

Multidisciplinary Journal of Gender Studies
Volume 13, Issue 1, 23th February, 2024, Pages 59 – 80
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<http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/generos.13203>

Absolute Illiteracy in European Union Policies. Exploring the Intersections of Gender, Migration and Education

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Abstract

In the context of a study focused on the absolute illiteracy of migrant women in Europe, this article assesses the extent to which European Union policy instruments on gender, migration and education incorporate an intersectional perspective. The analysis was based in the content analysis of a selected group of EU policy documents and included i) the close and iterative reading and thematic codification of the texts; ii) the word frequency counting of relevant terms; and iii) the assessment of intersectionality through a set of quality criteria. Apart from revealing the invisibility of absolute illiteracy as a policy problem, results confirm previous evidence showing that the presence of intersectional approaches in EU public policy is still marginal. Some attempts to address the intersectionality of gender, migration or education inequalities have been identified in the selected documents, but a comprehensive policy framework to understand and address those inequalities is still lacking. The article adds up to the existing scholarship claiming for more inclusive policies in contemporary European societies.

Keywords

Intersectionality, gender, education, migration, absolute illiteracy.

To cite this article: Barroso, M. M. (2024). Absolute illiteracy in European Union Policies. Exploring the intersections of gender, migration and education. *Multidisciplinary Journal of Gender Studies*, 13 (1), pp. 59-80 <http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/generos.13203>

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Multidisciplinary Journal of Gender Studies
Volumen 13, Número 1, 23 de febrero de 2024, Páginas 59 – 80
© Autor(s) 2024
<http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/generos.13203>

El Analfabetismo en las Políticas de la Unión Europea. Explorando las Intersecciones del Género, Migraciones y Educación

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Resumen

En el marco de una investigación sobre el analfabetismo en las mujeres migrantes en Europa, este artículo examina en qué medida los instrumentos políticos de la Unión Europea en materia de género, migración y educación incorporan una perspectiva interseccional. El estudio se basó en el análisis de contenido de un grupo seleccionado de documentos políticos de la UE e incluyó i) la lectura detenida e iterativa y la codificación temática de los textos; ii) el recuento de la frecuencia de palabras de los términos pertinentes; y iii) la evaluación de la interseccionalidad a través de un conjunto de criterios de calidad. Además de revelar la invisibilidad del analfabetismo como problema político, los resultados confirman estudios anteriores que demuestran que la presencia de enfoques interseccionales en las políticas públicas de la UE sigue siendo marginal. En los documentos seleccionados se han identificado algunos intentos de abordar la interseccionalidad de las desigualdades de género, migración o educación, pero sigue faltando un marco político integrado para comprender y abordar esas desigualdades. El artículo se suma a los estudios existentes que reclaman políticas más inclusivas en las sociedades europeas contemporáneas.

Palabras clave

Interseccionalidad, género, educación, migración, analfabetismo.

Cómo citar este artículo: Barroso, M. M. (2024). El analfabetismo en las Políticas de la Unión Europea. Explorando las intersecciones del género, migraciones y educación. *Multidisciplinary Journal of Gender Studies*, 13 (1), pp. 59-80 <http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/genero.13203>

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Adult's absolute illiteracy is broadly defined as the inability of reading and writing.ⁱ According to the United Nations' estimates, there are more than 700 million illiterate adults in the world, with women representing two thirds of the total illiterate population (UNESCO, 2017). The gendered dimension of the phenomenon is largely attributed to gender inequalities in the educational strategies of families, which, in several parts of the globe, still tend to expect more from the returns to education of boys, and therefore, to invest more in their schooling (UNESCO, 2004, 2017).

In Europe, absolute illiteracy is marginal amongst the Europe-born population. Although statistics are limited², it is estimated that the proportion of individuals whose education corresponds to the level 0 of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) accounts for 0,6% of the Europe-born population (Eurostat, 2020). However, amongst the foreign-born population, not only it accounts for 3%, as it has been increasing slightly over the last decade, with relevant gender differences: in 2011, 3.04% of migrant women had no formal schooling, compared to 2.78% of men; in 2020, these figures were 3.72% and 2.96% respectively (Eurostat, 2020). Possible explanations may reside in the evolving nature of immigration to Europe, which is tendentially more diverse in terms of country of origin and sociodemographic characteristics of migrants. Many migrants in Europe are originally from countries with widespread low levels of literacy and/or strong oral traditions, where writing and reading are practices with reduced use in everyday activities (Adami, 2016). In addition, the migration experience may disrupt the educational trajectory of a significant number of individuals who are forced to migrate to flee from war, political persecution or extreme poverty. Consequently, although migrants tend to possess higher educational levels than the average of their home countries (Ichou et. al, 2017), and although skilled migration, namely female, is rising in Europe (Christou and Kofman, 2022), the intersections of gender, migration and illiteracy are shaping a number of life trajectories in contemporary societies. The changing nature of female migration, no longer exclusively associated with a male-dependent role, adds up to the complexity of the phenomenon and to the need to discuss the available responses to migrants' illiteracy in terms of social inclusion.

