

Brussels, 25 May 2021

COST 077/21

DECISION

Subject: Memorandum of Understanding for the implementation of the COST Action “Making Early Career Investigators' Voices Heard for Gender Equality” (VOICES) CA20137

The COST Member Countries will find attached the Memorandum of Understanding for the COST Action Making Early Career Investigators' Voices Heard for Gender Equality approved by the Committee of Senior Officials through written procedure on 25 May 2021.

MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

For the implementation of a COST Action designated as

COST Action CA20137

MAKING EARLY CAREER INVESTIGATORS' VOICES HEARD FOR GENDER EQUALITY (VOICES)

The COST Members through the present Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) wish to undertake joint activities of mutual interest and declare their common intention to participate in the COST Action, referred to above and described in the Technical Annex of this MoU.

The Action will be carried out in accordance with the set of COST Implementation Rules approved by the Committee of Senior Officials (CSO), or any document amending or replacing them.

The main aim and objective of the Action is to increase the visibility of inequalities faced by Early Career Investigators (ECIs) from a gender perspective and to promote a sustainable dialogue between ECIs and stakeholders in the research ecosystem across Europe. This will be achieved through the specific objectives detailed in the Technical Annex.

The present MoU enters into force on the date of the approval of the COST Action by the CSO.

OVERVIEW

Summary

Over the last decades, European higher education and research systems have been characterized by deep changes, due to globalization and marketization, that have dramatically transformed research careers. While doctoral and postdoctoral researchers constitute a fast-growing workforce, their working conditions have become increasingly precarious and their career prospects uncertain. Those processes tend to exacerbate and create new forms of gendered inequalities for Early Career Investigators (ECIs), first and foremost women – that have been magnified by the COVID-19 crisis. Those inequalities are also reinforced by disparities within academia linked to other social determinants, such as origin, socioeconomic status, sexuality or ability.

However, current institutional Research & Innovation (R&I) policies, including gender equality policies, rarely consider ECIs’ specific challenges. Moreover, implementing efficient and impactful policies that promote sustainable gender equality remains a great challenge throughout R&I institutions.

The main goal of this Action is thus to increase the visibility of inequalities faced by ECIs from a gender perspective and to promote a sustainable dialogue between ECIs and stakeholders in the research ecosystem at the systemic level (European & national policy-makers) and at the institutional level (senior researchers, academic managers) by creating a community of gender equality practitioners composed of various stakeholders (ECIs, independent researchers, academic managers, organizations) across Europe. The Action has among its outcomes: training schools for ECIs, scientific publications by ECIs, recommendations & guidelines for academics and policy-makers.

<p>Areas of Expertise Relevant for the Action</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Sociology: Gender and sexuality studies ● Political Science: Public administration, public policy ● Sociology: Work and professions ● Philosophy, Ethics and Religion: Ethics and morality, social ethics 	<p>Keywords</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Early Career Investigators ● Gender Inequalities ● Gender Equality Policies ● Policy Implementation
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Specific Objectives

To achieve the main objective described in this MoU, the following specific objectives shall be accomplished:

Research Coordination

- To ensure effectiveness of Gender Equality Plans in research institutions by fostering dissemination of good practices regarding equality plans, which integrate gender-sensitive measures and actions geared towards ECIs, between Action Participants and through a White Paper, Dissemination conferences, scientific publications.
- To provide support for Action members in each Working Group in gathering and analyzing current actions and measures geared towards Early Career Researchers in their institutions.
- To develop guidance on how to introduce an intersectional analysis in gender equality plans to ensure inclusiveness of Gender Equality Plans, for each topic tackled by WGs through transversal workshops / outputs.
- To develop recommendations for appropriate monitoring and evaluation measures that consider the early career stage through transversal workshops with all WGs / outputs.

- To promote overall a better understanding of gender inequalities and discriminations faced by ECIs taking into account national and disciplinary context, through knowledge transfer and mutual learning between Action Participants.

Capacity Building

- To create a sustainable and supportive European community of gender equality plan practitioners that fosters knowledge sharing, exchanges of good practices, and reflections about gendered inequalities at an early career stage, gathering ECIs and other categories within research and innovation throughout COST countries.
- To provide a platform for dialogue and co-construction of policies between ECIs and policy-making bodies to ensure that the specific gendered experiences of ECIs are heard and considered in national and European policy-making by engaging policy-makers in the Research and Innovation ecosystem and by direct involvement of ECIs in VOICES.
- To engage ECIs as advocates and change agents for a better research culture by encouraging the transfer of gender knowledge through training schools, by using inclusiveness targeted countries conference grants, and by funding of scientific publications jointly authored by ECIs.
- To cooperate and include non-governmental stakeholders outside academia in the Action that have expertise and knowledge about discrimination in the workplace, equality and diversity management, feminist policies, and career mobilities for scientists to enrich perspectives on the issues tackled.

TECHNICAL ANNEX

1. S&T EXCELLENCE

1.1. SOUNDNESS OF THE CHALLENGE

1.1.1. DESCRIPTION OF THE STATE-OF-THE-ART

Several studies point out to the role of Early Career Investigators (ECIs), i.e., PhD and Postdoctoral researchers, in advancing research innovation and knowledge development and bringing fresh perspectives to research (Musselin 2004, Åkerlind 2005, Cantwell 2011, Chen et al. 2015). ECIs also greatly contribute to the enrichment of the academic life and culture, through innovative teaching, creating associations and networks – and therefore to research excellence overall.

However, while they represent a growing pool of professionals in Europe, only slightly over half of those in the academic sector are employed on permanent contracts, compared to the vast majority of those in other sectors (European Science Foundation 2017, p.11). Moreover, their working conditions have become increasingly unstable as they are particularly affected by the growing casualisation of the academic workforce and precariousness of the academic life (Murgia & Porgio 2019). They face, among other things, insecure employment conditions (short-term contracts, part-time), low remunerations, long working hours, increasing requirements (mainly mobility), intense academic competition, overwhelming administrative and organizational tasks, and a lack of recognition by research organizations. PhD candidates are still often perceived as “students” instead of full researchers.

