Integrating Gender Dimension

in MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowships

What evaluators look for — and what goes wrong

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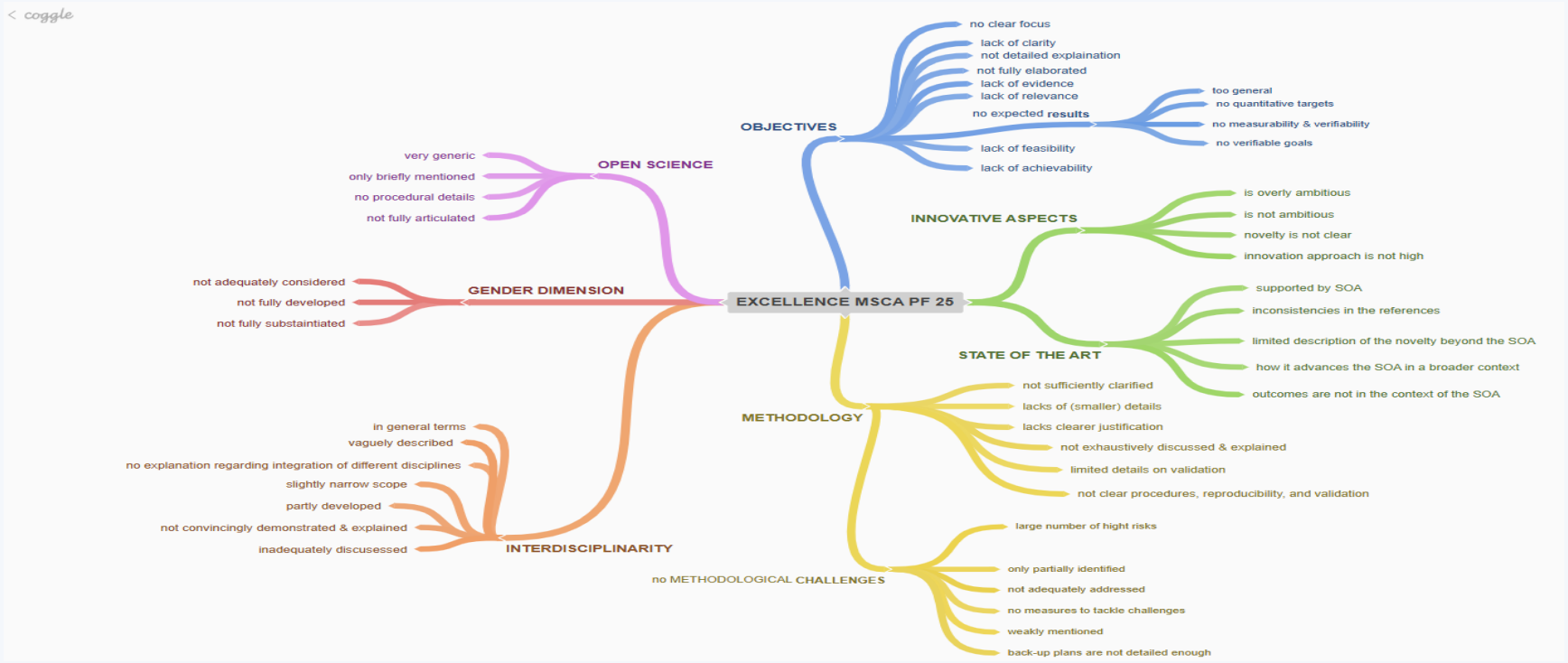
Where does gender dimension sit in the bigger picture?

From Stojan Sorčan's presentation — Excellence criterion: recurring weak points in MSCA PF 2025 evaluation



Why does this matter for your proposal?

①

It affects your score

Gender dimension is evaluated under Excellence — the highest-weighted criterion. Weak handling lowers your score on scientific quality, not as a side note.

②

Evaluators flag it explicitly

If your proposal scores below 5 on Excellence, evaluators must list the shortcomings. Gender dimension comments appear in your Evaluation Summary Report — visible to you and your institution.

③

It is easy to get right

The gender dimension section is short. One well-argued paragraph is enough — if it addresses the right things.

Bottom line: a strong gender dimension section does not take long to write well. A weak one costs you points you cannot recover elsewhere.

First — let's clear up the most common confusion

✗ COMMON MISTAKE

Gender dimension

=

Counting women & men
in the research team

✓ CORRECT UNDERSTANDING

Gender dimension

=

Integrating sex/gender
analysis into research
content & methodology

Gender Dimension — the Horizon Europe definition

SEX		GENDER
Biological characteristics Genes · Physiology · Morphology (primary & secondary sex characteristics)	↔ interact & influence each other	Socio-cultural processes Behaviours · Roles · Norms Values · Products · Technologies (how individuals interact with their environment)

Goal: 'Fixing the knowledge' — research that ignores sex/gender variables produces incomplete or biased results

What this means in your MSCA PF proposal

Section 1.2 of the proposal form: Soundness of the proposed methodology (including interdisciplinary approaches, consideration of the **gender dimension and other diversity aspects** if relevant for the research project)

When you reach this question in the proposal form, you have two options:

PATH A

Show it is relevant to your research

Explain how sex or gender affects:
— your research questions
— how you collect or analyse data
— how you interpret results

Most researchers will take this path.

PATH B (harder than it looks)

Argue that it does not apply

Write a short, argued explanation of why sex and gender are not relevant — with evidence from the literature.

