Is the European Green Deal really leaving no-one behind?
Exploring the intersection of gender with age, disability and migrant status

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Key findings

– Climate change mitigation policies introduced by the European Green Deal, necessary to reduce carbon emissions, will disproportionately affect people in vulnerable situations, particularly those subject to multiple disadvantages because of factors such as gender, age, disability, racial or ethnic background, migrant or socio-economic status.

– While women in general are likely to face disadvantages in the green transition context, some women are particularly vulnerable due to the cumulative effect of various characteristics. This includes women with disabilities, older women and migrant women.

– Current EU ‘just transition’ frameworks and related national plans scarcely contain concrete measures to address the effects of gender and intersecting inequalities, although some positive examples can be found in the national Recovery and Resilience Plans of a few countries.

– A genuine commitment to a just transition instead requires adequate funding and targeted measures that support the most vulnerable, taking into account the cumulative effects of multiple disadvantages. Further research and comparable data are necessary to enable us to understand the factors leading to (intersecting) vulnerabilities, which should feed into the design of such measures.
Introduction

The climate change mitigation policies introduced by the European Green Deal (EGD) and accompanying policy packages will affect some social groups more than others, threatening to exacerbate inequalities on various axes (Galgóczi and Akgüç 2023). The employment effects of the industrial transformation driven by green transition policies and distributive effects related to energy price increases are already becoming apparent, and hitting people in vulnerable situations hardest (ibid). Although it is not the only possible definition, the 16 June 2022 Council Recommendation on ensuring a fair transition towards climate neutrality defines ‘people and households in vulnerable situations’ as:

‘(T)hose who, independently of the green transition, face or are at risk of facing a situation of limited access to quality employment, including self-employment and/or to education and training and/or to a decent standard of living and essential services, implying low capacities to adapt to the consequences of the green transition.’ (para (3)(d))

Factors such as gender, age, race or ethnicity, disability, migration and socio-economic status or living in a rural area – among others – can thus be determinants of vulnerability. Climate policies may also create new vulnerabilities. For example, workers in fossil fuel industries are exposed to new risks arising from the transition to net-zero, and are included in the category of ‘people and households most affected by the green transition’ defined by the Recommendation (para (3)(c)).

Crucially, some people are subject to multiple vulnerabilities that have a cumulative effect, putting them in an even more precarious position than others with whom they share some, but not all characteristics that contribute to disadvantages in the green transition context. For example, a single mother from a lower socio-economic group will find it harder to be able to afford to keep her home adequately warm than a wealthier dual-parent household, whereas an older worker with a disability in the coal mining sector is likely to face greater challenges than a younger worker without a disability in finding a new job. Unless accompanied by targeted support measures, climate policies will impose the heaviest social and economic pressures where multiple axes of inequality intersect, threatening to further marginalise the most vulnerable. The same applies to the physical effects of climate change, such as extreme weather events and environmental degradation.

Efforts to ensure a ‘just, fair and inclusive’ transition must therefore look at the effects of climate policy through an intersectional lens and include targeted measures to distribute resources and opportunities to those who need them most. In this policy brief, we explore the intersection of gender with age, disability and migrant status, highlighting how the presence of two or more sources of vulnerability contributes to particular disadvantages, focusing here on the effects of climate policy rather than climate change itself. We then examine some of the main EU instruments intended to ensure a just transition, and the Territorial Just Transition Plans (TJTPs) and national Recovery and
Resilience Plans (RRPs) of seven Member States, which in our view do not adequately capture the effects of intersecting inequalities. We conclude with some recommendations on how gender and intersectional concerns can be better incorporated into just transition policies.

The position of women facing multiple vulnerabilities

The most recent European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) Gender Equality Index report highlights the disadvantages faced by women in the green transition context (EIGE 2023). Women are consistently underrepresented in jobs that are key to the green transition: for example, only 24 per cent of employees in the energy sector are women. While the representation of women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) jobs is only two percentage points lower than that of men across the EU, this still corresponded to about three million fewer women among scientists and engineers employed in 2022. Besides concerns about working conditions that may be discouraging women from taking such jobs, a significant part of this difference could be explained by severe underrepresentation of women in STEM fields in tertiary education (Galgóczi and Akgüç 2023); women indeed made up only one-quarter of new STEM entrants at university in 2021 (OECD 2023). Women are similarly underrepresented in decision-making positions related to the green transition: less than half (44 per cent) of senior administrators in national ministries and only 30 per cent of members of parliamentary committees working on environmental issues or climate change are women (EIGE 2023). Owing to gender gaps in hourly pay and income, women are at a higher risk of poverty than men, including energy poverty.