Those specific work experiences are profoundly gendered. Considerable asymmetries in careers between men and women, especially at top positions, are documented but less is known of early stages of careers. However, gender equality is far from being achieved at early career stages. While women make up 47.9% of doctoral graduates at the European level, the proportion of women among doctoral graduates still varies among disciplinary fields. They are over-represented in education (68%) but under-represented in the field of information and communication technologies (21%) and in the fields of engineering and manufacturing and construction (29%) (She Figures 2018). As for the post-doctoral phase, women tend to occupy more precarious positions and they drop out on the way to permanent positions, commonly known as the “leaky pipeline” phenomenon. The transition to the private sector is also complicated. Women are indeed less likely to become innovators despite European efforts to promote women innovators such as the recent call SwafS-26-2020 “Innovators of the future: bridging the gender gap” and the EU Prize for Women Innovators.

Moreover, the “leaky pipeline” explanation is not enough to explain women drop-out and implies a linear and masculine vision of research careers, as well as “women” as a homogenous category. Several studies in fact emphasize the “gendered pipelines” at play (Dubois-Shaik et al. 2019; Backouche et al. 2009) and take into account the systemic and organizational environment to explain the progressive “disappearance” of women. Women are also differently affected during this early career period: other social determinants (age, economic status, disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation) or specific experiences like parenthood (Akram and Young 2020) entail multiple experiences that need to be recognized by institutions. The VOICES COST Action and its activities will therefore pay attention to the multiple dimensions of careers and non-linear career paths of ECIs with an intersectional perspective. By doing so, it will value different responsibilities and aspects of research careers that are often

underestimated – even made invisible – such as "care" work, teaching, mentoring, contributing to the research community – tasks most often performed by women. This Action thus seeks to actively adopt an institutional and structural change approach by tackling sexist norms in academia, to question the traditional concept of "research career". Those same norms also sustain gender-based violence in academia, an urgent issue to which VOICES dedicates a specific Working Group (WG).

It should be noted, however, that despite a growing body of literature on the experiences of the early career stage from a gender perspective, studies on this topic remain few. VOICES will most importantly draw from the GARCIA EU Project (2014-2017), which is the most comprehensive European research project on the topic so far.

Gender equality has also been on the European political agenda for research and innovation over the last decades, and many EU-funded projects focus on gender mainstreaming in research institutions through the implementation of Gender Equality Plans: LeTSGEPs (2020-2023), GEARING ROLES (2019-2022), SPEAR (2019-2022), GENDERACTION (2017-2021), EQUAL-IST (2016-2019), ACT (2018-2021), to mention a few. Moreover, several certification and award schemes already exist in Europe (Athena Swan Award, Label égalité, etc.) while the CASPER project (2020-2022) examines the feasibility of establishing a European certification system for gender equality for Research Performing Organizations (RPOs). However, the specific challenges of ECIs are sometimes hard to monitor and to address through those initiatives. ECIs are often funded by research projects or external stakeholders and do not appear in institutional data sets, since they frequently hold short term positions and are very mobile. In such conditions, tracking them is a challenging task for institutions. Their variety of experiences and career paths are therefore most of the time invisible in Research and Innovation (R&I) and Higher Education (HE) policies that address gender inequalities. Moreover, when measures are put in place, such as mentoring programmes geared toward young women researchers, they are not always field-specific, they often target a small elite of women, and they tend to reinforce the linear idea of the career path (Striebing et al. 2020).

Regarding the heightened competition and instability of careers, European policymakers have started to take those issues into consideration over the last decades. Policy documents such as the European Charter for Researchers (CEC 2005), the Code of Conduct for Recruitment of Researchers (CEC 2005a), the Bratislava Declaration of Young Researchers (BDYR 2016) or the certification scheme HRS4R, all consider sustainability and career developments of researchers, with a focus on ECIs. There are also local and national initiatives that target the challenges of the early career period in Europe. However, those projects may lack a gender perspective or may need to ensure still an efficient integration of gendered issues in their approaches (e.g., Review of Concordat principles in the United Kingdom). Moreover, ECIs are rarely given a voice in decision-making processes at the institutional level, which complicates the implementation of impactful and sustainable policies in RPOs and research funding organizations.

In consequence, there is an acute need for better informed practices, tools, and measures for integrating specific challenges of ECIs in equality actions in research and innovation institutions with a structural and organizational approach. Those practices include strategies to establish sustainable gender equality at the early career period (ensuring administrative commitment, policy budget, training for staff and others). Better informed practices also imply a greater understanding of ECIs' experiences that must be provided by ECIs themselves. ECIs thus play a major role in this Action and are at the focus of a durable network of cooperation that VOICES seeks to build up.

1.1.2. DESCRIPTION OF THE CHALLENGE (MAIN AIM)

While issues of gender inequalities and working conditions at an early career stage have gained more attention from policymakers over the last decades, ECIs and women are mostly absent in academic leadership, university governance and in European and national decision-making bodies dedicated to research policies. Therefore, most of the time research institutions have little commitment towards those policies, and decisions are not always relevant and fail to grasp the issues at stake.

The **main aim** of the VOICES COST Action is thus to increase visibility of inequalities faced by ECIs from a gender perspective and to promote a sustainable dialogue between ECIs and stakeholders in the research ecosystem at the systemic level (European & national policy-makers) and the institutional level (senior researchers, academic managers) by creating a community of gender equality practitioners composed of various stakeholders (ECIs, researchers, academic managers, organizations) across Europe and beyond.

