GENDER EQUALITY PLAN

2026 - 2028



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1. Helixconnect Europe Gender Equality Plan

1.1 Introduction

Helixconnect Europe's Gender Equality Plan (GEP) is a strategic document that outlines our commitment for the next two years (2026 – 2028) to address gender inequalities and promote diversity within our organization. Our focus extends beyond gender, encompassing various aspects such as age, culture, physical ability, sexual orientation, multilingualism, and more. In a time when societal norms are evolving rapidly, we recognize the significance of fostering an inclusive community that not only rejects discrimination but actively embraces differences as ethical values and valuable resources that can drive positive change.

The GEP serves as a powerful tool to counteract the adverse impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, which studies indicate disproportionately affected women and risked reversing the progress made in recent years. As an institution that works with other higher institutions such as universities, vocational schools, NGOs, innovators, etc. it is our duty to offer a path free from biases and stereotypes, one that values individuality and uniqueness. Our goal is to move away from preconceived notions and towards a society that appreciates talent without creating unnecessary divisions, ensuring that no one is left behind. We believe that by cultivating an inclusive and equitable environment within our community, we can also export these best practices, innovative perspectives, and impactful ideas globally.

The Gender Equality Plan is not merely a response to a European requirement but a passionate commitment to the call of the Research and Innovation Directorate-General of the European Commission. This call mandates that all public institutions, including our organization, must have a GEP to access research funding under the Horizon Europe program. Our GEP publicly reaffirms our dedication to the principles of gender equality and intersectionality, which are core values shared by European educational institutions. It also leverages the collective efforts of national and international networks working on these issues, presenting concrete actions for implementation.

This document builds upon existing policies pursued by Helixconnect Europe while exploring new goals and strategies to overcome persistent obstacles to gender equality and diversity. The GEP spans a two year period (2023 - 2025), and we intend to align it with our

Strategic Plan in the years to come, taking into account the annual analysis presented in the Gender Equality Report and the Positive Action Plan (PAP) proposed by the Guarantee Committee. Our aim is to create an inclusive and communicative learning and work environment where all individuals are treated equitably, fostering trust, a sense of belonging, shared goals, and ultimately contributing to the growth of our entire institution.

1.2 Gender Equality in Research and Innovation

Gender equality is a core value of the European Union and a vital component of the United Nations' sustainable development goals (SDGs). Within the context of research and learning, gender equality is imperative to ensure that research and innovation systems contribute to democratic and equal societies. Additionally, studies have shown a positive correlation between a country's innovation capacity and its gender equality index. While the reasons for this correlation are multifaceted, gender equality brings multiple advantages to research and innovation:

- **Enhanced Quality and Impact:** Gender equality ensures that research and innovation are representative of and pertinent to the entire spectrum of society, thereby improving their quality and impact.
- **Positive Work Environments:** Promoting gender equality creates conducive work environments that facilitate high-quality research and learning. It maximizes the potential and talents of all staff and students.
- **Talent Attraction and Retention:** By assuring all staff that their abilities will be acknowledged fairly and appropriately, gender equality attracts and retains talent in the field of research and innovation.

Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) is a framework that encourages organizations to align their research and innovation processes with societal needs, values, and ethical considerations. It emphasizes the importance of involving various stakeholders, including the public, in decision-making and ensuring that innovation is not only technically sound but also socially and environmentally responsible.

At Helixconnect Europe, we are committed to the principles of Responsible Research and Innovation, and we integrate this concept into all our innovation processes. This means that in addition to pursuing technological advancements, we actively engage with

stakeholders, consider ethical implications, and aim to create innovations that have a positive impact on society while minimizing any potential negative consequences. By applying RRI, we ensure that our innovation efforts are not only cutting-edge but also aligned with the broader goals of sustainability, inclusivity, and ethical responsibility.

2. Gender Equality Policy (GEP) Framework

2.1 Legal basis

Gender equality is a core principle deeply embedded in the legal and policy framework of the European Union (EU). Several fundamental EU legal documents, such as Articles 2 and 3(3) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), and Articles 21 and 23 of the Gender equality are a foundational value of the European Union (EU), anchored in its primary law and progressively reinforced through a growing body of secondary legislation and policy strategy. The legal and institutional framework governing this commitment has been significantly updated since 2020, reflecting the EU's renewed ambition to achieve a Union of Equality.