An intersectional lens is important, however. There appears to be a rising trend, as elderly women are more likely than younger women to be at risk of poverty (AROP) or social exclusion (AROPE), especially since 2018 (Figure 1), while a contrasting situation is observed among men (elderly men are less likely than working age men to be at risk of poverty or social exclusion). This is against the background of a gender pension gap (for people 65 years of age or over) of 26 per cent in the EU27 in 2022 (EU-SILC). Thus, elderly women are more likely to experience energy poverty than younger women and elderly men. Older women workers also face challenges, such as combined age and gender discrimination, a high burden of care responsibilities and lack of digital skills (EIGE 2022), making job transitions harder.
Figure 1  Differences in AROPE by age groups and gender

Source: authors’ elaboration based on Eurostat data extracted from https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_peps01n__custom_9970343/default/table?lang=en

Women with disabilities also face particular disadvantages. In 2020, only 20 per cent of women with disabilities were in full-time employment, compared with 29 per cent of men with disabilities, and 48 per cent of women and 64 per cent of men without disabilities (EIGE 2023). From those groups, women with disabilities have the lowest monthly income and the highest risk of poverty, exposing them to negative distributional effects of green transition policies. We also looked at in-work AROP rates of men and women with disabilities, including some or severe levels of disability resulting in activity limitation (Figure 2), and also comparing employees aged 18+ and older employees aged 55–64. The data suggests that in 2022 women aged 55–64 with disabilities were on average 14.9 per cent more likely to be in-work and at risk of poverty than men of similar age and disability status, but also that this gender gap is higher than that experienced by younger women with disabilities, pointing to the cumulative effects of three intersecting vulnerabilities.

Figure 2  Gender gap in in-work AROP for individuals with disability by age groups

Notes: authors’ elaboration based on Eurostat data extracted from https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/hlth_dpe050__custom_9972881/default/table?lang=en
Finally, we looked at AROPE rates at the intersection of gender, migration status (based on country of birth) and age. Regardless of gender, foreign-born persons have higher AROPE rates than native-born persons (34.8 versus 21.4 per cent), but there is also a gender gap in favour of men regardless of country of birth (9.8 and 5.6 per cent, for native- and foreign-born respectively) based on Eurostat data for the EU27 among persons aged 18+ between 2011 and 2020. Like older women and women with disabilities, migrant women face the challenge of multiple forms of discrimination (gender, migrant background, but often also racial discrimination), as well as other factors such as language barriers and various frictions when transferring their human capital to destination country labour markets. Looking across age groups, Figure 3 shows that women above 55 years of age from migrant background are more likely to be at risk of poverty and social exclusion than elderly native-born women, on average. The picture is fairly similar for men, although with lower rates overall than women. Interestingly, among migrant women, those of working age (aged 25–54) have higher AROPE rates than those aged 55+, unlike native-born women. These findings indicate a need for further research to help us to understand the underlying reasons for observed heterogeneities.

Figure 3  AROPE rates of native- versus foreign-born women by age groups, EU27 (%), averages over 2011–2020

These are only some of the possible intersections of different dimensions of inequality. Further research and data are necessary to explore the effects of other combinations of these and other axes of vulnerability – such as racial and ethnic background, where data is currently scarce – and their cumulative effects.
The sensitivity of EU ‘just transition’ measures to gender and intersecting inequalities

