

Policy Brief – 05/2026

Intersectional justice in EU research for better policies

Intersectional justice ensures better policies for all. Intersectionality recognises that people experience overlapping and interconnected forms of disadvantage shaped by gender, race, class, disability, age, citizenship, and geography. When research fails to account for these intersections, its findings are incomplete, and the policies that follow from that research are less effective.

The EU has taken important steps to broaden inclusion in policymaking and research. Previous Horizon Europe programmes funded gender equality research and required Gender Equality Plans, while the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2026–2030 commits to intersectionality in research and funding. Yet, the [Horizon Europe legislative proposal](#) for 2028-2034 and its [Specific Programme](#) do not mention intersectional justice.

Embedding intersectional justice across three dimensions: (1) project selection and evaluation; (2) conceptual framing; and (3) research methods can strengthen science and improve policy outcomes for all EU citizens. Intersectional justice is not a niche concern nor a mere add-on; it strengthens the EU's scientific base, enhances the societal relevance of funded research, and supports the EU's core commitments to equality, non-discrimination, and evidence-based policymaking.

Recommendations

- **Integrate and operationalise intersectional justice explicitly** into the legal text of the next Horizon Europe programme.
- Encourage applicants in relevant calls to **address intersectional dimensions beyond gender.**
- **Develop clear guidelines** for applicants and evaluators on how to incorporate intersectional justice.
- **Mandate intersectional data disaggregation** whenever feasible.
- **Diversify evaluation panels** to include reviewers with relevant expertise and/or lived experiences.
- **Avoid tokenism:** require meaningful structural inclusion of affected communities in research.

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Introduction

Without an intersectional justice lens, Horizon Europe, the EU’s Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, risks reproducing systemic exclusions in research design, data collection, and policy relevance. The proposal for the period 2028-2034 is designed around four pillars: Excellent Science; Competitiveness and Society; Innovation; and the European Research Area. Its ambitions are expansive, encompassing clean transition, digital sovereignty, next-generation AI, and more. These domains are not neutral: they both shape and are shaped by existing social inequalities.

Horizon Europe 2028-2034 is an important opportunity to embed intersectional justice at the heart of European science.

With [an expected increase in budget](#), the next programme will shape research priorities and methodologies and influence the knowledge base for EU policies over the next seven years. As the programme’s core provisions take shape, there is a real opportunity to integrate intersectional justice across its design and implementation. The good news is that doing so is both politically feasible and legally grounded. Under Article 2 of the Treaty of the European Union and Articles 8 and 19 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, the EU has both the mandate and the competence to eliminate inequalities in all its activities, including research funding.

This brief builds on the [Intersectional Justice Guidelines](#) developed for the Models, Assessment, and Policies for Sustainability (MAPS) Horizon Europe-funded project (Patki et al. 2025). These guidelines reflect lessons and findings from incorporating an intersectional justice framework in a Horizon Europe research project and thus can be instructive for shaping its next programme.

Intersectional Justice in Horizon Europe: Current situation

What has been achieved: Under the current Horizon Europe programme, the EU took meaningful steps toward greater equality in research. Gender Equality Plans became a mandatory eligibility criterion for public bodies and research organisations. The programme funded dedicated research on gender equality and required the integration of the gender dimension across research & innovation processes. In total, over €5 billion in Horizon Europe commitments can be directly linked to gender equality-advancing efforts, [representing 11 per cent of total programme commitments](#).

The EU Gender Equality Strategy 2026–2030, published earlier this year, goes further, explicitly committing the EU to fund dedicated research and innovation with an intersectional approach and to launch a Research and Innovation Network for a Union of Equality. The recently adopted Intergenerational Fairness Strategy explicitly acknowledges that “disadvantaged groups experience additional difficulties requiring an intersectional approach.” These signals reflect growing political momentum for intersectional justice at the EU level, which should be applauded.

What gaps remain: Intersectionality is rhetorically present in some aspects of EU policymaking, but often substantively absent (Debusscher et al. 2024). Notably, the current legislative proposal for the Horizon Europe Programme does not mention intersectional justice or meaningfully integrate it into its design. There are two ways in which we can progress further: firstly, by considering more axes of discrimination alongside gender when