Local and community organizations often recognise and report the challenges faced by these segments of the population, who are at the intersection of gender, migration and illiteracy (Elvias Carreras, 2009; Sierra Rodriguez and Pelaez-Paz, 2017). However, few is known as to how the European public policy is addressing them, concretely at the European Union level.

Within the framework of a study on the absolute illiteracy of migrant women in Europe, this article provides an analysis of the intersections of gender, migration and education in a selection of EU policy documents. The analysis starts by reviewing the main studies analysing gender, migration and illiteracy or low-education, and by highlighting the current debates on the incorporation of intersectionality in public policies. Following the presentation of the research methodology, the results are described and discussed.

Absolute Illiteracy, Gender, and Migration

Literacy has been discussed and theorised not only as a technical acquisition of reading and writing skills, but also as a social practice, whose uses and meanings are shaped by relations of power (Street, 1984, 2012). Literacy acquisition is a process that implies a change in the way the reality is apprehended and in the way the individual perceives him/herself (Freire, 1970; 1981). Relevant studies have analysed the relationship between gender and illiteracy, and demonstrated how literacy acquisition is associated with increased capacity for challenging power relations in everyday life, social engagement, and even political participation (for instance, Ghose and Mullick, 2012; Kalman, 2005; Maddox, 2005; Niño-Murcia, 2009; Olomukoro and Adelore, 2015).

The interconnectedness with migration status and with the migration experience has been less explored in the literature, although some contributions are noteworthy. North (2017) focuses migrant domestic workers living and having literacy classes in the UK. The author discusses the impact of transnationality in the engagement of these women with different types of literacies over their learning trajectories, and how these literacies interplay in their individual experiences and needs. Sierra Rodriguez and Pelaez-Paz (2017) in their ethnographic research on a literacy programme in Spain remark how the lives of Moroccan migrant women, some of them also domestic workers, are shaped by the intersections of gender, ethnicity and social class. The study reports on the added difficulties of living, working, and learning a new language while being unable to read and write, drawing attention to the insufficiencies of the migrants' integration systems in guaranteeing the full access of these women to fundamental rights. Using a quantitative approach based in the UK's longitudinal survey on refugees, Cheung and Phillimore (2017) found significant gender differences disfavouring women in terms of language acquisition, health, employment and housing. The authors denote that the acquisition of literacy and language competencies amongst refugees in the UK is associated with pre-migration education and that women entail in learning programmes later than men. In the specific case of women, inadequate schedules, unaffordable childcare or absence of single-sex courses are pointed out as possible obstacles to attendance and successful learning (Spencer and Cooper, 2006). Iñiguez-Berrozpe et al. (2020), analysing OECD PIAAC data, give evidence on the benefits of adult education for low educated women in Europe. With a focus on the attainment level ISCED 0-2, the study points out the overrepresentation of migrants amongst this populational group. The results show higher levels of social and political confidence, cultural participation, health and employability, for low educated women enrolled in adult education.

Existing scholarship converges in claiming for policy responses that adequately intersect gender, migration and education in contemporary societies, namely by meeting the needs of migrant women with low literacy, but research is needed on how the existing policies are actually addressing these disadvantages.

Intersectionality in Public Policy

As coined by Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality refers to the interconnectedness of different identity markers in the shaping of the lived experiences of individuals (for a thorough discussion of the origins and development of the concept of intersectionality, see for example Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016).

Gender, ethnicity and class are the social categories traditionally studied in intersectional analysis, but the range of identity markers contemplated in today's scholarship is wide enough to include other categories, namely those with a mutable nature, such as education or migration status (Manuel, 2006).

