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Strengthening a weak policy area through monitoring: the case of gender equality in the European Research Area

Angela Wroblewski



INSTITUTE FOR
ADVANCED STUDIES
VIENNA



Author(s)

Angela Wroblewski

Title

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Institut für Höhere Studien – Institute for Advanced Studies (IHS)

Josefstädter Straße 39, A-1080 Wien

T +43 1 59991-0

www.ihs.ac.at

ZVR: 066207973

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Abstract

This article focuses on the central role of monitoring in the implementation of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). Referring to gender equality in the European Research Area (ERA), it demonstrates that the OMC has only been partially implemented due to a lack of policy discourse and monitoring. Consequently, the OMC's potential remains underutilised, particularly with regard to identifying best practice and supporting mutual learning. Based on an analysis of the implementation of gender equality policies in the ERA at a national level, the article identifies starting points for the further development of the OMC. These include: (1) establishing a gender equality discourse between the European Commission and the Member States with the aim of setting common gender equality objectives; (2) encouraging Member States to commit more firmly to gender equality; and (3) implementing meaningful monitoring procedures at both the European and national levels.

Key words: European Research Area, Open Method of Coordination, Monitoring, Gender Equality, Policy Implementation

Key messages:

- OMC is only partly implemented in the field of gender equality in ERA.
- Assessing progress regarding gender equality in ERA requires monitoring of policy implementation.
- Monitoring supports effective gender equality policy implementation and a policy discourse in ERA.
- Voluntary commitment to ERA Action 5 should be strengthened by mandatory action plans and reporting.

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1 Introduction

In 2024, two expert reports highlighted key challenges in EU research and innovation (R&I) policy, calling for further development of the European Research Area (ERA). The report coordinated by Mario Draghi (European Commission, 2024a+b) calls for a reversal in the decline of EU economic productivity and for the competitiveness gap with other global scientific and economic powers to be closed. Meanwhile, the report by Enrico Letta (2024) demanded a reduction in fragmentation within the European research area to enable the free circulation of scientific knowledge, research and innovation — referred to as the 'fifth freedom'.

The European Research Area (ERA) was established at the Lisbon Summit in 2000 with the strategic goal of becoming “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth, with more and better jobs, and greater social cohesion” (Council of the European Union, 2000). As with the Draghi Report, the EU's lower competitiveness compared to the US or China was then, as now, identified as a key weakness. Therefore, the ERA aims to integrate and coordinate research activities at the national and European levels more effectively, making them as efficient and innovative as possible and ensuring that Europe offers attractive prospects to its best talents (Council of the European Union, 2000).

1.1 Development of a European Research Area (ERA)

The political concept of the European Research Area (ERA) was first launched in 2000 with the publication of the European Commission's 'Towards a European Research Area' communication. This initiative aimed to boost Europe's competitiveness, improve the coordination of research activities at national and European levels, develop human resources, and increase the attractiveness of European research to the world's top researchers. In 2007, progress in developing the ERA was evaluated, with new perspectives presented in a Green Paper (European Commission, 2007). The Green Paper emphasised the importance of the European Research Area (ERA) in enabling the European Union to become a leading knowledge society. It also confirmed the main ERA objectives. “The ERA concept encompasses three inter-related aspects: a European ‘internal market’ for research, where researchers, technology and knowledge can freely circulate; effective European-level coordination of national and regional research activities, programmes and policies; and initiatives implemented and funded at European level” (European Commission, 2007: 5).

In December 2008, the Competitiveness Council formulated a 2020 vision for the ERA, endorsed by the European Council (Council of the European Union, 2008). A third phase in the development of the ERA began in 2012 with the new communication and council conclusions (European Commission, 2012), leading to the adoption of the ERA roadmap for 2015–2020 (European Research Area and Innovation Committee, 2015). The purpose of the roadmap was to identify a limited number of top-priority actions that would have the greatest impact on Europe's research and innovation, while recognising that national research and innovation systems across Europe differ in their characteristics and specificities. The Member States were responsible for identifying and deciding which approaches to pursuing the ERA best suited the structures and dynamics of their national research and innovation systems when implementing these actions (Council of the European Union, 2015: 3).

A comprehensive review of the common research area after 20 years indicated that the originally envisaged objectives had not been fully achieved (European Commission, 2020b). EU R&D investment was still far from reaching the target of 3% of GDP, and there were significant discrepancies in the quality of science and innovation activity within the European Union. Furthermore, Europe was still lagging behind in translating R&I results into the economy. Consequently, the European Commission's Communication 'A New Era for Research and Innovation' (2020a) reinforced the commitment to the European Research Area (ERA) and addressed the current challenges facing the EU, such as the transition towards climate neutrality and digital leadership, recovery from the societal and economic impact of the Coronavirus crisis, and strengthening resilience against future crises.