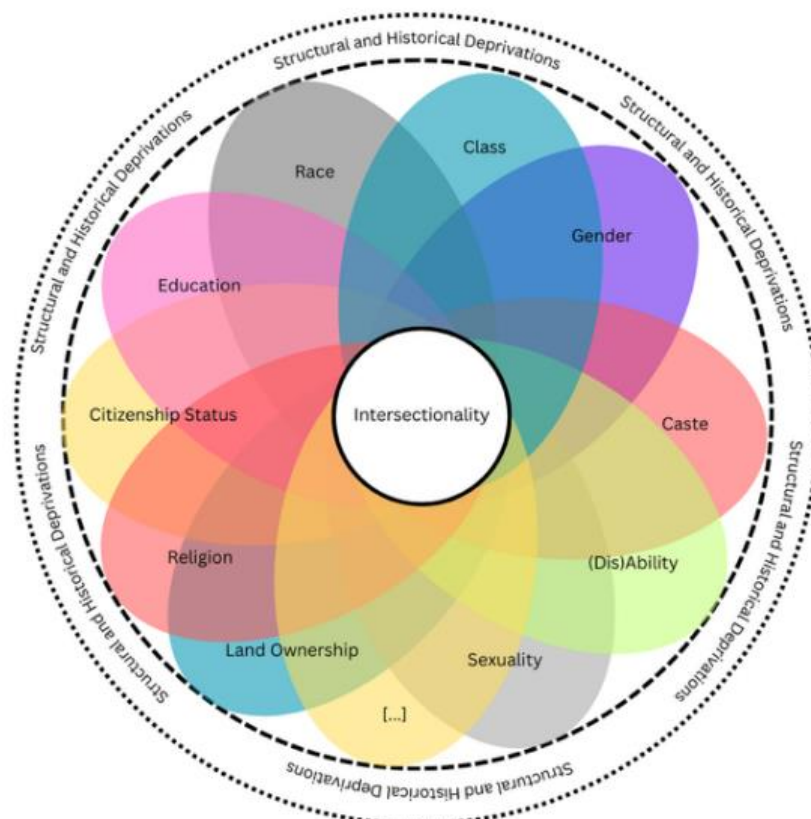
conducting research and policy-making (age, race, class, ability, etc.) and secondly, by moving beyond piecemeal approaches (e.g. DEI initiatives) to address the structural causes of these inequities and improve well-being of all. For example, [workplace sexual harassment especially affects women and young people in the EU](#), particularly young women. Creating workplace policies to address this (e.g. worker representatives to approach, legal protections against retaliatory firing, school workshops for young people on sexual harassment, etc.) would help all people who suffer from workplace sexual harassment (including men and those who are older).

The consequences of this gap are not theoretical. When research on artificial intelligence (AI), digital health, or climate adaptation does not account for intersecting vulnerabilities, its findings can produce less effective (and at times harmful) policies. For instance, AI trained on non-representative data produces discriminatory outputs. Climate adaptation modelling that ignores

the intersection of rurality, disability, and low income can generate recommendations that favours urban, educated, able people. For example, low carbon mobility policies often focus on public transport solutions designed for high density urban areas, while offering fewer alternatives for people in rural areas that remain dependent on private vehicles.

Intersectional Justice: The Basics

Intersectionality is a concept that originates in Black feminist scholarship and has since evolved into a critical analytical lens to guide both research and policy action (Crenshaw 1989; Combahee River Collective 1977). It asserts that identities and systems of power or discrimination must be examined together rather than in isolation. They do not simply



“add up”; rather, they overlap and interact in complex, context-dependent ways.

Intersectionality encompasses many forms of discrimination: class, race, gender, nationality, (dis)ability, age, sexuality, and others (see image above). One person can experience different forms of discrimination simultaneously. For example, a racialised woman from Eastern Europe working as a care worker may face racial discrimination, gender-based sexism, and class-based precarity not as separate experiences, but as a unique, compounded form of injustice that cannot be explained by any single axis alone.

Intersectionality shifts the focus from tokenism to embracing systemic solutions. Crucially, intersectional justice is distinct from diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). DEI tends to prioritise representation and favours individualised responses, often focusing on visible axes such as gender and race while neglecting other axes like class, disability, or migration status. Intersectional justice, by contrast, focuses on structural

root causes and transformative interventions (Hunting and Hankivsky, 2024).

An intersectional justice framework is particularly important when addressing the large-scale challenges at the heart of Horizon Europe. Whether the topic is clean aviation, ocean observation, or the future of work, intersectional inequalities shape who benefits from innovation and who bears its costs. Research that ignores these dynamics is not only normatively insufficient but also scientifically incomplete.