Several authors have been debating how to incorporate intersectionality in public policy to prevent the exclusion of those who, belonging to different social categories, carry a number of "singularities" (Hankivsky and Jordan-Zakhery, 2019; Manuel, 2006). The intrinsic nature of public policy, designed to be tendentially universal and inexpensive doesn't seem to be compatible with the complex and costly process of addressing the needs of those who are at the intersection of different axes of discrimination (Manuel, 2006). The selection and identification of the axes of inequality, in itself, constitutes a difficulty in the adoption of an intersectional approach to public policies (Hancock, 2007; Jiménez Rodrigo, 2020, 2022). Other obstacles include the variety of uses and (mis)interpretations of the concept of intersectionality (La Barbera et al., 2022; Brochin, 2018; Jiménez Rodrigo, 2020), the compartmentalized structure of some policymaking institutions (La Barbera et al., 2022) or the unavailability of data able to inform policy (La Barbera et al., 2022). Consequently, to a large extent, public policies are still designed to target homogeneous social groups, concentrating on single axis of exclusion, or treating multiple inequalities as independent (Hancock, 2007), in what is often labelled the "one size fits all" approach (Béland, 2017; Hankivsky and Jordan-Zakhery, 2019; Verloo, 2006).

In the context of the EU policymaking, although there have been some improvements in the adoption of intersectional views, it seems rather consensual that these still fail to integrate the structural dimensions and the relations of power behind social inequalities (Agustín and Siim, 2014; D'Agostino, 2015; Degani and Ghanem, 2019; European Commission, 2023; Ferreira, 2022; Hankivsky et al., 2014; Koczé, 2009; Lombardo and Agustín, 2012, 2016; Lombardo and Verloo, 2009; Maes and Debusscher, 2022; Verloo, 2006; van der Vleuten, 2019). Hence, intersectionality is mostly integrated at a discursive level, and multiple discrimination approaches are more easily identifiable than truly intersectional ones (Coll-Planas and Cruells, 2013; Jimenez Rodrigo, 2020; Ferreira, 2022).

In their recent systematic literature review on intersectional public policy, Garcia and Zajicek (2022) recognize the increasing visibility of the field, although underlining the still limited knowledge on how intersectionality is actually integrated in existing policies. It seems to be clear that intersectionality has gained increasing attention by scholars in the recent decades, but the transfer of academic research to policymaking takes time, especially when we are considering complex concepts such as intersectionality (Ferreira, 2022; Manuel, 2006).

Methods

The research was based in the content analysis of six EU policy documents on Gender, Migration and Education:

Gender

- The Gender Equality Strategy (hereafter GES) - 2020-2025;
- The Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality (hereafter SEGE) - 2016-2019;

Migration

- The Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (hereafter APII) - 2021-2027;
- The New Pact on Migration and Asylum (hereafter NPMA) - 2020;

Education

- The European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience (hereafter ESA) - 2020-2025;
- The European Education Area (hereafter EEA) - 2020-2025.

All documents were issued by the European Commission, and they provide a non-binding framework to identify, understand and address current social problems in the respective policy area. Although other documents could have also been examined, the intensive nature of the analysis required the delimitation of the number of documents to be screened. These were selected based in their topicality and relevance at the time of the study, since they constitute the reference frameworks for the European action in each field.

The analysis was threefold. The content analysis started with the close and iterative reading of all documents, to understand their purposes, scope, approach, and terminology used. Then, using MAXQDA Plus software, and following a deductive approach, the documents were coded according to preestablished codes: problem definition, objectives, priority areas, references to other EU policy documents, categories addressed and relationship between categories, and expression of intersectionality.

Secondly, a word count was performed, quantifying the frequency of occurrence of specific terms. In all of the documents, the occurrences of the terms intersectionality, multiple disadvantages/discrimination/vulnerabilities and diversity were counted. In the gender policy documents, the occurrences of words related to migration and education were counted. In the migration policy documents the frequency of words related to gender and education was counted. In the education policy documents the occurrences of the terms related to gender and migration were counted.

Finally, the collected data was analysed applying the intersectionality quality criteria defined by Lombardo and Agustin (2012), which offers a comprehensive and structured framework, based on specific criteria that allows assessing how intersectionality is framed in policy instruments:

- a) *explicitness, visibility* and *inclusiveness* of the references to intersections, referring to the way inequalities and intersections are named and made visible and explicit in the documents;
- b) *articulation* in the expression of the relationships between the categories considered, referring to the explanation of the relationships between intersecting inequalities, namely by making a distinction between “additive” categories (sum of disadvantages) and “multiple constitutive categories” (intersecting disadvantages are more than the sum of inequalities);
- c) *gendering*, understood as explicit references to gender;
- d) *transformation* potential, based in the structural understanding of inequalities and in the consideration of the effects of power hierarchies at the individual and collective levels;
- e) *challenge of privileges*, referring to the questioning of norms and advantages of the dominant groups;
- f) (lack of) *stigmatization* of the target groups, referring to the ways by which policy instruments may promote or reinforce stigmatization;
- g) *consultation* with the civil society.