In 2021, the Member States adopted the Pact for Research and Innovation in Europe, which was approved by the European Council (Council of the European Union, 2021a). Under the new Pact, Member States have committed to the following for the coming years: i) a set of common EU principles and values for R&I; ii) shared priority areas for action; iii) investments and reforms; and iv) simplified policy coordination and monitoring processes. The Council conclusions propose specific European Research Area (ERA) actions contained in the ERA policy agenda for 2022–2024 (Council of the European Union, 2021b), which will be implemented on a voluntary basis by the Member States together with the European Commission, as well as in cooperation with countries associated with the 'Horizon Europe' programme, and with research, academic, and business organisations.

1.2 Gender equality in ERA

From the outset, gender equality has been a key concern in ERA, although it was not initially defined as a priority. The European Commission's communication, 'Women in Science', sets out the objective of “encouraging women to participate in European research” (European Commission, 1999: 3). The EC also envisaged developing a coherent approach to increase the proportion of women participating in its Fifth Framework Programme (FP5, 1998–2002). This approach included Marie Curie scholarships, as well as corresponding advisory groups and assessment/monitoring panels aimed specifically at promoting research by, for, and on women. In other words, the goal was to increase female participation in research and strengthen gender issues in research content ('research for women' and 'research on women'). During the third phase of ERA development, the focus on gender has broadened and been formulated more explicitly. Gender equality and gender mainstreaming in research are defined as one of the ERA's six priorities, “to end the waste of talent which we cannot afford and to diversify views and approaches in research and foster excellence” (European Commission, 2012: 4).

In 2020 the EC reinforced its commitment to gender equality (European Commission, 2020). The Council of the European Union also demonstrated a strong commitment to gender equality in research and innovation (R&I) through its conclusions in December 2020 and May 2021 (Council of the European Union, 2020, 2021c). These conclusions focused on gender equality in research careers, as well as on the development of inclusive gender equality plans at research performing organisation (RPO) level that address the gender dimension in R&I. The Council defined inclusiveness as broad, gender-balanced, non-discriminatory participation of researchers, national and regional actors, and R&I stakeholders across Europe in ERA activities. Furthermore, Horizon Europe's first strategic plan considers gender equality a cross-cutting priority, foreseeing supporting actions to strengthen the ERA by promoting inclusive gender equality (European Commission, 2021b).

In autumn 2021, the Council of the European Union, the EC and Member States and Associated Countries approved the framework for the new ERA, which includes a commitment to strengthening and further developing gender equality policies. A key aspect of this joint, reinforced commitment to gender equality is the Ljubljana Declaration on Gender Equality in Research and Innovation (Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2021). The Declaration reaffirms the commitment of Member States, Associated Countries, and the EC to implementing gender equality and gender mainstreaming in the new ERA, outlining priority areas to foster an inclusive ERA for all. Through the Ljubljana Declaration, the primary stakeholders in

R&I have agreed on the future development of gender equality, including addressing gender-based violence, shifting from a gender-oriented approach to an intersectional one, and focusing on gender equality plans (GEPs) as the most significant instrument for achieving long-term progress towards gender equality in R&I. Furthermore, the Ljubljana Declaration calls for active monitoring and evaluation.

The Pact for Research and Innovation in Europe also emphasised gender equality, dedicating one of its 18 ERA actions to the issue (ERA Action 5 “Promoting gender equality and foster inclusiveness”). These actions are to be implemented by EC, Member States and Associated Countries in a coordinated and flexible manner (Council of the European Union, 2021a). Compared to the previous ERA period (2015–2020), the ERA actions are more detailed and comprehensive than the priorities set out in the ERA roadmap. During the previous period, Member States and Associated Countries were required to outline their specific commitments in a national ERA roadmap (action plan), although all six priorities were expected to be addressed. In the current ERA period, the involvement of Member States and Associated Countries is on a voluntary basis, but they are expected to fulfil a set of clearly defined requirements for the implementation of related actions. Action 5, for example, is titled “Promote gender equality and foster inclusiveness, taking note of the Ljubljana Declaration” and consists of eight sections description/background/rationale, main actors responsible for the implementation of the action, a timeframe and milestones, funding possibilities, expected impact, monitoring, communication and additional information (Council of the European Union, 2021b).

1.3 Open Method of Coordination in ERA

From the outset, the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) was designed to facilitate the development of the ERA. It was launched as a 'new' policy instrument for the EU at the 2000 European Council in Lisbon. It comprises four central instruments (Council of the European Union, 2000):

- (i) guidelines for the Union combined with specific timetables for achieving the goals that they set in the short, medium and long run;
- (ii) establishing performance indicators and benchmarks against the best in the world and tailored to the needs of different Member States and sectors as a means of comparing best practice;
- (iii) translating these guidelines into national and regional policies by setting specific targets and adopting measures, taking into account national and regional differences;

- (iv) periodic monitoring, evaluation and peer review organised as mutual learning processes.