At the level of primary law, Articles 2 and 3(3) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) establish gender equality as a foundational value and objective of the Union. Article 8 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) mandates the elimination of gender inequalities and the promotion of equality between women and men across all EU activities. Articles 21 and 23 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union further prohibit discrimination on grounds of sex and guarantee the right to equality between men and women in all areas.

At the level of strategic policy, the overarching framework is now the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2026–2030, adopted by the European Commission on 5 March 2026. Building on the previous 2020–2025 Strategy and the Roadmap for Women's Rights endorsed by all EU Member States in 2025, the new Strategy sets out 30 concrete measures to empower women and girls, actively engage men and boys, oppose any backtracking on fundamental rights, and accelerate progress towards a truly gender-equal Europe. It embeds gender equality across every aspect of life: online and offline, from education and health to work and public life, and addresses modern threats such as gender-based cyberviolence and AI-related risks that particularly affect women. For the first time, women's health is included as a dedicated policy area, with a flagship joint initiative with the World Health Organization to improve the quality and accessibility of women's healthcare. The Strategy also introduces a new Action Plan on Women in Research, Innovation and Startups, with the aim of making the EU the most attractive place to work for women in these fields by 2030. The Horizon Europe programme, under which Helixconnect Europe operates, directly links to this evolving strategic framework by requiring all eligible public bodies to have a Gender Equality Plan (GEP) as a condition for

accessing research and innovation funding.

A landmark development in the area of equal pay is Directive (EU) 2023/970 of 10 May 2023, which strengthens the application of the principle of equal pay for equal work or work of equal value through pay transparency and reinforced enforcement mechanisms. Member States have until 7 June 2026 to transpose this directive into national law. Key obligations include pre-employment pay disclosure, employer reporting on gender pay gaps, and mandatory joint pay assessments where a gap of 5% or more is identified. Notably, this directive introduces intersectional discrimination — the combination of gender with other grounds such as race, ethnicity, or disability — into EU equality law for the first time.

Two further directives adopted in May 2024 strengthen national equality body infrastructure: Council Directive (EU) 2024/1499 and Directive (EU) 2024/1500, which set standards for the independence, mandate, and effectiveness of equality bodies in the fields of gender equality and equal treatment more broadly. These are complemented by the Directive on Gender Balance on Corporate Boards (2022/2381/EU), adopted in November 2022 and entered into application in December 2024, which requires large listed companies to achieve at least 40% representation of the under-represented gender among non-executive board members by 30 June 2026.

Concerning violence against women, Directive (EU) 2024/1385, adopted on 14 May 2024, represents the first comprehensive EU legal instrument to tackle violence against women and domestic violence. It criminalises specific forms of physical and online violence, including non-consensual sharing of intimate images and cyber-stalking, and requires Member States to put in place comprehensive measures for victim protection, support, and access to justice. Furthermore, the EU's accession to the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention was concluded in June 2023, binding the EU to its ambitious standards for preventing and combating gender-based violence.

The existing legislative framework continues to apply, including Directive 2006/54/EC on equal treatment in employment and occupation, Directive 2004/113/EC on equal treatment in access to goods and services, and the Work-Life Balance Directive (2019/1158/EU), which introduced paid paternity leave, strengthened rights to parental and carers' leave, and supported flexible working arrangements for parents and carers across all genders.

At the global level, gender equality remains a cross-cutting commitment under the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Sustainable Development Goal 5

specifically targets the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, while gender mainstreaming is embedded across all 17 SDGs. Helixconnect Europe's Gender Equality Plan is fully aligned with this international framework and with the EU's legal obligations as set out above.

2.2 The Gender Advisory Board

At Helixconnect Europe, we are committed to promoting gender equality and fostering a diverse and inclusive workplace.

The Gender Advisory Board is also an essential component of Helixconnect Europe's commitment to promoting gender equality and fostering an inclusive work environment. It serves as a strategic body responsible for advising and guiding the organization on matters related to gender equality. The Gender Advisory Board is composed of a diverse group of individuals within the organization, representing different departments and roles with MA Lola Vaskovic Bojovic serving as Gender Officer. This diversity ensures a wide range of perspectives and experiences are considered when addressing gender equality issues.

The Gender Advisory Board collaborates closely with other departments and teams within Helixconnect Europe to ensure that gender equality is integrated into the fabric of the organization. Through the efforts of the Gender Advisory Board, Helixconnect Europe aims to create an inclusive workplace where all employees are treated equitably, and their unique contributions are recognized and valued. The board's initiatives and policies are designed not only to meet legal requirements but also to foster a culture of respect, diversity, and empowerment.