Considering that the gender documents would perform better in the gendering quality criteria, and although aware of the de/gendering debate in intersectional scholarship (see Lombardo and Agustín, 2012), gendering was excluded from the analysis. Also, given the variations in the consultation processes that informed the development of these documents, and considering the lack of information publicly available, an accurate analysis of the consultation criteria would surpass the scope of this research, and therefore this criterion was also excluded.

While the authors recognise that these criteria are open for suggestions, Lombardo and Agustín’s proposal proved to be suitable for policy impact assessments of concrete policy issues (Lombardo and Agustín, 2016; van der Vleuten, 2019), and revealed to be an appropriate scheme to analyse policy responses and planned actions for the inclusion of migrant women with low literacy in the receiving countries.

Results

Intersectionality in EU Gender Policy

Explicitness, Visibility, and Inclusiveness

The GES (European Commission, 2020a) shows important advances in relation to the SEGE (European Commission, 2016) regarding the integration of intersectionality as a principle. The latter had an approach much more focused on gender mainstreaming in European policy. The former, in turn, refers explicitly to intersectionality, both in the definition of its objectives and in the identification of the priority areas of intervention (Table 1). This attempt at a change of paradigm is attested by the wordcount, that shows differences between the two documents in the occurrence of the terms intersectionality and mainstreaming (Table 4). The references to

other EU policy instruments in each document are also illustrative of a greater cross-cutting approach in the GES (Table 1).

Both documents give visibility to the combination of different categories of inequality (age, migration status, ability, violence, occupation/education). In fact, the GES rarely mentions gender in isolation. Instead, the expression "in all its diversity" is preferred (p. 2, footnote 9), being often, but not always, followed by some specification: sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age, sexual orientation. In the SEGE, gender is mostly treated as the primary category of analysis.

The intersectionality criterion of explicitness is evident in the GES. The visibility of different categories of inequality is present in both documents, as is the inclusiveness of considerable number of categories of inequality. However, in the attempt to adopt an inclusive and comprehensive approach through the expression "in all its diversity", the references to the categories of inequality lose specificity in the GES, and therefore its inclusiveness may be questionable. The same holds true for the use of the expression "multiple disadvantages" in the SEGE.

Articulation

In terms of articulation, both documents still lack a comprehensive explanation of the relationships between the inequality categories. Gender, age, family situation and employment, are articulated when both texts mention poverty in old age and its relationships with the gender pay gap in earning and pensions, the gendered patterns of paid and unpaid work, and the economic disadvantages of motherhood (eg.: p.10 of GES or p.8 of SEGE). However, this articulation is limited for the intersections of gender, migration status, ethnicity, and ability, and inexistent when the references to intersectionality appear under the general form of "multiple disadvantages", and "in all their diversity".

Transformation Potential

The structural understanding of the intersecting inequalities is not comprehensively elaborated in the selected texts. There is an attempt to contextualize gender inequalities in the problem definitions, and to present it as a rationale for the strategies and respective actions. However, this is mostly done by treating gender as an isolated category, and still lacking an in-depth view of inequalities. In the SEGE, the relationships between gender, education and employment outcomes are outlined, as are the connections between gender pay and pensions gaps, poverty and age (eg.: p. 8, 12-13, 24-26). In the GES, although intersectionality is explicitly mentioned, a structural understating of the nature, causes and consequences of these inequalities and interconnectedness is lacking.

The transformative potential of intersectionality is absent in the SEGE, and in the GES it arises mainly from the claims to a more integrated approach in EU policies and through the identification of concrete policy instruments that, together with the strategy, may deliver more inclusive responses (Table 1).

Challenge of Privileges

No explicit references were found challenging the male norm or the current structures of power.

Stigmatization

No references were found that could be interpreted as a stigmatization of particular groups.

There are no specific references to absolute illiteracy in the texts.