The potential of the OMC lies in the fact that the Member States and the EC agree on common objectives, with responsibility for achieving these resting with the national authorities. This should ensure that Member States retain their sovereignty and that relevant competencies do not have to be transferred to the EU level. On the other hand, the national context and respective framework conditions can be addressed optimally. Monitoring is essential to ensure that this combination of shared objectives and decentralised policy implementation, as well as mutual learning, works.

The implementation of the OMC has been analysed across several policy areas. The primary focus was on social policy, including policies relating to the labour market, pensions and poverty alleviation (Büchs, 2007; Smismans, 2005). However, analyses are also available for health policy (Matei et al., 2021), environmental policy (Graziano, 2023), education policy (Gain, 2024), and higher education and innovation policy (Elken and Stensaker, 2012; Prange and Kaiser, 2005). While the implementation of gender equality objectives has been analysed in labour market policy (Ahrens and van der Vleuten, 2019; Berloff et al., 2018; Enderstein, 2017; Wöhl, 2011; Beveridge and Velluti, 2008; Braams, 2007; O'Connor, 2005), this has not yet been done for the ERA.

In most cases, the analysis comes to a critical assessment of the effects of the OMC (see Büchs 2007, Citi and Rhodes, 2007). "It provided the EU with a role in social policy-making without formally limiting member state authority in this area. This led to the establishment of a complex and opaque multi-level governance system which is not effective in reaching its aims while at the same time has also produced problems of democratic legitimacy" (Büchs, 2007: 152). This is primarily because policy learning is difficult to operationalise and success cannot be measured by aggregated indicators alone, such as employment or poverty rates (Büchs, 2007). As Gornitzka (2018: 235) emphasised, the practices of the OMC have gained legitimacy and become routinised, but 'functional effectiveness cannot explain the survival of the OMC'. According to Smismans (2005, p. 221), the OMC is 'too soft' and 'too hard' at the same time. "Too soft because it is not possible to formulate binding standards at the European level. Too hard because, despite its non-binding nature, it may impose a cognitive framework outside of which it may prove increasingly difficult to take policy initiatives".

However, the OMC provides a template for policy coordination in areas where the EU has limited or no competence, enabling stakeholders to agree on a working method

at the EU level despite holding divergent views on policy priorities (Vanhercke & Pochet, 2022: 454). This is particularly relevant in the context of developing the ERA and achieving gender equality within it. This article is a valuable addition to the field as it fills a gap in the literature by focusing on the implementation of the OMC in the ERA and the associated gender equality objectives.

2 Research question, material and methods

This paper focuses on how monitoring can support the implementation of gender equality objectives in ERA and the prerequisites for achieving this. In this context, the following questions are discussed:

- Considering the fundamental characteristics of OMC, how can the ideal model of OMC implementation for gender equality in ERA be described?
- To what extent does current practice align with this ideal model of OMC implementation?
- Which key missing links can be identified by comparing the ideal model with current practice?

The analysis is grounded in material generated as part of the GENDERCATION project and its subsequent follow-up initiative, GENDERACTIONplus. Initially funded under the Horizon 2020 programme (2017–2021), the GENDERACTION project was subsequently funded under Horizon Europe (2022–2025) as GENDERACTIONplus. Both projects aimed to support Member States and Associated Countries in developing gender equality policies within the ERA framework. A work package in both projects was assigned the task of analysing the implementation of national ERA gender equality policies and developing a corresponding monitoring system. An online survey was conducted with national authorities (mostly representatives of ministries responsible for science, research or innovation) who were members of the Standing Working Group on Gender in Research and Innovation (SWG GRI, 2015–2021) or the ERA Forum Subgroup on Inclusive Gender Equality (since 2022). Furthermore, national policy documents (e.g. national action plans) and European framework documents on ERA were incorporated into the analysis.

As part of the project, the material was analysed in a topic-centered manner (documents) according to Froschauer and Lueger (2003) and descriptively (survey responses). Using a triangulation approach (Flick, 2018), the analysis examined the implementation of national gender equality policies in ERA in terms of the gender equality objectives addressed and the extent to which the development and implementation of the policies were evidence-based and subject to monitoring.