The **key challenges** addressed by VOICES are listed below, with each challenge addressed by a Working Group (WG), except for the challenge 7 that is common to all WGs:

1. How to enforce policies that ensure better career prospects and career development within and outside academia (ensuring that female ECIs have the pertinent skills, mentoring and networking opportunities needed for intersectoral mobility), as well as appropriate working conditions for female ECIs and a fair and attractive research environment (WG1)
2. How to better integrate ECIs and their interests into decision-making bodies (WG2)
3. How to further share and disseminate knowledge on gender as a research dimension in PhD & post-doc training and R&I content (WG3)
4. How to tackle gender-based violence at early career stage within academia, and to disrupt current sexist discourses that sustain violence in R&I institutions (WG4)
5. How to introduce an intersectional analysis to research policies to account for a more complex understanding of how inequalities play out at early career stage (WG5)
6. How to assess the effectiveness and impact of measures aimed at ECIs and their career progression (WG6)
7. Overall, how to tackle the implementation gap of gender equality plans and make sure they are inclusive of ECIs' specific challenges (all WGs)

VOICES is particularly aligned with the European political agenda regarding gender equality in research. As of 2021, the European Commission proposes the development of gender equality plans with Member States and stakeholders, emphasizing inclusiveness & diversity (ERAC 2020). Moreover, under the Horizon Europe Programme, Gender Equality Plans become an eligibility criterion (The EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, 2020), therefore recommendations and guidance on the effective integration of ECIs' peculiar challenges are essential. Moreover, GENDERACTION's briefing paper on the implementation of European Research Area priority 4 "Gender Equality and Gender Mainstreaming in Research and Innovation" (2018) underlines the need for capacity-building activities for stakeholders involved in the development and implementation of national actions plans to bolster relevant and holistic gender policy development.

1.2. PROGRESS BEYOND THE STATE-OF-THE-ART

1.2.1. APPROACH TO THE CHALLENGE AND PROGRESS BEYOND THE STATE-OF-THE-ART

Three main aspects should be emphasized regarding the innovativeness of this Action's approach:

- (1) VOICES pays peculiar attention to **Early Career Investigators' role in this Action**. ECIs will have direct involvement in VOICES at every level: the Action Management Committee (MC), the Stakeholders Board (see implementation), in leadership positions (e.g., Working Group Leaders) and as active Action participants throughout all Working Groups. The Action will implement a bottom-up process where the experiences and perspectives of ECIs participating will inform the activities and reflections, as well as the content of the various outputs of the Action. ECIs will also benefit from training schools (the integration of gender in research, mentoring programmes) offered by this Action, and whereby they will be able to obtain knowledge on gender, and relevant skills and resources for their career development. **VOICES seeks to act in the present**, investing in ECIs and women, **to ensure sustainable and transformative change** in the research and innovation sector as well as in other working sectors and to shape a better future for ECIs as workforce and as decision makers or innovators. Attracting talented and diverse ECIs and promoting a gender culture will create the conditions to shape a more creative, fair, and attractive research environment.
- (2) The aim of VOICES is to make ECIs' voices heard by other stakeholders. Therefore, a second original feature of this Action is to ensure participation of a **wide range of stakeholders**, such as universities, research centres, funding agencies, policymakers, NGOs, unions representatives, companies, associations, informal networks, to cross perspectives on the issues at stake. All stakeholders are engaged at different levels and may have different agendas with respect to gender equality and ECIs. VOICES provides a space to foster dialogue among those different categories of social actors that constitute or have close links to the academic and research community, to harmonize these different perspectives and to advance mutual learning on gendered inequalities faced by ECIs.
- (3) Following the core principle of the European Research Area, VOICES takes on an integrated approach to the advancement of gender equality for ECIs in the R&I sector. The key challenges fit this multi-dimensional approach by focusing on the three European Research Area priorities regarding gender policies in research: employment and career development (WG1) – with a focus on career mobilities as it represents a critical issue for ECIs –, leadership & decision-making (WG2) and gender as a research dimension (WG3). Another challenge faced by ECIs, closely related to the previously mentioned topics, that needs special attention is gender-based violence, particularly sexual harassment (WG4). Challenging gender stereotypes and transforming institutional culture is also a core dimension of this Working Group. Finally, the Action's innovative approach lies in two cross-cutting topics covered by WG5 and WG6, namely "intersectionality" and "monitoring and evaluation" (indicators) addressing topics of WG1 to WG4. Both transversal approaches align with the priorities of the European Commission Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 and the recommendations of the ERAC Standing Working Group Position Paper on Gender in Research and Innovation for 2020-2030.

1.2.2. OBJECTIVES

1.2.2.1 Research Coordination Objectives

- **RC1:** To ensure effectiveness of Gender Equality Plans in research institutions by **fostering dissemination of good practices regarding equality plans**, which integrate gender-sensitive measures and actions geared towards ECIs, between Action Participants and through a White Paper, dissemination meetings, conferences, and scientific publications.
- **RC2:** To provide **support for Action members in each Working Group in gathering and analysing current actions** and measures geared towards ECIs in their institutions.
- **RC3:** To develop **guidance on how to introduce an intersectional analysis in gender equality plans (GEPs)** to ensure inclusiveness of GEP, for each topic tackled by WGs through transversal workshops / outputs.
- **RC4:** To develop **recommendations for appropriate monitoring and evaluation measures** that consider the early career stage through transversal workshops with all WGs / outputs.
- **RC5:** To promote overall a **better understanding of gender inequalities and discriminations faced by ECIs** considering national and disciplinary context, through knowledge transfer and mutual learning between Action Participants.