Table 1

Thematic distribution of EU Gender policy documents

Dimension	Strategic engagement for gender equality, 2016-2019	Gender Equality Strategy, 2020-2025
Problem definition	Persistence of gender inequalities in labour market, pay, occupations, violence, external action.	Low progress on gender equality Persistence of gender gaps in employment, pay, care, power and pensions Persistence of gender-based violence and harassment
Objectives	Reference framework to promote equality between women and men and to integrate a gender perspective in EU policies and funding.	Achieve a gender equal Europe Eliminate gender-based violence, sexual discrimination, structural inequalities between women and men Gender mainstreaming and intersectionality in EU policy
Priority areas	Labour-market and economy Earnings, pensions and poverty Decision-making Gender-based violence Women's rights across the world	Violence and stereotypes Economy Society Gender mainstreaming Intersectional perspective Funding equality actions Women's empowerment in world
References to other EU policy documents	European Pact for Gender Equality European Agenda on Migration Education and Training	EU Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in External Relations EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy EU Strategic Approach and Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security EU Strategy on Victims' Rights EU Strategy towards the Eradication of Trafficking in Human Beings EU Strategy on a More Effective Fight Against Child Sexual Abuse European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience European Education Area

Dimension	Strategic engagement for gender equality, 2016-2019	Gender Equality Strategy, 2020-2025
Categories addressed	Gender Migration Family situation Social class Ability Violence Occupation Age Ethnicity	EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion EU strategic for the rights of persons with disability EU LGBTIQ Equality Strategy EU Roma Strategic Framework on Equality, Inclusion and Participation EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child Gender Age Migration Ability Health Violence Education
References to Intersection	Migrant women Women entrepreneurs Disabled women Roma women Older women Groups facing multiple disadvantages	“In all their diversity” – sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age, sexual orientation Women in poverty Older women Migrant women

Source. Author’s compilation

Intersectionality in EU Migration Policy

Explicitness, Visibility, and Inclusiveness

In general, the selected documents in the field of migration consider migration status as the main category of inequality, and although some signs of an intended intersectional approach are present in the texts, these are limited.

The NPMA (European Commission, 2020b) addresses nationality and migration status as central categories (throughout the document, it is possible to find expressions such as “legally resident”, “unauthorized movements of migrants”, “legally staying migrants”), although references to age (migrant children, older migrants), gender (migrant women and girls) and education (highly skilled talent; low and middle-skilled workers), together with broader references to the “most vulnerable groups” are also present in the text. In the definition of the actions, it is underlined the need to move towards tailor made approaches, where different policy areas do not act independently (p.2). However, this interconnectedness seldom goes beyond age and education, as seen by the references to other EU policy instruments (Table 2), and by the wordcount, that shows that the words intersectionality and mainstreaming are totally absent, and that the terms gender, women, men, girls, boys, appear very sporadically in the text (Table 4).

The APII (European Commission, 2020c) in turn, clearly adopts a social policy mainstreaming approach, and states that “the combination of personal characteristics, such as

gender, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, sexual orientation and disability can represent specific challenges for migrants” (p.6). Gender assumes a central role in the plan, with one of its main objectives being to consider gender mainstreaming and anti-discriminatory priorities (p.6). Besides the combination of gender (migrant women), age (young migrants), education (highly educated migrants) or gender identity or sexual orientation (LGBTIQ migrants), the intersection of more than two individual characteristics also appear throughout the text (“over-qualified migrant women”, “migrant children with disabilities”). The wordcount reveals that the term intersectionality appears twice, and mainstreaming is referred once. Other terms, such as equality, diversity or discrimination, gender, women, are more frequent than in the NPMA (Table 4).

Although both documents give visibility to certain intersectional inequalities, the explicitness of those references and inclusiveness of different categories of inequality are reduced.

Articulation

The articulation of the intersecting inequalities is poor on both documents. In the NPMA there are some observations regarding the vulnerability of women and children to the risks of trafficking and violence, and one note to the specific needs of low and medium skilled migrants regarding admission permits, but there is no elaboration on the nature of the relationships between migration, age, gender, or education. In the APII, although more categories of inequality are mentioned, this is done mostly in an additive fashion, in a logic of adding up disadvantages (Lombardo and Agustin, 2012), and scarce explanations are provided for the relationships between them (eg.: “Such discrimination can be based solely on their migrant background, but may be exacerbated due to their ethnic or racial origin as well as their religion or belief. LGBTIQ migrants and migrants with disabilities can also face multiple forms of discrimination.”, p.7). An exception is the case of gender, family status, education, and employment, for which a more comprehensive reasoning is offered as to why migrant women (and girls) are confronted with more difficulties in accessing language learning, entering the labour market, or getting their qualifications recognised (p.12-13).