The Gender Equality Plan outlines our strategy and actions to ensure equal opportunities, fair treatment, and the full participation of all employees, regardless of their gender, in our community. As we mainly work on Erasmus+ and Horizon projects, we recognize the importance of diversity and inclusion in driving innovation and achieving our mission.

2.3 Helixconnect Europe GEP Action plan

Thus, we plan to implement gender equality policies based on these steps:

1. Leadership and Commitment:

a. **Leadership Commitment**: The company's leadership team will lead by example in promoting gender equality and inclusion within the organization.

2. Recruitment and Hiring:

a. **Unbiased Job Descriptions**: Ensure that job descriptions are free from gender bias and promote diverse candidates.

b. **Diverse Candidate Pools**: Actively seek a diverse pool of candidates for job openings through various recruitment channels.

3. Career Development:

a. **Training and Development**: Provide equal access to training and development opportunities for all employees, regardless of gender.

b. **Mentorship**: Establish mentorship programs to support the career growth of underrepresented genders.

c. **Promotion and Advancement**: Monitor promotions and advancement to ensure gender equity, and address any disparities.

4. Work-Life Balance:

a. **Flexible Work Arrangements**: Offer flexible work arrangements, including remote work options, to support work-life balance for all employees.

b. **Parental Leave**: Provide equitable parental leave policies for all genders to promote caregiving responsibilities.

5. Equal Pay:

a. **Pay Equity Analysis**: Regularly review and analyze pay structures to identify and address gender pay gaps.

b. **Salary Transparency**: Promote transparency regarding compensation and benefits to ensure fairness.

6. Reporting and Accountability:

a. **Regular Reporting**: Publish regular reports on the company's progress toward gender equality goals and initiatives.

b. **Accountability**: Hold managers and teams accountable for promoting gender equality within their respective areas of responsibility.

7. Harassment and Discrimination:

a. **Anti-Harassment Policy**: Implement and enforce a comprehensive anti-harassment policy that ensures a safe and respectful work environment for all employees.

b. **Reporting Mechanisms**: Establish clear and confidential reporting mechanisms for incidents of harassment or discrimination.

8. Diversity and Inclusion Programs:

a. **Employee Resource Groups**: Encourage the formation of employee resource groups that promote diversity and inclusion.

b. **Diverse Suppliers**: Support and promote relationships with diverse suppliers and partners.

9. Monitoring and Evaluation:

a. **Regular Assessment**: Continuously assess and evaluate the effectiveness of gender equality initiatives and adjust them as needed.

b. **Feedback Mechanisms**: Encourage feedback from employees to inform improvement efforts.

10. Communication and Awareness:

a. **Internal Communication**: Regularly communicate updates and progress on gender equality initiatives to all employees.

b. **External Communication**: Highlight our commitment to gender equality in our external communications and partnerships.

3. End notes

In line with Helixconnect Europe's mission to foster innovation, facilitate growth, and promote integration among innovators, NGOs, industry, and government, our Gender Equality Policy is a fundamental component of our commitment to creating an inclusive and equitable work environment. We recognize that as we bridge the gap between Eastern Europe, Western Balkans, and the global innovation systems, it is imperative to ensure that our organization upholds the principles of diversity, gender equality, and fairness in all our endeavors.

Our work, characterized by a hands-on approach to innovation and knowledge and technology transfer, demands that we embrace modern technologies and organizational performance frameworks. These transformative processes necessitate a conscious effort to promote gender equality and diversity as essential drivers of innovation and sustainable impact. At Helixconnect Europe, we believe that the inclusion of diverse perspectives, experiences, and talents is key to achieving our mission effectively and ethically.

To support our commitment to gender equality, we operate under the guidance of an international advisory board comprising influential figures from industry, innovation, and policy-making sectors. This collaborative approach ensures that our gender equality initiatives are tailored, practical, and in alignment with global best practices. We understand that fostering gender equality not only benefits our organization but also contributes to the broader goal of creating a fair and responsible impact on society.

By integrating our Gender Equality Policy with our core mission and values, we aim to create a workplace that values and celebrates the unique contributions of every individual, regardless of their gender. Our commitment to gender equality is not just a standalone initiative but an integral part of our strategy to drive innovation, promote growth, and facilitate meaningful integration within the innovation ecosystem.

Together, through our dedication to gender equality and inclusivity, we will continue to build a dynamic and forward-thinking organization that thrives on the diverse talents of its workforce, upholds ethical principles, and contributes positively to the communities we serve.