Alongside these empirical observations, we conducted a textual analysis of the main European Green Deal instruments intended to support vulnerable groups in the green transition, to see whether they: (i) mention gender, age, disability, and migrant status in their preamble; (ii) include any obligations or conditionalities related to supporting those groups; and (iii) acknowledge intersecting inequalities. We also included the 2021 Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) Regulation. Although the latter is not part of the EGD, it has proved to be an important instrument in supporting both green and social policies (Theodoropoulou et al. 2022). The results are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1  Main EU just transition instruments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>Gender, age, disability and migrant status mentioned in preamble?</th>
<th>Provisions or conditionalities related to these characteristics?</th>
<th>Intersecting inequalities recognised in preamble or provisions?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Just Transition Fund Regulation</td>
<td>Mentions gender equality/ women, people with disabilities, and child- and elderly care</td>
<td>Child- and elderly care mentioned as an example of a social inclusion measure for which Member States may use funds</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Climate Fund Regulation</td>
<td>Mentions gender equality/ women and persons with disabilities</td>
<td>National Social Climate Plans should set out, where relevant, an explanation of how measures and investments are aimed at addressing gender inequality</td>
<td>Recognises in preamble that single mothers, women with disabilities and elderly women who live alone are particularly affected by energy poverty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council Recommendation on ensuring a fair transition towards climate neutrality</td>
<td>Mentions gender equality/ women, people with disabilities and older people</td>
<td>In relation to education and training, recommends specific actions to attract persons with disabilities, women and other underrepresented groups; recommends measures to empower women and organisations representing people in vulnerable situations, including people with disabilities, to participate in decision-making</td>
<td>Recognises in preamble that single mothers and older women are particularly affected by energy poverty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council Recommendation on energy poverty (2023)</td>
<td>Mentions women, people with disabilities and older people</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Recognises in preamble that single mothers and older women are particularly affected by energy poverty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recovery and Resilience Facility Regulation</td>
<td>Mentions gender equality/ women and children and young people</td>
<td>Funds must be used to mitigate the impacts of the Covid-19 crisis, in particular on women; RRPs must explain how measures are expected to contribute to gender equality and equal opportunities; some obligations related to young people</td>
<td>Points out in preamble that the majority of single parents are women</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Source: authors’ own elaboration.
The preamble to all instruments explicitly mentions gender equality/women, but only the RRF, the Social Climate Fund (SCF) and the (non-binding) Recommendation on fair transition include some requirements regarding gender equality, and even these are fairly minimal. Notably, the original RRF proposal paid little attention to gender, which suggests that it was not a core Commission priority (Vanhercke et al. 2022). Although disability and age are highlighted in almost all the preambles, only in the Recommendation on fair transition are there concrete provisions concerning people with disabilities, and there are provisions on children and young people in the RRF. Migrant background is not mentioned anywhere. While most instruments recognise the combination of some dimensions of disadvantage, none contain concrete provisions requiring that intersecting inequalities be taken into account in the distribution of resources and opportunities.

In other words, there is little in these instruments to guarantee that funding or other measures will be dedicated to tackling gender and intersecting inequalities. It is left to Member State discretion. This finding is consistent with other studies criticising the lack of a gender and intersectional perspective in EGD policies (EIGE 2023; Heffernan et al. 2021), but it is at odds with the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025, which states that ‘intersectionality of gender with other grounds of discrimination will be addressed across EU policies’. Women might still receive support when falling within the general category of ‘people in vulnerable situations’, but the lack of a gender and intersectional perspective could mean that resources are allocated in a way that exacerbates – or at least does nothing to improve – existing gender inequalities and fails to help the women most in need. For example, reskilling programmes that are gender-blind might be less accessible to women because they are not compatible with care responsibilities, and labour market inclusion measures that are targeted at women in general might attract fewer migrant women because of language barriers.

Gender and intersecting inequalities in Member State plans

In order to obtain a better understanding of the relevant national measures, we also looked at the Territorial Just Transition Plans (TJTPs) and the national Recovery and Resilience Plans (RRPs) of seven Member States: Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Greece, Ireland and Spain. These were selected to ensure diversity in terms of their geographical spread, size of economy and EIGE Gender Equality Index score. We considered the extent to which these recognise and seek to address impacts on women/gender equality, but also whether there is any recognition that some women are particularly vulnerable because of their age, disability or migrant background. The analysis revealed a mixed picture with widely varying approaches.

Earlier studies of TJTPs, while asking slightly different research questions, concluded that although most plans mention women, young people and other vulnerable groups, the majority do not propose any steps towards tackling the challenges they face (CEE Bankwatch Network 2023; WWF 2023). Our own study
found that one (out of three) of the TJTPs of Greece, as well as the plans of Bulgaria and Denmark do not mention women or gender equality, though the latter makes reference to the Danish gender equality framework in supporting documents. The plans of Austria and Ireland mention impacts on women only briefly, with a reference in the Austrian plan to training measures for ‘the unemployed, young people and women’. By contrast, the Greek plans on Western Macedonia and Megalopolis specifically mention the objective of increasing women’s labour market participation, envisaging training programmes and job subsidies (respectively), but also support for social infrastructure for child- and elderly care.

The French plans go further, foregrounding equality between men and women clearly as a (transversal) priority, and mentioning multiple times measures to attract women to relevant industries and support their professional development and training. The Spanish plans similarly integrate a gender equality angle across proposed measures, ranging from training, qualification and employment support initiatives, to entrepreneurship, social infrastructure, participation and monitoring. While most plans – most notably the Spanish ones – highlight the disadvantages people face because of age or disability, sometimes mentioning these alongside gender, none of them recognise the effects of intersecting inequalities or propose targeted measures to address multiple vulnerabilities jointly. Similarly, none of the plans mention migrant status, although most at least mention impacts on ‘vulnerable groups’ in general.