1.2.2.2 Capacity-building Objectives

- **CB1:** To create a **sustainable and supportive European community of gender equality plan practitioners** that fosters knowledge sharing, exchanges of good practices and reflections about gendered inequalities at an early career stage, gathering ECIs and other categories within research and innovation, mainly established researchers and management staff, and across all environments where research is carried out (industry, third sector) throughout COST countries.
- **CB2:** To provide a **platform for dialogue and co-construction of policies between ECIs and policy-making bodies** to ensure that the specific gendered experiences of ECIs are heard and considered in national and European policy-making by engaging policy-makers in the Research and Innovation ecosystem and by direct involvement of ECIs in VOICES.
- **CB3:** To engage ECIs **as advocates and change agents for a better research culture** by encouraging transfer of gender knowledge through training schools, by using COST Inclusiveness Target Countries (ITC) conference grants, and by funding of scientific publications jointly authored by ECIs.
- **CB4:** To cooperate and include **non-governmental stakeholders outside academia** in the Action that have expertise and knowledge about discriminations on the workplace, equality and diversity management, feminist policies and career mobilities for scientists to enrich perspectives on the issues tackled.

2. NETWORKING EXCELLENCE

2.1. ADDED VALUE OF NETWORKING IN S&T EXCELLENCE

2.1.1. ADDED VALUE IN RELATION TO EXISTING EFFORTS AT EUROPEAN AND/OR INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

As previously mentioned, the most comprehensive European research project on the topic so far was the GARCIA project (2014-2017). It compared seven European institutions in both Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) departments, analysing gender asymmetries, considering the impacts of structural reforms in R&I. The project designed innovative organisational policies and self-tailored gender action plans for the involved institutions.

Another initiative focused on training is the Gender Equality Academy project aimed at developing and implementing a high-quality capacity-building programme on gender equality in research, innovation, and higher education, but it is not specifically focused on the specific situation of ECIs.

Promotion of ECIs and gender balance are two pillars at COST: these dimensions are integrated in the Open Call process and in running COST Actions. The COST Targeted Network GenderSTE (2012-2016) and some ongoing COST Actions address gender equality, for example EUGAIN: European Network for Gender Balance in Informatics (CA19122, 2020 – 2024), Women on the Move (CA19112, 2020-2024), G2NET: a network for Gravitational Waves, Geophysics and Machine Learning (CA17137, 2018-2022). Additionally, COST organises ad-hoc events on gender equality in R&I to connect COST Actions and stakeholders: in occasion of the International Day of Women and Girls in Science, COST organised in 2020 an event involving several Actions and stakeholders and, similarly, in 2021 a COST Connect event on gender equality in R&I.

Many VOICES Action participants are directly involved in various national or EU-funded gender equality projects and networks. Moreover, they have an active role in associations of transnational networks of actors involved in gender equality projects on specific topics, but none of those projects or networks brings all the stakeholders together around the challenges faced by ECIs.

Therefore, the Action represents an opportunity for bringing all those together and disseminating best practices on ECI-sensitive policies to a large pool of stakeholders, within and outside the academia, also to R&I. The COST Action VOICES, as a “**network of networks**”, represents a huge potential for collaboration and networking. All categories of stakeholders will be represented, and many stakeholders are already committed to gender equality.

2.2. ADDED VALUE OF NETWORKING IN IMPACT

2.2.1. SECURING THE CRITICAL MASS AND EXPERTISE

The Action will gather an **extensive and diverse network** that represents a great opportunity for disseminating best practices on ECIs-sensitive policies from a gender perspective and conveying ECIs voices to a large pool of stakeholders within and outside academia - at the institutional and European & national policy-making level:

- **All types of researchers, from PhD students to experienced researchers will be involved as active participants.**
- **The Action’s focus on ECIs** is reflected first by ECIs’ involvement in elaborating and implementing the Action’s activities. In the initial network of proposers, one of the main co-proposers was an ECI engaged with national and European networks of ECIs. The Action will thus be connected to an extensive network of ECI communities over Europe and beyond. These participants will be active in the Working Groups.
- Critical expertise on the issues at stake regarding ECIs in the research system is then secured by those who have first-hand knowledge of the problems. Even if the number of ECIs participating in

the Action may not be sure to stay in the same institution for the coming years, through networks of ECI and associations at the European level the Action will reach and facilitate the engagement of a **massive ECI participation**.

- The Action will also include **representatives** from research, innovation, academia, governmental and non-governmental institutions, or policymakers. The researchers involved in the initial network of proposers have links to **European policymaking bodies** and can secure the participation of EU representatives and relevant stakeholders such as the national network of **Gender and Diversity Officers** in HE.
- Action participants will encompass a **grand variety of research disciplines** across SSH, STEM, and natural and applied sciences. The initial network of proposers already featured a disciplinary diversity, which will be further developed during the Action implementation. This will enable the Action to consider specific challenges of ECIs for each research field.
- **Non-profit organizations outside academia**: think tanks, associations will provide insights on the issue of equality & diversity management in organizations and on the issue of career mobility of ECIs. Organizations that work for better bridges between research and industry, as well as feminist activist organization will bring relevant perspectives on issue of power struggles on the workplace.
- The Action's network will be **geographically spread**: the initial network of proposers included an important proportion of participants affiliated to institutions in **Eastern European Countries**. They will contribute to address the ECI experiences in these countries (e.g., "brain drain" problem) as well as the strong resistances towards gender equality policies which are increasingly occurring in many Eastern European Countries, the so-called opposition to 'gender ideology' (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017).

2.2.2. INVOLVEMENT OF STAKEHOLDERS

The Action will gather existing **European networks of stakeholders such as women scientists associations and stakeholders** themselves. Action Participants who represent networks will be able to disseminate knowledge and to mobilise network members across Europe, which is a strong asset for the Action.