The analysis is based on two assumptions regarding the successful implementation of gender equality policies: (1) that policy development is embedded in a gender equality discourse, and (2) that policy development and implementation follow a complete policy cycle. The requirement for a policy discourse is founded on a constructivist view, which assumes that all social and political order is constructed and reconstructed through communication (Wodak, 2008). Therefore, we start from the position that 'gender equality', 'gender-based violence', and 'intersectionality' are discursively constructed forms of social knowledge. ERA Action 5 policies are part of this productive process, influencing how gender inequality is presented and the solutions proposed (Bacchi, 2000). The discourse on gender equality in R&I aims to ensure a shared understanding of the current state of gender equality, the challenges that need to be addressed and the objectives that need to be reached. This requires the involvement of a broad range of stakeholders in the development and implementation of concrete policies. Furthermore, the effective implementation of policies is assumed to follow a complete policy cycle (May and Wildavsky, 1978) at European, national, regional and institutional levels. Ideally, gender equality policies would begin with a baseline assessment of the current situation with regard to gender equality. What are the main challenges to be addressed? Which mechanisms produce inequalities? How can these inequalities and their underlying causes be tackled? Based on the results of the gender analysis, gender equality objectives are formulated. These objectives form the basis for developing concrete policies. Ideally, these policies would be implemented, monitored and evaluated (Wroblewski and Palmén, 2022).

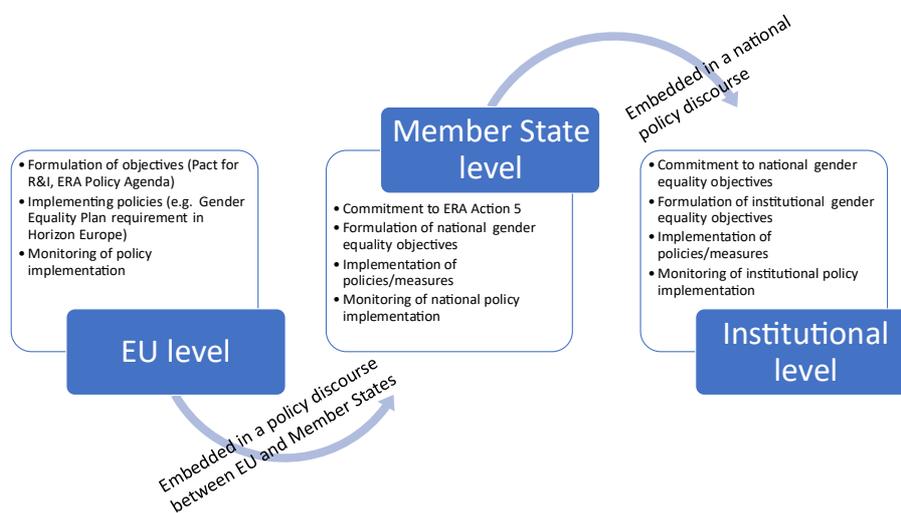
3 An ideal model of OMC implementation in ERA and related challenges

As previously stated, the OMC focuses on shared guidelines and goals, creating indicators to demonstrate their achievement and implementing a monitoring process to identify best practice. With these criteria in mind, the ideal implementation of the OMC in relation to ERA Action 5, as well as related challenges, is described below.

In order to implement ERA Action 5 in accordance with the principles of the OMC, the European, national and institutional levels must be integrated (see Figure 1). The European Commission and the Member States have agreed on the main gender equality priorities and specific goals to be achieved as part of the ERA Policy Agenda or the Pact for R&I, and have also decided on the corresponding measures at the European level (e.g. the GEP requirement in Horizon Europe). Ideally, the transfer of

these priorities and goals to the national level should take place as part of a discursive process involving relevant stakeholders, including ministries, RPOs and research-funding organisations (RFOs). These objectives are then used to formulate national-level objectives, derived from or referencing the European goals. Specific policies are then developed and implemented to achieve these objectives. Ideally, these measures would be developed and implemented through a participatory process involving the relevant institutions (e.g. universities and research funding organisations), which would then be expected to formulate institutional-level equality objectives that are compatible with those at European and national levels. It is essential to monitor the implementation of measures at each of these levels.

Figure 1: Ideal implementation of OMC concerning ERA Action 5



Source: own elaboration.

In the above-described setting, monitoring is assigned a supportive role in the effective implementation of gender equality policies for two reasons: (1) it facilitates effective policy implementation, and (2) it contributes to policy discourse. The first of these roles forms part of the definition of monitoring. It is defined as “the planned, continuous and systematic collection and analysis of program information able to provide management and key stakeholders with an indication of the extent of progress in implementation, and in relation to program performance against stated objectives and expectations” (Markiewicz and Patrick, 2016: 12). Its core function is to provide information on policy implementation (e.g. the number of policies implemented, participants in training programmes and budget expenditure on specific measures) and related outputs (e.g. the proportion of RPOs in a country with a GEP). Monitoring that addresses this core function supports policy steering in three

ways: (1) it makes stakeholder accountability transparent; (2) it provides the first indications of suboptimal policy implementation; and (3) it helps identify deviations from planned implementation and the need to adapt policies or their implementation at an early stage. Thus, monitoring supports goal achievement and the efficient use of resources.