Transformative Potential

The structural understanding of the intersecting inequalities is not developed in the migration documents. There is an attempt to put the migration experience in context, and to portrait the present situation of Europe as a rationale for the actions proposed. This includes mentioning multiple vulnerabilities and intersectional inequalities, but not discussing the structural causes and consequences of these inequalities. In the APII, the urge to integrate over-qualified migrants, and to support the low qualified ones, is presented as an imperative to avoid losing human capital (p.2), and as such can be interpreted as an indication of the transformative potential of intersectionality. However, just as in the gender texts, the transformative potential of intersectionality arises mainly from the claims to more interconnectedness of EU policies and through the identification of the policy instruments where dialogue and joint action is needed to achieve the defined objectives (Table 2).

Challenge of Privileges

No explicit references were found challenging the current structures of power in any of the documents.

Stigmatization

No explicit indications of stigmatization of certain groups were found in the APII, but in the NPMA, the use of expressions such as “the right to stay” or “legal migration”, as well as the links established between being in an irregular situation and being more vulnerable to criminal networks, clearly makes a stigmatization on the grounds of administrative status.

The texts do not mention absolute illiteracy. However, there are some references to the obstacles faced by migrants with low educational levels.

Table 2

Thematic distribution of EU Migration policy documents

Dimension	New Pact on Migration and Asylum, 2020	Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion, 2021-2017
Problem definition	Migrations crisis management Demographic changes, climate change, security, global race for talent, inequality, and its impact in migration	Overeducation and undereducation of migrants and EU citizens with migrant background Covid-19 pandemic Persistent challenges in relation to employment, education, access to basic services and social inclusion of migrants
Objectives	To address urgent needs To build a system that manages and normalizes migration for the long term and which is grounded in European values and international law	Inclusion for all Targeted measures Gender mainstreaming and anti-discrimination Integration Multi-stakeholder partnerships
Priority areas	Common European framework for migration and asylum management Crisis preparedness and response system Integrated border management Fight against migrant smuggling International partnerships Skills and talents More inclusive societies	Education and training Employment and skills Health Housing
References to other EU policy documents	European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child EU Charter of Fundamental Rights EU Security Union Strategy	EU Anti-Racism Action Plan EU LGBTIQ Equality Strategy EU Roma Strategic Framework on Equality, Inclusion and Participation Gender Equality Strategy EU Strategy on combat Antisemitism and fostering Jewish Life

Dimension	New Pact on Migration and Asylum, 2020	Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion, 2021-2017
	EU Action Plan on integration and inclusion EU Action Plan against Migrant Smuggling	European Education Area European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience EU Digital Education Action Plan
Categories addressed	Age Gender Migration Nationality Social vulnerability Violence/trafficking	Migration Gender Racial or ethnic origin Religion or belief Sexual orientation Ability
References to intersections	Migrant women Migrant children Highly skilled beneficiaries of international protection Low and medium skilled workers	Migrant women and girls Over-qualified migrant women Migrant children Migrant children with disabilities Highly educated migrants Young migrants Lgbtiq migrants Migrants entrepreneurs

Source. Author's compilation

Intersectionality in EU Education Policy

Explicitness, Visibility, and Inclusiveness

In the selected documents, skills and education are the main categories considered. There are no specific mentions to the term intersectionality; mainstreaming appears once in each text; and inequality and discrimination are mentioned very sporadically (Table 4). Several categories of inequality are indicated in the texts, but primarily as separate dimensions (Table 3). Intersectionality is expressed mainly through the intersection of two categories (education and gender, or education and age), and rarely include a third category (usually migration status or occupation).

In the ESA (European Commission, 2020d), education and skills, and in particular the high and low educated groups, are the central categories, although gender (“women and men alike”), age (“low/high-skilled adults”), and gender and age (“young women”) appear frequently to specify the scope of action. General expressions such as “vulnerable groups” or “other discriminatory stereotypes” are also present in the text, and for specific actions, there are clear mentions to gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, age, sexual orientation, low-qualified adults, and migrants. Migration and migrants are mentioned throughout the document; however, this category is often undissociated of residency status, with “legal migration” and “legally residing migrants” (eg.: p.17) being the focus of the planned interventions (Table 4).