ECIs will be directly involved in Action leadership positions, including WG leadership. The management of the Action will be organised to include ECIs even in precarious positions and to offer them better perspectives thanks to the experience and network gained in the Action. Researchers' associations, **women scientists' associations** and other academics involved in the Action will be actively involved in the network, also in the role of mentors, advisers, and trainers.

COST ITC will be well represented in the Action and encouraged to take leadership roles.

Research Performing Organisations (RPOs) will be also well represented, universities and public and private research centres already committed to Gender Equality with an experience of EU-funded structural and institutional change projects for many of them, which is another opportunity for further networking with existing or former consortia.

Representatives of **Research Funding Organisations (RFOs)** will be invited to join during the first year of the Action by making use of connections that Action Participants have to **policymakers** at country level. Similarly, R&I stakeholder from the business sector and **entrepreneurs** will be invited to join. When inviting new participants to join the Action, particular attention will be devoted to ensure gender balance, in line with COST policies.

2.2.3. MUTUAL BENEFITS OF THE INVOLVEMENT OF SECONDARY PROPOSERS FROM NEAR NEIGHBOUR OR INTERNATIONAL PARTNER COUNTRIES OR INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

The Action will be open to international collaborations with participants from COST Near Neighbour Countries (NNC) or International Partner Countries (IPC) involved in gender equality projects. When considering expressions of interest to participate, the assessment of mutual benefits will consider, among others, the additional knowledge of gender issues faced by ECIs, the contribution to harmonised indicators to monitor Gender Equality Plans related to ECIs, and the contribution to a common set of tools to improve ECIs situation. Because many ECIs experience mobility across countries, including NNC and IPC, this Action is especially relevant to allow such ECIs to present and better under their experience and specific challenges faced in mobility contexts.

3. IMPACT

3.1. IMPACT TO SCIENCE, SOCIETY AND COMPETITIVENESS, AND POTENTIAL FOR INNOVATION/BREAK-THROUGHS

3.1.1. SCIENTIFIC, TECHNOLOGICAL, AND/OR SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACTS (INCLUDING POTENTIAL INNOVATIONS AND/OR BREAKTHROUGHS)

As **ECIs are the future of the European Research Area (ERA)**, promoting a more diverse research culture will improve the **creativity** through the diversity of ECIs themselves.

Regarding the **research culture**, the expected impact is a shift **towards a more collaborative and inclusive research culture**, creating networks of solidarities, especially for ECIs, through this Action. “Excellence” ideology tends to promote a very competitive, selfish and Darwinist research culture coined by the injunction “publish or perish”. Nonetheless, collaboration, teamwork and solidarity are also important values in research communities to achieve major research projects.

Better inclusion of ECIs in decision making and leadership will bring **more fairness and more secure careers** as it is the interest of RPO and RFO and of the whole society to attract and to retain talents instead of wasting them through an uncertain and risky career path.

Sex and gender as a research dimensions represent a huge potential to rethink and innovate in many fields as the project Gendered Innovations has demonstrated (European Commission, 2013). If ECIs are trained to include sex and gender in research, very promising new research perspectives will emerge with a better relevance to societal needs, especially for health and Health Systems Strengthening (HSS) in the long term.

Impacts on stakeholders:

- **ECIs** will benefit from the experience and the networks involved in the Action, they will gain leadership and participation in decisions shaping the academic and R&I environment. Through

thematic training schools, they will improve their skills to be better prepared for the challenges of a research career.

- **Independent researchers and academics** will benefit from the experience of ECIs to better understand how to attract and retain them and offer fair career paths. It is the interest of all academics to promote a sustainable academic culture where talents are not wasted.
- **RPOs and RFOs** will have a better knowledge of specific issues related to ECIs and will be able to develop policies and measures to ensure a fair, diverse and attractive working environment. This will lead to attracting and retaining talents instead of wasting it. In the short, medium and long term, the diversity of talents shall increase creativity and excellence of research outputs.
- The **R&I sector** has the same interest as RPOs and RFOs: attracting talents and providing a fair, creative and stimulating working environment, especially to female innovators, who are still a minority among innovators.
- **Policymakers** have the responsibility to shape the future for the common good of the society. Implementing policies and laws which consider ECIs situation in R&I and in academia promotes better research, adapted to the needs of societies. It also provides a fair and attractive working environment to people who are the future of the European Research Area.

3.2 MEASURES TO MAXIMISE IMPACT

3.2.1. KNOWLEDGE CREATION, TRANSFER OF KNOWLEDGE AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

The first measure to maximise the impact is the use of **networks** of associations in which Action Participants are involved to reach many other ECIs associations and women scientists associations across Europe. All those networks provide a huge potential to provide relevant inputs and a huge potential for dissemination. They will act as multipliers of VOICES as **a network of networks**.

The second measure is the organisation of the Action as a sustainable **Community of Practice (CoP)**. CoPs have been defined by Wenger (Wenger 1998) as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly". CoPs focus on knowledge sharing, knowledge co-design, learning process among peers and assume that learning is a social process and is situated in a social context. CoPs do not promote a top-down approach of learning, but a constructivist approach based on co-design and knowledge exchange. This concept is especially appropriate to COST Actions and share the same principles. CoPs have already been experimented successfully in the implementation of gender equality policies in the recent ACT project.

Through regular online and face to face workshops, Action participants will create and transfer knowledge regarding the topics of the WG. The Action will set up **a newsletter, a website, an online forum, and social media** to better disseminate and enhance knowledge exchange and co-construction.

Regarding career development, as the Action will promote leadership and training of ECIs, the **Action will help them develop a career and gain self-confidence** thanks to a better knowledge of career issues and thanks to their participation in the improvements of the research environment towards fair, diverse and sustainable career paths. ECIs input is crucial to better understand and better design policies aimed at gender equality in early career stages and later ones.

