems and help young people to establish themselves as parents;
6. recognises and appreciates the efforts made by the European institutions to promote gender mainstreaming, as well as the great importance attached to achieving the objectives of the European Pillar of Social Rights in the 2021-2027 cohesion policy legislative and programming framework, with particular regard to the enabling conditions and tracking system in spending programmes relating to specific objectives;
7. is concerned, moreover, that in 2017 the employment rate and average wage for women in Europe were still around 12 and 16 percentage points respectively lower than those for men

(67.3% as against 79%), and that, according to the analysis of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), the performance of EU countries in gender mainstreaming had actually been declining since 2012. In fact, again according to EIGE, which ranks the key elements of gender mainstreaming on a scale from 0 to 16, the average value for the Member States dropped from 8.4 in 2012 to 7.4 in 2018;

8. regrets, furthermore, that the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 does not include specific measures for mainstreaming gender equality into all EU policy areas, and points to the need to increase the use of effective indicators to measure and assess the gender impact of implementing the strategies;
9. calls, therefore, on the European Commission to step up efforts to ensure real gender equality, to be pursued using a double-pronged approach of, on the one hand, specific initiatives to tackle specific inequalities and, on the other, mainstreaming, as a cross-cutting approach covering all European policies;
10. reiterates that if genuine gender equality is to be pursued, this goal needs to be incorporated into every stage of the decision-making process and into the subsequent implementing phase: when priorities are set, when policies are worked out and when resources are allocated. It is important, to this end, that regional and local authorities make programmes subject to the appropriate gender impact assessments;
11. recommends, however, that the gender mainstreaming approach not divert attention away from specific measures and investments aiming explicitly to remove the causes of discrimination and to support the processes of empowerment, participation and strengthening the role of women in society and the world of work;
12. to this end, urges the European Commission to make greater use of the tools put in place by EIGE to regularly monitor the degree of implementation of gender equality and cohesion commitments; if these tools are insufficient, calls for tools to be created specifically for assessing concrete achievements linking equality and cohesion;
13. believes it necessary, with reference to the better regulation principle, for greater attention to be paid to ensuring that the regulatory measures taken are capable of having a real and effective impact on the social and cultural context, transforming the legal guarantees embodied in the Charter into a dynamic of structural change in relations between the sexes. To this end, legislation needs to be drafted that, by ceasing to see individuals as legal abstractions, is increasingly focused on intervening in the reality of discrimination in society;
14. the gender factor and its relationship with the digital divide needs to be addressed, with more investment required in digitalisation, digital innovation and digital connectivity; cohesion policy should support equal access for women and men to training and employment and should help ensure that the just, green and digital transitions do not widen the gender gap between men and women;

15. urges the European Commission to propose methodology for assessing the gender impact of programmes funded by the European Union, making available gender-specific data and indicators, in line with what was agreed in the latest Interinstitutional Agreement on budgetary discipline; therefore calls on the Commission to put in place appropriate training measures to help managing authorities implement these new methodologies better;
16. stresses that as the COVID-19 pandemic hit sectors employing a high number of women particularly hard it exacerbated gender inequalities. Women are more frequently employed in what are traditionally seen as 'female jobs', such as health care, retail and child care. This made these women frontline workers during the pandemic, which exposed them disproportionately to the virus and the impact of the crisis. The greater gender impact of COVID-19 is also seen, as well as in lower employment rates, in the greater difficulty women have – compared with men – in returning to work following an end to restrictions: appropriate tools must therefore be put in place to foster the return to work of women who have lost their jobs as a result of lockdowns, also drawing on the experience of previous crises;
17. considers that of all the Union's various policy instruments, cohesion policy can make a particular contribution to a real increase in equality between men and women, with regard to the volume of funding and its nature and targeting; stresses that particularly in those regions where programmes take up a considerable portion of the overall budget, gender impact also depends on how programmes are designed and implemented;
18. calls on the European Commission, and in particular the Member States, to coordinate closely with local and regional authorities when drafting partnership agreements in order to take into account the challenges associated with effective equality policies at local and regional level;
19. highlights the fact that the variety of cohesion policy funds means that measures can be implemented that are directly aimed at furthering gender equality in employment, social inclusion, education and childcare, as is the case with the European Social Fund (ESF). The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) should contribute more, from investment and services in support of female entrepreneurship, to narrowing the gender gap in research and innovation and improving access to physical, ICT and social infrastructure;
20. calls, therefore, for the contribution to gender equality not to be considered as having to come from the Social Fund alone, which is actually mainly people-focused, but as coming from all the funds, including the ERDF, which is largely business-facing, and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), which has an important role to play in promoting the development of rural and inland areas, where the issue of gender equality and women's participation in the labour market is often more pronounced; synergies need to be improved between cohesion, recovery funds and other programmes on the fringes of cohesion policy;