Not acceptable: 'not applicable'
Not acceptable: one sentence with no reasoning.

Other diversity aspects also apply to both paths: consider age, disability, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, geographic origin — any characteristic that may affect how your research subjects experience or interact with your topic.

"But is gender really relevant to MY research?"

The honest answer: in most research, yes — often in ways researchers haven't considered.

Computer Science / AI

Training data often reflects historical gender biases. Facial recognition performs worse on women and non-binary people. Who uses the system matters.

Environmental Science

Women and men have different exposure patterns, mobility habits, and energy use behaviours. Climate adaptation affects them differently.

Biomedical / Health

Drug dosages historically based on male body models. Symptoms of the same disease present differently across sexes. Sex disaggregation in data is expected.

Engineering / Materials

Protective equipment, vehicle safety systems, and ergonomic tools have been designed to male-standard body metrics — with documented safety consequences.

Social Sciences / Economics

Almost always directly relevant — labour markets, policy impact, behaviour, and institutions are all gendered. Intersectionality adds further complexity.

Basic / Fundamental Research

The one area where non-relevance can genuinely be argued — but only with justification. The moment results have any application potential, revisit this.

The 3 most common negative evaluator comments

01

Not adequately considered

Gender dimension confused with team balance — or simply ignored. Root cause: not understanding what is being asked.

02

Not fully developed

Mentioned but not operationalized. Applicant shows awareness but doesn't embed it in the research design or methodology.

03

Not fully substantiated

Claimed but not evidenced. Statements about relevance (or non-relevance) not backed by literature or methodological reasoning.

01 | "Not adequately considered"

What this means:

The applicant either ignored the gender dimension entirely or confused it with gender balance in the team.

✗ Weak proposal examples

"We will ensure gender balance in the research team."
"Gender is not relevant to this project." (no justification provided)
An AI proposal training a model on user behaviour data — no mention of gender bias in training data.

✓ What a better version looks like

"This study trains a machine learning model on mobility data collected from urban populations. Gender is relevant: research shows that women and men exhibit systematically different mobility patterns due to care responsibilities, safety concerns, and unequal access to transport. Training data will be examined for gender imbalances and results will be disaggregated by sex to avoid encoding existing inequalities into the model."

02 | "Not fully developed"

What this means:

Gender is mentioned but not operationalized — the applicant shows awareness but stops short of embedding it in the methodology.

✗ Weak proposal examples

"We will consider gender where applicable throughout the project."
"Data will be disaggregated by sex." (no further analysis of intersecting factors)

✓ What a better version looks like

"This project studies workplace injury patterns in construction. Data will be collected disaggregated by sex and analysed in relation to gender roles (task allocation, risk culture, reporting behaviour), not sex alone. We acknowledge that simply splitting by biological sex would miss the social dynamics that drive exposure to risk — intersecting factors including age, employment status, and seniority will be included in the analysis."

03 | "Not fully substantiated"

What this means:

Claims about relevance — or non-relevance — are asserted without evidence, literature, or methodological reasoning.

✗ **Weak proposal examples**

"Gender is not relevant to materials science research." (no argument, no literature)
"Gender differences exist in this area and will be addressed." (which differences? which literature? what will you address?)

✓ **What a better version looks like**

"A review of the literature (insert reference to source) confirms that personal protective equipment in this sector has historically been designed to male body proportions. This project will test performance outcomes using both male-standard and female-standard parameters, addressing a documented gap with direct safety implications. Sex-disaggregated performance data will be reported in all deliverables."

Pre-submission checklist

3 questions every applicant should answer before submitting

1

Is sex/gender relevant to my research?

Check the literature in your field. If you claim it's not relevant, argue it — don't just assert it.

2

How does it affect my methodology?

Be specific: data collection, sampling, instruments, analysis approach. "Will consider" is not an answer.

3

Where is my evidence?

Reference existing sex/gender analysis in your field. Use Gendered Innovations (genderedinnovations.stanford.edu) as a starting point.

Key resources

METHODOLOGY & CASE STUDIES

- **Gendered Innovations** — *genderedinnovations.stanford.edu*
  Case studies by field (health, AI, engineering, transport). Co-produced with EC. Good starting point for any researcher asking, 'how is gender relevant to MY research?'.
- **Gendered Innovations 2 — EC Policy Report (2020)** — *research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu*
  Methods for sex, gender & intersectional analysis across HE clusters. Free PDF.

EC / REA OFFICIAL GUIDANCE

- **REA: Gender in EU Research & Innovation** — *rea.ec.europa.eu/gender-eu-research-and-innovation_en*
  Official REA page — definitions, GEP requirements, gender dimension vs gender balance.
- **Horizon Europe Programme Guide (pp. 16-20)** — *ec.europa.eu — Programme Guide PDF*
  Evaluator-facing guidance on gender dimension and inclusiveness under Excellence criterion.
- **EC RTD: Gender equality provisions in HE (2026)** — *EC Cluster 2 Info Day presentation, March 2026*
  Includes new 2025 Framework for inclusive gender analysis in R&I content.

TOOLS & STATISTICS

- **EIGE GEAR Tool** — *eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/toolkits/gear*
  Step-by-step toolkit for GEPs and gender mainstreaming in Horizon Europe.
- **She Figures 2024 (EC DG RTD)** — *research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu*
  Latest EU-wide statistics on gender equality in R&I — useful for contextualising arguments.