3.2.2. PLAN FOR DISSEMINATION AND/OR EXPLOITATION AND DIALOGUE WITH THE GENERAL PUBLIC OR POLICY

The Dissemination Plan aims, beyond strengthening the network and gathering best practices, **to create opportunities for ECIs, making sure ECIs voices are heard. Structured dialogue** between ECIs, policymakers, researchers and institutional administrative management in the Working Groups will be a major asset of VOICES. European and national networks of ECIs involved in the VOICES COST Action will allow for an **impactful dissemination** of the Action's activities and outputs. Moreover, the Action website will have a specific "forum" section aimed at fostering the dialogue between ECIs and other stakeholders, and another section with resources. The **dissemination strategy** will be defined by the MC at the beginning of the project and will be updated on a regular basis in the internal progress reports. Action outcomes and main deliverables to be disseminated will be:

- Action website featuring ECIs forum: online platform that will promote the work of the Action, share resources, etc. The Action website will be regularly updated and content dissemination will also be done through social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Medium) to disseminate the Action activities and results and engage more stakeholders.
- White paper about the specific situation of the ECIs and tools to improve gender equality, fairness, and attractiveness of research careers, with inputs of all WGs.
- At least two articles per year will be published on a large public magazine reaching a broad, but relevant audience such as *The Conversation* or other similar magazine.
- At least 2 scientific joint publications per (thematic) WG will be published in Open Access format throughout the Action lifetime. Publications will be co-authored by Action participants and directly resulting from work carried out in the Action.
- Annual training schools organised by different WGs each year (3 training schools during the Action).
- Annual Action conferences (3 conferences, in the second, third and fourth year)
- Introduce the Action to relevant European-wide organisation promoting fairness and equality in career assessment and research organisation', with the aim to raise awareness and dialogue between ECIs and decision makers to promote fairness and equality in career assessment and research organisation. Participation of ECIs to leadership will be promoted.

4. IMPLEMENTATION

4.1. COHERENCE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF THE WORK PLAN

4.1.1. DESCRIPTION OF WORKING GROUPS, TASKS AND ACTIVITIES

The Action will be managed by the Management Committee (MC), supported by a Core Group (CG) to address its challenges (described in section 1.1.2) and facilitate the decision-making. The challenges will be addressed through seven Working Groups featuring four thematic WGs (WG1 to WG4) and two cross-cutting WGs (WG5 to WG6) addressing transversal topics:

- WG1: Employment, Career Development & Mobilities
- WG2: Leadership & Decision-Making
- WG3: Gender as a Research Dimension

- WG4: Sexual Harassment, Gender-Based Violence & Institutional Culture
- WG5: Intersectionality
- WG6: Monitoring & Evaluation



The Action MC will adopt the following policies to support the Action objectives:

- The Action MC will promote a **diverse participation** for each WG including ECIs, senior researchers, policymakers, gender equality officers/administrative staff and a disciplinary and geographical diversity as well. Involvement of ECIs in leadership positions will be strongly supported.
- The Action MC will develop the annual work and budget plan in close collaboration with WGs, collecting input on proposed activities and outputs. As **the Action is bottom-up**, each WG will define its annual activities addressing the planned tasks and contributing to the Action objectives. In defining activities, all WGs will follow the common conceptual framework co-designed during the launching phase of the Action.
- **Each WG will adopt a co-leadership model** to overcome the possible mobility of ECIs (see risk assessment 4.1.3).
- WGs topics are **inter-related topics**: WGs will have the opportunity to engage in transversal reflection during internal WG meetings and the annual Action conferences. Two cross cutting WGs (WG5 intersectionality and WG6 monitoring and evaluation) will also involve participants from the 4 thematic WGs.
- Activities of each working group will be based on CoP methods to foster **mutual learning and knowledge transfer**.
- The **Stakeholders Board** provides an external perspective on the Action and suggests topics, tools or activities to maximise the impact of the Action. It will invite stakeholders from all COST countries to its online meetings, and selected representatives at the main Action meetings. The composition and list of stakeholders will be developed during the first Action meeting and will reflect the diversity of countries, sectors, disciplinary fields. ECIs will represent at least one third of the board.

WG1: EMPLOYMENT, CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND MOBILITIES

Employment opportunities, career progression and mobilities for ECIs are complex issues that require a multidimensional approach. Through workshops, focus groups, and a training school, the WG1 will seek to gather best practices of measures for ECIs- and gender-sensitive **recruitment and evaluation procedures** in RPOs and RFOs. It will also assess measures taken to enhance **working conditions and career progression**, addressing, among other things, the assignment of administrative and less valued tasks in the professional sphere to female ECIs, as well as their main domestic responsibilities. The WG1 will examine efforts taken to tackle **horizontal segregation** across disciplinary fields, while simultaneously ensuring that female ECIs have adequate **transferable skills** and receive **guidance to integrate in other sectors** through an interdisciplinary approach. This may be especially relevant amongst the tech start-up milieu, which itself is a priority under the Horizon Europe Framework Programme. Finally, the group will address the **gendered obstacles encountered amidst the requirement for mobility for ECIs, including mobility along** geographical, disciplinary and intersectoral axes.

TASKS/ ACTIVITIES	DELIVERABLES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conceptual framework, references, and activities to address the challenge • Focus groups, workshops, and training school to explore institutional programmes, share best practices and provide training related to gender equality & career progression of ECIs • Mentoring programme for ECIs, with focus on ITC countries • Contribution to Website: resources for ECIs on career development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint publications in peer-reviewed journal or academic volume • White Paper (contribution, as this output results from the collaboration of all WGs)

WG2: LEADERSHIP & DECISION-MAKING

Inclusive and diverse leadership is needed for a democratic research system and more effective policy-making (McKinsey 2017), yet the share of women in decision-making positions is still low across European R&I Institutions. The proportion of women among heads of institutions in the Higher Education sector in Europe was 21,7% in 2017 (She Figures, 2018) and the presence of ECIs within decision-making bodies and committees remains even lower, if not completely absent or without significant impact. This Working Group seeks to gather best practices that work towards an integration of ECIs in decision-making bodies and the consideration of their specific challenges, from a gender perspective, by institutional leaders. The WG2 has two main objectives: (1) to **bring ECIs, especially female ones, into decision-making bodies**, and also to (2) change the **discussion culture** in those bodies in order to ensure efficient and impactful engagement of ECIs in dialogues and negotiations.