Furthermore, implementing monitoring provides a basis for an evidence-based policy discourse on advancing gender equality. A key contribution to this discourse is that developing and accepting monitoring requires the relevant stakeholders to have a shared understanding of the equality-related challenges and the objectives derived from them. Developing a shared understanding requires facilitating a participatory process involving the relevant stakeholders and initiating a constructive discourse focusing on questions such as: Where do we stand regarding gender equality? What are our priorities? What do we want to achieve?

However, implementing the OMC comes with a number of challenges inherent in gender equality policies. These primarily relate to the definition of objectives and the development of adequate indicators because:

- gender equality is a complex concept that is difficult to operationalise (Tzanakou et al., 2021; O'Brian et al., 2019),
- not all relevant dimensions of gender equality in ERA are supported by existing data sources (Wroblewski, 2021),
- it is necessary to establish a causal link between policy and changes in the indicators that are supposed to measure gender equality to identify best practice (Papanastasiou, 2019),
- it is necessary to obtain information on the implementation of policies to assess causality (Engeli and Mazur, 2018).

Although the European Commission's ERA Roadmap (2016–2020) and ERA Action 5 outline the expectations for gender equality policies in R&I among the Member States, a binding target has yet to be established. These policy documents do not define gender equality in terms of a SMARTii objective. Instead, they define the areas in which progress must be made to achieve equality. Gender equality and gender mainstreaming in research have been an ERA priority since the 2012 Communication 'A Reinforced European Research Area Partnership for Excellence and Growth', covering three specific objectives: gender equality in careers at all levels; gender balance in decision-making; and the integration of the gender dimension into research content. ERA Action 5 defined GEPs as the main instruments to address these objectives through institutional change. Furthermore, the need to tackle

gender-based violence, and to make gender equality policies more inclusive by considering intersections with other diversity categories and potential grounds for discrimination, such as ethnicity, disability, or sexual orientation, was identified.

The vagueness of the target definition is exacerbated by data gaps, since not all dimensions are equally well represented by existing statistics for European comparisons. The She Figures (European Commission, 2025a) is a unique dataset that enables meaningful comparisons between Member States and provides a comprehensive overview of the gender-related challenges faced in scientific careers and in accessing leadership roles. However, they do not include information on gender-based violence or intersectional disadvantages. Furthermore, the She Figures only include limited information on the implementation of gender equality policies at an institutional level, or on the integration of the gender dimension in research content.

For this reason, the first ERA progress reports for 2013 and 2014 were based not only on the She Figures, but also on a supplementary survey (European Commission, 2013, 2014). This facilitated the presentation of output indicators for all the dimensions of gender equality addressed by the ERA policy at that time. The 2016 Progress Report (European Commission, 2017) only used the available information, i.e. the She Figures, for the sake of simplicity. The primary focus is now on the headline indicator of the share of women in Grade A positions and the additional indicator of the proportion of women in leadership positions in higher education institutions. Subsequent ERA progress reports have continued to focus on the headline indicator of the share of women in Grade A positions as an indicator of progress towards equality (European Commission, 2019a+b).

Equalising gender equality with the share of women in Grade A positions is problematic for two reasons (see Wroblewski 2021 for details): (1) The share of women in Grade A positions is not a meaningful indicator of equality, as it only represents one of several dimensions of a complex construct. (2) The indicator provides no indication of the implementation of gender equality policies. An increase in the number of women occupying Grade A positions does not necessarily imply that gender equality policies have been successfully implemented.

In the following period, the indicator set was expanded but remained limited to the available quantitative information (She Figures) (European Commission, 2019a+b). This means that it is not possible to identify best practices based on the available data. To identify best practice, it is necessary to collect data on the implementation of policies considering specific good practice criteria separately, since the available databases do not contain any such information at the national or institutional level.

However, when the OMC was implemented in ERA, the existing data basis (She Figures) was not expanded. Instead, this task was outsourced to a Horizon 2020- or Horizon Europe-funded project (GENDERACTION, GENDERACTIONplus).

The initial situation described above presents the following challenges for implementing the OMC for equality in ERA, particularly with regard to the conceptualisation of monitoring:

- It is essential that a shared understanding of equality is developed among all the relevant stakeholders, including the European Commission and Member States.
- Considering this shared understanding, it is essential to develop a set of indicators for evaluating progress towards achieving equality in the aforementioned domains.
- To attribute positive developments in equality to policy implementation, it is necessary to monitor implementation at European and national levels, and agree on criteria for identifying good practice.