In the EEA (European Commission, 2020e), gender equality is a central topic and constitutes one of the priorities of the plan (Table 3). Gender is generally addressed through the expression “women and men in all their diversity” (eg.: p.16), or through the combination

of gender with age “young women and girls”. Migration and age (“youth with a migrant background”) also appears as elements to be considered in the definition of the EEA, but with less centrality than gender. The explicitness, visibility and inclusiveness of intersectionality is, thus, very limited in the education documents.

Articulation

The relation between the categories is not articulate.

Transformative Potential

In the ESA, there is an attempt to relate gender and education when addressing the under-representation of girls in the STEM educational fields, but the argumentation lacks depth and the causes of the inequalities are not properly discussed (p.9). In the EEA, the same relationship is more developed, with a greater elaboration on the education institutions, the gendered education experience, stereotypes, and the conditionings to educational choices, as well as the persistence of male and female dominated occupations (eg.: p.8 or p.20). The EEA states the need to bring together different policy instruments, notably the GES, but without explaining how the structures of inequality relate. Both documents make a contextualization of the main educational problems, key facts, and figures they aim to attend to, but without discussing structural causes, namely the effect of intersectional inequalities in the access, participation, attainment, and achievement in education at all its levels.

Challenge of Privileges

No explicit references were found challenging current structures of power in any of the documents.

Stigmatization

Just as in the NPMA, in the ESA, the targeting of specific actions to the “legally resident migrants” stigmatises those in an irregular administrative situation.

There are no specific references to adults’ absolute illiteracy. In the EEA the underachievement of students and the mastery of basic skills, namely reading, are generally addressed and correlated with socioeconomic status. In the ESA, the disproportion of lower education among migrants is referred to as an obstacle to labour-market inclusion.

Table 3*Thematic distribution of EU Education policy documents*

Dimension	European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, 2020-2025	European Education Area, 2020-2025
Problem definition	Green and digital transition Covid-19 pandemic Obsolescence of skills Low levels of participation in adult learning in Europe Lack of digital skills	Covid-19 pandemic Digital and green transitions Education as vital for recovery and resilience
Objectives	Sustainable competitiveness Social fairness Resilience	Achieve European Education Area Holistic approach to education and training Recognise the value of education Full contribution to and participation in society
Priority areas	Collective action Skilling for a job Build skills through life Setting ambitious skills objectives Unlocking investment	Quality in Education Inclusion and gender equality Green and digital transitions Teachers and trainers Higher education Geopolitical dimension
References to other EU policy documents	European Pillar for Social Rights New Skills Agenda for Europe Renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning EU Up-skilling pathways: new opportunities for adults European Education Area European Green Deal EU Digital Education Action Plan European Research Area New Pact on Migration and Asylum EU industrial Strategy EU New circular Economy Action Plan EU Biodiversity Strategy EU Bioeconomy Strategy	European Pillar for Social Rights Education and Training New Strategic Agenda for the EU European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience EU VET for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience European Research Area EU Strategic Agenda Gender Equality Strategy EU Digital Education Action Plan European Green Deal
Categories addressed	Education Gender Racial or ethnic origin Religion or belief Ability Age Sexual orientation Migration Employment Social vulnerability “Other discriminatory stereotypes”	Education Gender Age Nationality Social Class Migration Ability
References to Intersection	Low-skilled adults High-skilled adults Young women entrepreneurs Labour legal migrants Legally resident migrants	Youth with migrant background Girls and young women Students with a migrant background Children from disadvantaged backgrounds

Dimension	European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, 2020-2025	European Education Area, 2020-2025
		Underachieving students from disadvantaged backgrounds Pupils with diverse backgrounds

Source. Author's compilation

Table 4

Word count (frequencies)