TASKS/ ACTIVITIES	DELIVERABLES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect best practices of institutions (both 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint publications in peer-reviewed journal or

RPOs and RFOs) where ECIs are integrated in decision-bodies committees through workshops	academic volume <ul style="list-style-type: none"> White Paper (contribution, as this output results from the collaboration of all WGs)
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WG3: GENDER AS A RESEARCH DIMENSION

The integration of research as a gender dimension remains an area where least progress has been made regarding the advancement of gender equality in the research sector (ERAC 2020). Given the obvious need to **ensure that the next generation of researchers is well-equipped to make research gender-sensitive**, the main objective of WG3 is the development of a training programme (for face-to-face and online contexts) geared towards ECIs, and especially ECIs in COST ITC. WG3 will draw inspiration from established programmes (e.g. the ‘Gender Academy’ and ‘Gendered Innovations’) and will involve experts (such as the European Commission Expert Group on Gendered Innovations). A second objective is to examine **case studies where gender has been integrated successfully into research**, to circulate best practices of **tools and methods** to integrate gender in all stages of the research process and to identify in participating institutions impactful **gender training** in PhD training programmes. This objective will be achieved through a series of workshops.

TASKS/ ACTIVITIES	DELIVERABLES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development of training programme Case studies where gender has been integrated into research, involving the identification of relevant institutions and ECIs to share experience at dedicated workshops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Joint publications in peer-reviewed journal or academic volume White Paper (contribution, as this output results from the collaboration of all WGs)

WG4: SEXUAL HARASSMENT, GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE & INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE

Women and especially women in precarious working conditions are at greater risk of experiencing sexual harassment and gender-based violence during their research career. Moreover, compounding factors, such as mobility, precarious contracts, unequal relationships of power, increase the probability of sexual violence and make PhD candidates and postdocs high-risk categories. The WG4 seeks (1) to gather **existing practices in participating institutions to support victims, punish aggressors, and prevent sexual violence**. Curative, corrective and preventive work to eradicate gender-based violence is often done on the ground, by feminist researchers, administrative staff, unions and student associations that implement measures (CLASCHEs 2017). Through meetings and workshops, this WG will share and examine those measures in order to bring about best practices to tackle gender-based violence, especially at an early career stage. Since an important part of sexual violence policies consider preventive actions that aim at raising-awareness on the legal framework surrounding sexual violence but also at challenging gender stereotypes and “rape culture” in academia (Buchwald et al. 1993), this Working Groups will also (2) lead reflections on **long-term actions appropriate for a transformative agenda**. Therefore, this WG will work on best practices to **change the overall sexist research culture**, through mapping existing initiatives in participating institutions and with workshops where other stakeholders outside academia will share insights, as well as exchanging with similar projects (e.g. upcoming UNISAFE project).

TASKS/ ACTIVITIES	DELIVERABLES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mapping of the existing protocols for preventing and tackling sexual harassment and gender-based violence in participating institutions • Sharing good practices on impactful sexual violence policies and efficient implementation • Sharing good practices measures aimed at transforming institutional culture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint publications in peer-reviewed journal or academic volume • White Paper (contribution, as this output results from the collaboration of all WGs)

WG5: INTERSECTIONALITY

To better understand the complexity of ECIs' career paths and experiences within research and innovations institutions, intersectionality is so far the most appropriate approach. The WG5 will (1) **explore the multiples dimensions of each topic covered by the four thematic WGs (WG1 to WG4)**. It will examine how gender, interwoven with other systems of power linked to social categories such ethnicity, race, social class, disability, sexual orientation (the European Commission has recently launched its LGBTIQ Equality Strategy), produces **specific vulnerabilities and obstacles for ECIs**. To enable this first step, the WG will provide tools, invite experts, and share best practices on existing actions adopting an intersectional perspective through cross-cutting workshops. Its second objective (2) will then be to translate this co-created knowledge into **concrete and implementable policy measures** to provide recommendations to stakeholders.

TASKS/ ACTIVITIES	DELIVERABLES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mapping of tools, initiatives that address overlapping discriminations • Foster knowledge exchange and mutual learning across WGs that explore intersectional dimensions of ECI's career paths • Facilitating knowledge transfer on intersectionality between the WG group members and stakeholders through cross-cutting workshops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint publications in peer-reviewed journal or academic volume • White Paper (contribution, as this output results from the collaboration of all WGs)

WG6: MONITORING & EVALUATION

Monitoring and evaluation is regarded as a transversal topic of this Action since it overlaps all content related WGs. In Horizon 2020 in total 17 projects dealing specifically with structural change towards gender equity in research performing organizations have been funded. Gender equality plans (GEPs) with targeted measures were designed and implemented in research institutions across Europe. Monitoring and evaluation activities are essential for providing evidence on the effectiveness and assessing the impact of institutional intervention measures. The objective (1) of WG6 is to **bring together existing practical monitoring and evaluation knowledge accumulated in past and**

ongoing gender equality projects, which was already started by some projects (e.g. as integral part of the EFFORTI toolbox, in the GenderTime Monitoring Handbook, or the PLOTINA Monitoring tool); and 2) to make this collected know-how available in an **action-oriented** way for relevant stakeholders, such as practitioners in the field of gender equality or similar, with the help of **knowledge co-production activities**. A special focus, and a third crosscutting WG objective (3), lies on the definition of **adequate impact indicators to identify successful initiatives, which support ECIs** at different levels of their career progression. This will be described in the Action White Paper.