These challenges could have been addressed by integrating monitoring development within a comprehensive policy discourse aimed at establishing a shared gender equality objective. However, as the following analysis of the implementation of ERA Action 5 shows, this has not been the case.

4 Reality check: implementation of ERA Action 5

The following analysis examines the implementation of ERA Action 5 (2022–2024) in the context of the OMC requirements. This analysis is based on an online survey of ERA Forum Subgroup Inclusive Gender Equality members conducted as part of the GENDERACTIONplus project in spring 2024 (Wroblewski, 2024). The survey was completed by 19 countries (17 Member States and two Associated Countries). It should be noted that the survey responses reflect the situation of the 'old' Member States (the former EU 15) quite well, but not that of the countries that have joined more recently.

In general, there is a strong commitment to gender equality in R&I across the European Union: 25 of the 27 Member States endorsed the Ljubljana Declaration in 2021 and 22 of them committed themselves to ERA Action 5.iii Six Member States have expressed this commitment in an ERA Action Plan for the period 2022–2024, while three countries have formulated a national or regional policy on gender equality focusing on higher education or R&I instead of an ERA Action Plan. Among

survey respondents, eight countries do not have a strategic policy document in place that outlines gender equality priorities, objectives, and policies.

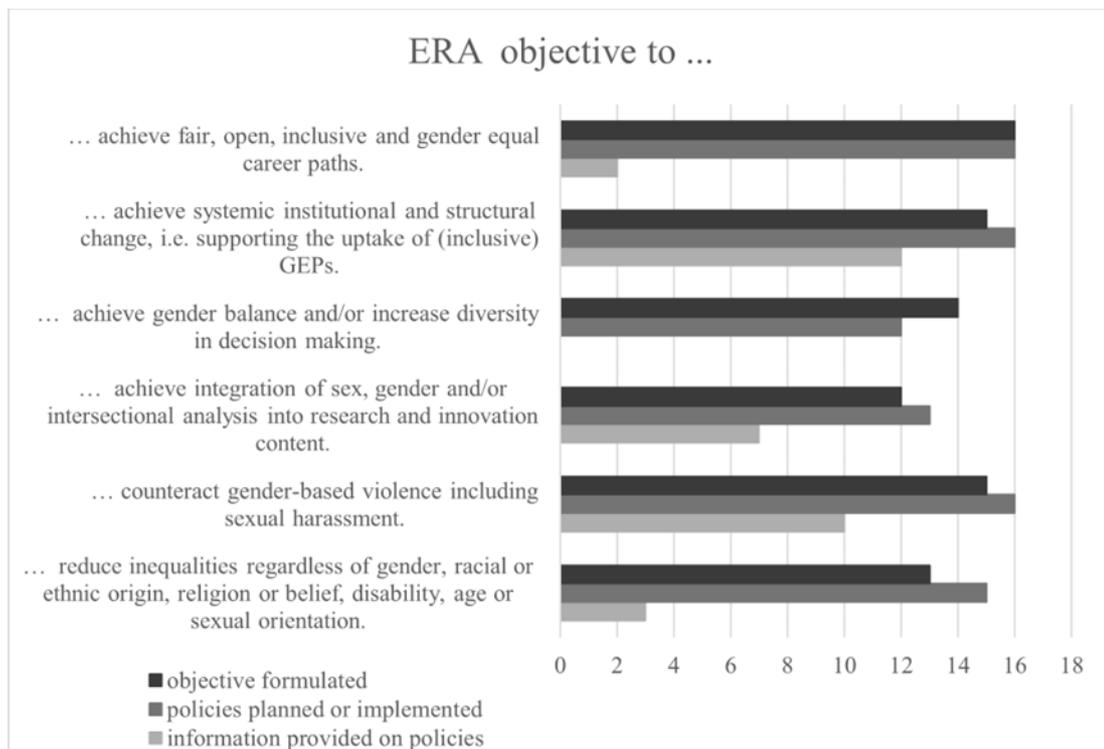
Participants in the survey were asked whether their national policy addresses the objectives mentioned in ERA Action 5, which are: achieving fair, open and inclusive career paths; achieving systemic, institutional and structural change; achieving gender balance and increasing diversity in decision-making; integrating sex, gender and/or intersectional analysis into R&I content; counteracting gender-based violence, including sexual harassment; and reducing inequalities regardless of gender, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation. They were also asked whether they implement or plan to implement concrete measures to support these objectives (see Figure 2). Even in the absence of a strategic document, the majority of countries represented in the survey stated that they have formulated gender equality policy objectives based on ERA Action 5. However, these objectives lack specificity, measurability and time-bound targets (SMART), instead representing a commitment to addressing specific challenges without formulating concrete targets.