Words	Word count by document					
	SEGE	GES	NPMA	APII	ESA	EEA
Main word	(Gender)	(Gender)	(Asylum)	(Integration)	(Skills)	(Education)
	320	205	306	182	254	355
Intersection, -s, -al, -ality	0	12	0	2	0	0
Equal, -ity, -ities	286	123	2	28	4	18
Inequality, -ies, unequal	14	12	2	3	1	3
Mainstreaming	20	12	0	1	1	1
Diversity, diverse	7	17	2	10	2	10
Discrimination, discriminatory	16	19	2	20	2	3
Inclusion, inclusive	7	11	13	71	14	19
Literacy	0	2	0	2	5	7
Illiteracy	0	0	0	0	0	0
Education, -al	19	14	13	56	92	355
Skill, -s	3	7	29	43	254	60
Qualification, qualified	0	0	4	13	25	10
Overqualification, overqualified	0	0	0	1	2	1
Underqualification, low qualified	0	0	0	1	12	2
Gender	320	205	1	14	7	30
Women, female	227	146	3	17	7	12
Men, male	83	41	2	3	3	5
Girl, -s	37	22	2	2	4	8
Boy, -s	4	10	1	1	1	7
Migration	4	3	161	41	8	0
Migrant, -s	9	3	57	187	6	6
Third country, -ies	0	1	36	14	5	2
Asylum	1	4	306	23	2	0

Source. Author's analysis

Conclusion

This analysis allows us to conclude, firstly, that absolute illiteracy remains as an invisible phenomenon in European strategy documents. Although there is evidence that absolute illiteracy is a reality that affects a segment of the population residing in Europe, and that disproportionately affects migrant women, there are still no signs of a real concern in European policymaking.

Secondly, the presence of an intersectional approach is still very occasional in the policy documents analysed. Some attempts to address gender, migration or education inequalities in an intersectional view have been identified. This is mostly visible in the way the texts either refer directly to the concept of intersectionality or mention different categories of inequality in combination. However, these references rarely include more than two social categories, and, using Lombardo and Agustin's framework (2012), almost never include the explanation of intersectionalities, their contextualisation in larger systems of inequalities, the identification of the transformative potential of combating intersectional inequalities, or the questioning of prevailing power structures. As some scholars have been noting (Brochin, 2018; Jimenez Rodrigo, 2020; 2022), this merely discursive use of intersectionality incurs the risk of transforming it in a buzzword, undermining its transformative potential.

The gender documents are those which present the greatest incorporation of an intersectional view of inequalities. It is also gender, as a social category, that appears most frequently in intersection with other inequalities. This is possibly due to the role that gender scholarship assumed in the dissemination of intersectional perspectives, but also to accumulated years of a gender mainstreaming strategy in European policies (Ferreira, 2022).

It is clear from the analysis that the need to design public policies that bring different areas of intervention into dialogue is well present at European level. This is noticeable in the way the documents analysed draw on, cite, and plan collaborative actions with other EU policy documents. However, the form that these potential collaborations will take is never or almost never explicit. The nature and objectives of the different policy instruments, namely regarding migration and education may bring additional challenges to this collaboration. The conception of migration policies as regulations about security and protection (Pinyol-Jimenez, 2021), and of education policies as guidelines and plans to tackle deficits, lead to the consolidation of profiles of "unwanted" migrants who are often excluded from policy interventions. In the specific case of gender and migration, it is crucial to consider that educational trajectories already shaped by gender norms, are often disrupted due to migration, and that the possibilities for skilling or re-skilling are, for their part, also determined by gender and migration status.

The results are in line with previous studies that underline the lack of intersectional approaches in EU policies. In the specific case of illiterate migrant women, the absence of targeted policy responses and the way policy instruments address women and migrants as homogenous social groups may reinforce existing vulnerabilities and exclusion. As individuals with multiple identity markers, the dynamism and complexity of their lives tend to be ignored in public policies (Manuel, 2006). As such, their concrete needs are not reflected in the current EU policies on gender, migration, and education. A structural understanding of how gender, migration and education inequalities interplay in determining the everyday complexities of being a migrant woman unable to read and write in Europe is indispensable for securing full rights to this populational group, but it is also essential for developing robust policy responses to social inequalities, able to guarantee the general well-being of society at large.

By providing a throughout list of dimensions through which intersectionality can be manifested and assessed, Lombardo and Agustin's (2012) framework allowed a comprehensive analysis of the incorporation an intersectional lens in these policy documents. Although limited in scope, this analysis contributes to the field by providing new evidence to the discussion of intersectionality in public policy, and by underlining the invisibility of adults' absolute

illiteracy in Europe as a policy problem. Even so, additional research, namely with a broader documental corpus, would be valuable to develop the conclusions further.

Acknowledgments

This article has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowship Grant agreement 891932.

Notes

¹For a discussion on the definition of the term literacy, see UNESCO (2004) and UNESCO (2017).

²For a wider discussion on the challenges of measuring both migration and literacy, please see Regger and Sievers, 2009; Unesco, 2004; Unesco 2017

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