TASKS/ ACTIVITIES	DELIVERABLES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mapping and evaluation of best practice initiatives targeted at ECIs • Establish collection of measures that target specific measures for ECIs • Fostering knowledge exchange between monitoring and evaluation experts from European gender equality actions • Facilitating knowledge transfer on monitoring and evaluation between the WG group members and stakeholders through cross-cutting workshops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint publications in peer-reviewed journal or academic volume • White Paper (contribution, as this output results from the collaboration of all WGs)

4.1.2. DESCRIPTION OF DELIVERABLES AND TIMEFRAME

Deliverable	Description	Month(s) of Delivery	Contribution / Responsibility
D1	Action website with the collaborative platform, online repository and forum, and social media accounts: Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.	Launch at M4, updated regularly	All WGs / Core Group
D2	Detailed communication and dissemination plan, to be regularly updated (at M19 and M31, included in periodic progress report, and M43 included in final report)	M6	All WGs / Core Group
D3	Action Newsletters	launched at M6 and published every 3 months	All WGs / Core Group
D4	Report on the common co-designed conceptual framework of the Action to be used by all WGs.	M8	All WGs / Core Group
D5	Four articles published on large public magazines reaching a broad, but relevant audience such as <i>The</i>	M24	All WGs / Core Group

	<i>Conversation</i> or other similar magazine. Additional four articles are to be published until the end of the Action.		
D6	Plan for VOICES Action Sustainability. Networking and collaboration beyond the Action lifetime.	M43	All WGs / Action MC
D7	White Paper aimed at decision-makers and the general public presenting the Action recommendations and outcomes	M46	All WGs / Core Group
D8	Academic volume in open access aimed at academics, presenting the Action outcomes and recommendations	M46	All WGs / Core Group
D9	At least 8 joint publications in selected peer-reviewed open access journals and international conferences.	M48	All WGs

The Action will be also producing several other internal reports and deliverables, contributing to the planning of the activities (yearly work and budget plans) as well as to the monitoring of progress of the Action on COST Policies implementation (M12) and towards its objectives (progress report at M24 and final report at 48).

Milestones

Milestone	Description	Month(s) of Delivery / periodicity
MS1	Online CG Meetings	Every month, starting M2
MS2	Yearly Face-to-Face MC Meetings	Every year: M12, M24, M36, Final: M48
MS3	Online MC Meetings	2 online MC Meetings per year, (total of 3 MC Meetings per year, 2 online and 1 F-to-F: online meetings on M4 and M8, M16 and M20, M28 and M32, M40 and M44)
MS4	9 Joint WG Meetings (4 meetings are joint with MC Meetings)	Every 6 months, joint with MC Meetings when possible M3, M9, M12, M18, M24, M30, M36, M42, M48
MS5	Online WG Meetings	Every 2 months, starting M1, when no face-to-face WG Meeting

MS6	3 Action Conferences	Every year, in the second half of the grant period, M20, M32, M44
MS7	3 Training Schools	Every year, except the last one, during summer, M10, M22, M34
MS8	4 Internal reports	Every year, before the finalisation of each annual work and budget plan: M10, M22, M34, M46

4.1.3. RISK ANALYSIS AND CONTINGENCY PLANS

Risks in the VOICES Action are defined as "unfulfilled specified requirements". The main task in risk management is to identify risks at an early stage, to analyse causes and impacts of risks, to minimize possible negative deviations and to optimize positive changes to reach the aims of the Action. Additionally, risk management will be enforced during the Action by an analysis of the critical path of the project. For the purposes of risk assessment, the Action MC will request to each WGs to identify and describe the initial risk that may affect the development within that WG, and to propose possible mitigation measures.

The following main risks have been identified:

Risk description	Probability of occurrence	Mitigation Plan
Failure in involving ECIs in leadership roles because of mobility issues, precariousness, or lack of experience	high	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Continuous support to ECIs through mentoring, peer-support schemes, training, financial and technical resources. 2. Co-leadership model for each WG to ensure a smooth transition if one of the WG leaders leaves for some reason.
Failure in co-operation	medium	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Efficient communication mechanisms within the Action: Regular face-to-face and online Meetings 2. Flexible reallocation of activities and tasks to quickly solve problems if they occur 3. Core Group intervention to propose solutions
Failure in involving specific stakeholders	medium	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The MC will identify all opportunities among members' networks. 2. The stakeholders board will identify stakeholders to be contacted by the Action MC to join the Action.
Failure in meeting MoU objectives in full:	low	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Actively monitor the progress towards each of the Action objectives. 2. If deviations occur, the CG will enable rapid strategic decisions.

		3. The respective WG leaders will be responsible for informing the Action CG as soon as such a situation occurs and to decide on a set of countermeasures.
External circumstances as a continuing world pandemic or any major political event changing the environment of the Action	low	<p>1. In case of continuing pandemic, CG will prepare alternative scenarios to move all activities online. In any case, due to the constraints of international collaboration, many activities already use online tools.</p> <p>2. In case of major political events, the MC will decide an alternative work programme to overcome the new situation and support as far as possible the impacted Action Participants. Most probably, few countries would be impacted, allowing others to support them. The probability seems very low to have all Europe impacted at the same time.</p>

4.1.4. GANTT DIAGRAM

The COST Action activities will take place throughout the four years of the Action. Conceptually, the Action will go through a launching phase (M1 to M6), gaining speed during the following three years (M7 to M42) and entering a final consolidation phase in the last 6 months (M43 to M48).

These phases are described in the Gantt diagram below, in connection to the main Action milestones and deliverables.

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