Furthermore, the analysis of the qualitative information provided in the survey (e.g. the provision of related policy documents) reveals that countries that have committed to one of the stated objectives have different interpretations of the goal. For example, one country aims to increase the proportion of women in management positions in order to promote fair, open and inclusive career paths that are equal for all genders. Another country has developed a strategy to make careers in science and research more attractive by focusing specifically on gender equality programmes. A third country has proposed increasing the transparency of human resources procedures, while a fourth aims to increase the proportion of women in professorships. These examples illustrate that Member States interpret the objective differently, and that different indicators should be employed to monitor progress depending on the objective's formulation. Similarly, regarding the other objectives, Member States demonstrate clear differences in interpretation and prioritisation. Different target groups are prioritised, particularly with regard to reducing inequalities beyond gender.

Although most countries have set out a series of objectives and thus implemented ERA Action 5 in principle, this has not been reflected in an appropriate mix of policies. According to the survey, most countries indicate that they implement or plan to implement specific policies to support the objectives. Fourteen countries provided information on at least one measure. Six countries are implementing measures to support structural change in higher education institutions (HEIs) and research and policy organisations (RPOs), as well as measures to strengthen sex/gender analysis

or intersectional research. However, only a few countries mention concrete measures to promote inclusive career paths, combat gender-based violence, promote gender balance in decision-making, or address inequalities beyond gender.

Figure 2: Number of countries that formulated objectives related to ERA Action 5, planned or implemented measures and provided information on these measures



Source: Wroblewski, 2024.

As the figure 2 shows, there are striking discrepancies between respondents' statements that objectives have been formulated and measures planned, and the concrete description of measures taken in three areas, including inclusive career paths, decision-making positions, and intersectional approaches to gender equality. This raises the question of why the situation in these three areas differs from that regarding structural change, intersectional approaches to research, and gender-based violence. One hypothesis is that the GENDERACTIONplus project focused on new topics in current ERA period and thus provided ministries with concrete support, particularly in these latter areas.

The survey reveals three scenarios: countries that mention specific objectives and implement related policies; countries that mention specific objectives but do not implement related policies; and countries that do not mention specific objectives but implement related policies. Therefore, implementing policies to support gender

equality in ERA does not necessarily involve a full policy cycle. This finding is also supported by the limited information available on the areas addressed by the objectives at a national level. This means that measures are not based on evidence and there is no monitoring in place for their implementation.

However, the situation is not much better at the European level in terms of monitoring. Progress towards achieving ERA targets is recorded by the ERA Dashboard (European Commission, 2025b) and the ERA Scoreboard (European Commission, 2025c) for all ERA actions. Quantitative indicators dominate, and She Figures are primarily used in the area of gender equality (European Commission, 2025a). This means that progress in terms of gender equality is still measured by the share of women in Grade A positions. Consequently, countries that do not occupy top positions in international gender equality rankings, such as the EIGE Gender Equality Index, are considered top performers in this area (including Latvia, Romania, Lithuania and Bulgaria). Thus, a meaningless indicator is used to measure progress towards equality, depicting only a single dimension of a complex construct (see Wroblewski, 2021 for details).

5 Discussion

Analysis of the implementation of ERA Action 5 at a national level clearly shows that most Member States support gender equality goals and are prepared to take concrete measures. However, the implementation of ERA Action 5 remains sub-optimal in terms of coordination and efficiency. Weitgruber (2020: xlv) states that “there are still major disparities between countries and regions, some of which are diverging rather than converging”. Due to the absence of concrete objectives and a shared understanding of gender equality among the Member States, measures are implemented uncoordinatedly at national level. Several countries are developing policies in parallel (e.g. policies to support intersectional approaches in research), which leaves potential synergies unrealised. Furthermore, a lack of collaboration when designing measures means that mistakes made in one context may be repeated in another. To capitalise on opportunities for mutual learning, it is imperative to establish appropriate structures and networks. These should be initiated by governments or the European Commission, with a particular focus on involving relevant stakeholders (Townsend, 2013). Currently, there is no institutionalised exchange between Member States or between Member States and the European Commission. The absence of shared objectives and mutual understanding of progress towards gender equality is due to the lack of discourse on gender equality policy between Member States and the European Commission.

As most countries lack information on the status of gender equality beyond She Figures, the development of measures is not evidence-based. This lack of evidence-based development also makes it difficult to measure progress, which carries the risk of inefficient resource use. Furthermore, such an approach makes it impossible to identify good practices, which limits the possibility of learning from the experiences of other countries.