II. Policy recommendations

21. firmly reiterates that cohesion policy must address the issues of gender equality and women's participation in the labour market, prioritising the related objectives, as it is unrealistic to

envisage greater economic and social cohesion without increasing women's participation in the labour market and eliminating discrimination and wage inequalities;

22. as a result, considers it particularly important among the keys to understanding to be duly taken into account as we go forward, that gender policy measures also be seen as a tool for the tangible realisation of cohesion policy; welcomes the Commission's initiative to include a specific section on gender equality in the 8th Cohesion Report;
23. recommends that the authorities managing programmes for 2021-2027 co-financed by the European Union develop projects and measures aimed at: (a) supporting work-life balance, boosting businesses and developing dedicated workplace strategies; (b) encouraging the reintegration of women who have lost their jobs because of COVID-19; (c) stepping up and improving care services so as to lighten the burden on women; (d) implementing specific, targeted measures to encourage women's participation in traditionally male-dominated spheres of activity; (e) countering gender stereotyping and gender roles and preventing discrimination and sexual and gender-based harassment in workplaces; (f) bringing specific skills and professional expertise to bear to guide the overall gender mainstreaming process; (g) providing the beneficiaries of European funds with useful support and guidelines to better integrate the gender perspective into the different areas of intervention, from employment policies to research and development, from environmental protection to public transport and digital technologies; (h) encouraging women to become entrepreneurs; (i) paying attention to the objective of increasing women's safety when designing infrastructure; (j) promoting measures to achieve co-education and eradicate stereotypes and roles in classrooms; and (k) eliminating the sexist image of women in the media;
24. recommends that managing authorities in the 2021-2027 programming period work together, coordinate and seek support from equality bodies in acquiring specific skills and knowledge in order to systematically integrate the gender perspective throughout the funding cycle in the development of operational programmes, in their implementation and in the evaluation phase, thus making it possible to ascertain the impact that these programmes have on reducing gender gaps during and after their implementation;
25. calls for ever wider assessment of models for organising public services (e.g. public transport), and for providing support in general, so that their consistency with the objectives in the area of promoting gender equality can be verified;
26. considers it of paramount importance for the gender perspective also to be incorporated into the Next Generation EU national recovery plans, and the principles and tools for gender assessment applied to the main projects;
27. recommends that the necessary data and statistics be made available to regional and local authorities in order to carry out appropriate assessments of existing gender inequalities;
28. calls for tools such as gender impact assessment and gender budgeting to be incorporated more widely into European programmes, as they are currently still too rarely used;

29. points to the experience of the period 2014-2020 with regard to the following critical points that warrant attention: (a) the disparity between formal statements and tangible progress; (b) the lack of adequate knowledge on how to implement gender mainstreaming, in particular in European Regional Development Fund support; (c) the need for greater gender focus in selection criteria and assessment systems; (d) the fact that a stronger link is desirable between national strategies and cohesion policy measures in the field of gender equality; and (e) that it is useful to develop a governance system to coordinate and monitor gender mainstreaming;
30. stresses that managing authorities should exchange ideas and good practices with civil society bodies active in promoting gender equality, and that training, coordination and evaluation should be boosted, with regard to both managing authorities and partners.

Brussels, 2 December 2021

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions

Apostolos Tzitzikostas

The Secretary-General
of the European Committee of the Regions

Petr Blížkovský

III. PROCEDURE

Title	The gender dimension of structural and cohesion funds 2021-2027, with a focus on the preparation of the operational programmes
Reference(s)	–
Legal basis	Article 307 TFEU
Procedural basis	Rule 41(b)(ii) RP
Date of Council/EP referral Date of Commission letter	–
Date of Bureau/President's decision Commission responsible	4 May 2021
Commission responsible	Commission for Territorial Cohesion Policy and EU Budget (COTER)
Rapporteur	Donatella PORZI (IT/PES) Member of Umbria Regional Council
Analysis	8 July 2021
Discussed in commission	28 October 2021
Date adopted by commission	28 October 2021
Result of the vote in commission (majority, unanimity)	Majority
Adopted at plenary	2 December 2021
Previous Committee opinions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Opinion on A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025;• Opinion on The European Pillar of Social Rights and Reflection Paper on the social dimension of Europe;• Opinion on Work-life balance for parents and carers;• Opinion on the Directive on improving the gender balance among non-executive directors of companies listed on stock exchanges and related measures.
Date of subsidiarity monitoring consultation	–