On the other hand, all of the RRPs studied mention gender equality and include, to different degrees, measures to reduce disadvantages for women, particularly regarding labour market participation and pay gaps. All mention at least one of the other dimensions of vulnerability (age, disability, migrant status) accompanied by targeted measures, though the majority address only one vulnerability at a time. For example, the Danish plan emphasises women’s participation in STEM and entrepreneurship, but does not touch upon the specific needs of migrant women. The French plan is very detailed, addressing the challenges of elderly people and facilitating their autonomy, and including measures to improve the empowerment and social inclusion of persons with disabilities. The intersection of age and disability with gender is not mentioned, however. The Greek plan focuses on improving women’s general labour force participation and the digital inclusion of elderly and people with disabilities, without intersecting these dimensions. Similarly the Irish plan considers gender inequality separately from other vulnerabilities.

By contrast, aspects of intersectionality are present, again to varying extents, in the other three plans. Austria proposes targeted measures for elderly women, whereas the Bulgarian plan envisages gender pay and employment equality measures, taking into consideration particular vulnerabilities faced by women with disabilities from ethnic minorities or women with migrant backgrounds. However, Spain stands out in terms of integrating an intersectional perspective in its recovery plan. It is the only country that mentions the word intersectionality, and has a dedicated set of measures that cover intersectionality and special protection situations. These include vulnerabilities faced by young women,
single mothers raising children, elderly women in single-person households, refugees and minority women and women living in rural areas experiencing multiple inequalities.

Overall, RRPs fare better than the TJTPs when it comes to gender-sensitive measures, though efforts to address intersecting inequalities are present in only some of them. Even considering that these are longer documents of wider scope, they offer many examples of measures that could have been included in the TJTPs to signal priorities. In this respect, there is a notable contrast between the TJTPs and RRPs of some countries (for example, Bulgaria and Denmark). Our study also found, however, that in the majority of cases, the coverage of these vulnerabilities – either separately or jointly – are not explicitly framed within the green transition context. Only a few measures in some plans (for example, those of Denmark and Spain) refer explicitly to their contribution to the green transition agenda, such as promoting women’s STEM skills, who could then be employed in the renewable energy or transport sectors. Support measures targeting single mothers or elderly women to decrease energy poverty also contribute to achieving a just transition, but these exist in only a handful of cases and do not always refer to just transition explicitly. These observations are consistent with the findings of Theodoropoulou et al. (2022) that green and social objectives are often not connected within the framework of the RRPs.

**Conclusions: designing policies that capture multiple disadvantages**

This policy brief has demonstrated that, although women in general will be affected by aspects of the green transition, women subject to other types of disadvantage are particularly vulnerable. We provided empirical evidence pointing to cumulative vulnerabilities produced by the intersection of gender with migrant status, age and disability. We argued that the current EU ‘just transition’ instruments do not demand concrete steps to address gender and intersecting inequalities, and that the majority of the studied TJTPs do not propose such steps, either. The challenges faced by migrants, in particular, are overlooked. A gender perspective is better integrated into RRPs, though most do not take an intersectional approach, nor link relevant measures to the green transition. The risk is that current ‘just transition’ measures will fail to protect the most vulnerable from the negative effects of the transition.

This is not consistent with a genuine commitment to ‘leaving no one behind’. Instead, EU climate and just transition policies must send the right signals to Member States when it comes to prioritising the protection of people in vulnerable situations, including through obligations attached to funding. For example, guidance on Social Climate Plans under the SCF, to be submitted by June 2025, or future funding instruments could require Member States to develop concrete measures to support vulnerable groups, particularly those facing multiple disadvantages. Funding could be earmarked specifically for this, and relevant social conditionalities attached to support provided to businesses within the framework of the EU’s green industrial policy. This is in addition
to making more funding available through an expanded SCF and use of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), or new funding mechanisms (Arabadjieva et al. 2023). There are already good examples of gender mainstreaming and intersectionality, such as the RRP and TJTPs of Spain, which set the inclusion of women and vulnerable groups as a transversal objective.

To design appropriate measures, governments, social partners and other stakeholders need a better understanding of the factors that lead to vulnerabilities in the green transition and their cumulative effects. Collecting granular data and developing methodologies are essential for assessing the impact of climate policies across (intersecting) vulnerabilities. These should feed into the development of a range of measures – from policies to increase labour market participation and improve job quality, to social protection and income support – directed at people in vulnerable situations. This applies not just to the factors discussed here, but also other factors, notably racial or ethnic background and socio-economic status.

Social partners and organisations representing people in vulnerable situations, including local and grassroots organisations, need to be involved in policy design. At the industry level, they need to work together to identify the barriers facing people subject to multiple disadvantages in accessing education, training and reskilling in STEM and new green industries and develop appropriate inclusion programmes. Collective bargaining is a key instrument in promoting the inclusion of vulnerable groups in this respect. Crucially, all of these measures should aim not only to ensure that the most vulnerable are not worse off, but that they also benefit in a positive way from the opportunities that the green transition offers.
References


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