The lack of coordination and inefficiency in the implementation of ERA Action 5 emphasises the importance of monitoring. Meaningful monitoring of ERA Action 5 would facilitate political discourse on gender equality and lead to more effective policymaking. Therefore, the informative value of monitoring for the implementation of policies is crucial. Although a great deal of information on the current state of gender equality in science and research is available for individual countries (e.g. via the SHE Figures), this provides little insight into the implementation of ERA Action 5. Based on the current dataset, it is not possible to draw comparisons between the status of gender equality policies in different Member States and Associated Countries, or to determine whether these policies have evolved in a particular direction. Furthermore, it is not feasible to analyse the consistency and coherence of gender equality policy strategies.

The discussion makes clear that the OMC has only been partially implemented with regard to gender equality in ERA and that its potential to promote further equality in ERA is not being realised. Indeed, it could be argued that the combination of two key elements of the OMC makes gender equality in ERA a 'weak policy area'. Firstly, the commitment to equality is voluntary. Secondly, there are no binding targets or monitoring, even if Member States voluntarily commit to them. Thirdly, there are no sanctions for lack of engagement. This makes the commitment arbitrary.

6 Conclusions: using monitoring to strengthen a weak policy field

Given that gender equality is a sensitive policy area where the context and baseline differ significantly between Member States, the OMC instrument appears to be an ideal candidate for promoting gender equality in ERA. The OMC would facilitate the definition of tailored targets and the implementation of appropriate measures. However, this would require the analysis of progress towards equality to consider national characteristics.

Analysis of the implementation of the OMC for equality in ERA shows that this potential has yet to be realised. Specifically, the voluntary nature of the commitment

to equality, coupled with a lack of meaningful monitoring, has proven to be the greatest obstacle to effective implementation. A particular problem is that, in its current form, it is impossible to identify best practices and use them to inform mutual learning activities.

Notwithstanding the challenges encountered, the consistent anchoring of gender equality in the ERA policy documents establishes a foundation for the further development of the OMC and ERA monitoring. This would entail integrating the existing instruments of the OMC more closely with EU funding (Horizon Europe) and legislation (the planned ERA Activ). Following Vanhercke and Pochet (2022: 460), we can then speak of a hybridisation of policy instruments as these become increasingly inter-dependet and existing policy instruments can no longer be neatly separated as all of them consider gender equality as a crosscutting issue.

This claim is supported by both the Draghi Report (European Commission, 2024a, b) and the Letta Report (Letta, 2024). The former calls for inclusive policies to be implemented, while the latter denounces the persistence of discrimination as a risk factor and recommends robust monitoring mechanisms, among other things. “Focus on excellence should benefit as many groups as possible across the whole of the EU to avoid deepening existing inequalities. Policies promoting research and innovation should be open, inclusive and readily accessible to researchers, business and regions” (European Commission, 2024b: 246).

“Persistent discrimination faced by specific groups, whether due to gender, disability, ethnicity, or other factors, hinders their full participation in our Single Market and undermines the promise of opportunity for all. This calls for targeted actions, renewed funding, and meticulous monitoring to dismantle systemic barriers” (Letta, 2024: 105).

In view of the central role that research and innovation play in overcoming current challenges, achieving inclusive equality will be a key factor in the future success of the ERA. This will require the following steps:

- The anchoring of inclusive gender equality objectives in policy documents must be accompanied by an intensive gender equality discourse that aims to establish a common understanding of existing gender equality issues and objectives between the European Commission and Member States.
- It is imperative that Member States' voluntary commitment to inclusive gender equality is coupled with a higher degree of self-commitment. For example, they could be required to formulate national action plans for

their journey towards inclusive gender equality, including intermediate steps, and report on the implementation of concrete policies.

- The implementation of meaningful monitoring procedures will support the effective implementation of policies and the assessment of progress towards inclusive gender equality, as well as detecting a lack of engagement at both the European and national levels.

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ⁱ For the sake of simplicity, the regional level will not be discussed further in what follows. It should always be considered an additional level between the national and institutional levels.

ⁱⁱ Goals that meet the SMART criteria should be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and able to be achieved within a set timeframe (time-bound).

ⁱⁱⁱ In total 36 countries endorsed the Ljubljana Declaration – including all Member States but Hungary and Latvia. 22 Member States (exceptions are Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Malta and Romania) and 2 other countries (Israel, Norway and Georgia) committed themselves to ERA Action 5.

^{iv} In the second half of 2026, the Commission is expected to publish the European Research Area Act (ERA Act). The aim of the ERA Act is to address the challenges formulated in the Letta and Draghi reports. These are i) closing the competitiveness gap and ii) reducing the fragmentation of the European research area to allow for the free circulation of scientific knowledge, research and innovation referred as the ‘fifth freedom’ in the Letta report.