Intersectional Justice for Better Policy Outcomes

The case for intersectional justice in Horizon Europe is as much a matter of research quality as it is a matter of policy effectiveness. Policy outcomes are shaped by the evidence base produced through scientific findings. When research is

Common Misconceptions of Intersectionality	
Intersectionality does not	but rather
only apply to policies focused on gender, race, or diversity	is a lens for designing, implementing, and evaluating all policies, regardless of sector.
assume policies can be neutral or affect everyone in the same way	promotes awareness of how assumptions, priorities, and biases can shape policy impacts.
treat disaggregated data or symbolic representation as proof of inclusion	emphasises meaningfully understanding and integrating lived realities through qualitative methods and stakeholder engagement.
rank groups by who is “most disadvantaged” or “most privileged”, and focus only on individual circumstances	recognises that unequal outcomes are shaped by overlapping identities and structural factors.
translate to an all-or-nothing approach	supports applying intersectional thinking where feasible and being transparent about constraints.

designed and conducted with an intersectional lens, it can produce findings that are more nuanced, more reflective of diverse realities, and more useful for designing interventions that work for the full range of EU citizens. On the contrary, research that is not intersectional can produce oversimplified findings that reduce the complexity of reality and thus hinder the aims of the policy objectives.

Intersectionality does not add complexity for its own sake; rather, it helps to understand the complexity that was always there, but that other previous frameworks overlook. Across Horizon Europe's research areas - clean transition research, digital governance, mobility systems, and labour market policies - the quality of research depends on the degree to which it accounts for the full complexity of social realities.

Intersectional justice improves outcomes not only for marginalised groups, but for society as a whole. Research that accounts for the full diversity of human experience improves generalisability and robustness by reducing systemic bias and better capturing variation across populations, leading to policy solutions that are more durable and politically viable.

Recommendations

1. Integrate Experts on Intersectionality in Project Selection & Evaluation

- Include evaluators with expertise in intersectional approaches, and, where possible, lived experience of the inequalities being researched.
- Evaluation criteria could operationalise the consideration of intersectional dimensions by embedding it across existing assessment categories such as excellence and impact. This involves evaluating whether: proposals identify relevant axes of inequality, including

structural factors; diverse lived realities are reflected in their design and methods; affected communities are meaningfully involved throughout the research cycle, including the dissemination; and the research team has reflected on its positionality and how to overcome the biases arising from it.

2. Embed Intersectional Justice from the Conceptual Stage of Research

- Encourage researchers to identify which axes of inequality are most relevant to their research and how they will be addressed.
- Encourage applicants to ask themselves which scholarly traditions inform their research, and which assumptions may be embedded.
- Avoid universalised research subjects that obscure variations. For example, research on sustainable mobility should account for the fact that mobility needs differ profoundly across axes of disability, income, and geography. A research design that treats 'the urban commuter' as the default subject can produce findings that are irrelevant or harmful for many of the affected populations. For instance, excluding disabled people from research may lead to conceptualisations of urban mobility that only support the most "obvious" types of disabilities (blind and wheelchair bound), but neglect the needs of those with other less understood disabilities.

3. Strengthen Intersectional Design in Research

While these recommendations are directed at researchers, they can be encouraged through guidelines, evaluation criteria, and reporting requirements:

- Ensure inclusion of participants in research design/sampling from commonly underrepresented groups.
 - Design interview and survey questions that reflect intersecting identities rather than treating axes of discrimination as separate and additive.
 - Acknowledge the role of the researcher's positionality in shaping data collection and interpretation.
 - Encourage diverse research teams, adopting reflexive practices, and involving affected communities as co-producers of knowledge.
- 4. Improve Intersectional Rigour in Quantitative Research**
- For quantitative methods, the greatest challenge is data availability. Horizon Europe-funded projects could further aim to disaggregate data by multiple axes where possible, acknowledge what is missing, and pair quantitative with qualitative components where appropriate.
 - Finally, the treatment of statistical 'outliers' deserves particular attention: these are not anomalies to be discarded, but people with experiences that may represent the communities most affected by the research topic.

Conclusion

Horizon Europe presents an important opportunity to embed intersectionality into the architecture of European research and innovation funding. The political momentum is there: the Gender Equality Strategy 2026–2030, the Intergenerational Fairness Strategy, the European Social Charter, and the EU's own treaty obligations all point in this direction. The legislative window is open: the negotiation phase for both the Framework Programme Regulation and the Specific Programme offer opportunities to strengthen the text.

Embracing intersectional justice in Horizon Europe means going beyond tokenism to enact structural change: in how projects are conceptualised, how they collect and analyse data, and how they are selected and evaluated. It means acknowledging that excellent science is not achieved through reducing reality but appreciating the complexity of it. This can be supported through expanding the diversity of the research team and their awareness of intersectionality as a conceptual framework, and more systematic assessments of the structural causes of injustices. These changes shape both the quality of scientific output and enhance policy outcomes.

By adopting an intersectional justice lens, Horizon Europe can fund research that is transformative—research capable of addressing the full complexity of European and global challenges, and of informing policies that work for everyone.

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