



**European Committee  
of the Regions**

**COTER-VII/014**

## **WORKING DOCUMENT**

**Commission for Territorial Cohesion Policy and EU Budget**

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

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This document will be discussed at the meeting of the **Commission for Territorial Cohesion Policy and EU Budget** to be held from **11 a.m. to 4.30 p.m. on 22 June 2021**.

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

### Background

1. The general aims of cohesion policy 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. In this context, gender equality thus becomes at once (1) a cross-cutting criterion for the drawing up of cohesion policy programmes, (2) a goal to be pursued by the programmes and (3) a powerful factor helping to achieve cohesion policy's sustainable and balanced development goals.

### Approach

3. If genuine gender equality is to be pursued, this goal must be incorporated in every stage of the decision-making process: when priorities are set, when policies are worked out and when resources are allocated.
4. Gender equality must remain a priority for the European Commission, with 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.
5. This is a slow process, not yet completed, in which there are obvious difficulties and whose limitations and shortcomings – both in the formal extension of rights to women and in terms of their only apparent universality – have been pointed out by feminist theory.
6. In terms of legal instruments, greater attention should be paid to ensuring that the rules adopted 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.
7. It is therefore necessary to bring to light the discrimination and differences in treatment that are hidden and permeate social structures and thus risk not being picked up by an approach of legal and formal analysis. The drafting must be encouraged of legislation that, by ceasing to see individuals as legal abstractions, is increasingly focused on intervening in the reality of discrimination in society.
8. For this reason, the actual implementation of the policies adopted must be addressed, on the one hand by examining them in the light of the best practices implemented at regional level,

and on the other hand by taking care to assess whether the effects actually produced match the goals set.

## Cohesion policies

9. Of all the Union's various policy instruments, cohesion policy can make a valuable contribution to a real increase in equality between men and women, in terms of both the volume of funding and its nature and targeting. The variety of cohesion policy funds means, in fact, 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). But the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) can and should also 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. The contribution to gender equality cannot come from the Social Fund alone, which is mainly people-focused, but must come from all the funds, including the ERDF, which is largely business-facing, and the EAFRD, which has an important role to play in promoting the development of rural and inland areas.
10. Pursuing the gender equality goals laid down in the European Pillar of Social Rights must also involve the broadest possible range of regulatory and administrative instruments. Essential to this end is the most extensive and in-depth sharing between regional authorities of the policies they have adopted and the results they have achieved, which will be the backbone of the course we take.
11. One focus for attention in this is the impact of COVID-19 on female employment: women are over-represented in the jobs most affected by lockdowns, such as the accommodation sector, personal services and retail. The greater gender impact of COVID-19 is seen not so much in lower employment rates, but 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. Here too, special attention should be paid to pooling experiences and best practices adopted at regional and local level regarding the problem we find ourselves facing and this sharing should feature prominently in the analysis conducted.

## Analysis and methodology

12. Much analysis has shown that gender equality has benefits for economic growth and sustainable development, creating a fairer society and increasing resource efficiency.
13. Before the pandemic, however, the female employment rate in Europe was still around 12 points lower than that of men (67.3% compared with 79%). However, analyses by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) show that the performance of EU countries in gender mainstreaming had actually been declining since 2012. 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.

14. Nurturing gender equality and equal opportunities is a precondition for increasing the participation rate of women in the labour market, which in some countries, such as Italy, remains low. Increasing female labour market participation is an important measure to mitigate the sustainability problems of welfare systems resulting from the growing ratio between the inactive and the active, the consequence of the combined effect of increasing average lifespans and falling birth rates. In turn, bolstering welfare systems, especially those parts involved in maternal and child welfare, is a necessary, but not in itself sufficient, prerequisite for encouraging women's participation in the labour market.
15. Cohesion policy must address these issues, since it is difficult to envisage greater economic and social cohesion without increasing female participation in the labour market. As a result, particularly important among the keys to understanding to be duly taken into account as we go forward, is the fact that gender policy measures should also be seen as a tool for the tangible realisation of cohesion policy objectives.

#### Discussion points

16. Are policy-makers in your region/local authority aware of the importance of effective gender equality and broader participation of women in the labour market for the effective pursuit of the strategic objectives of cohesion policy?
17. Does your regional or local authority take gender mainstreaming into account in decision-making?
18. Is the regional/local budget examined in terms of gender (what sort of impact do increases or cuts in areas of expenditure have on each gender)?
19. Do you think that greater availability of measurable data on this matter could help your regional/local authority arrive at a better gender balance?
20. Do your draft plans for the next programming period take gender aspects on board?
21. Do you think that effective application of the principle of non-discrimination in the programming and implementation of the Structural Funds is enough, or do you think that stronger action and measures, including protective ones, are needed in order to better bridge the gender gap?

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