

EU Gender Equality Strategy: Too Little but Not Too Late

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March 19, 2021

In 2019, the EU reached a milestone for gender equality with the election of the European Commission's first female president. Shortly after, President Ursula von der Leyen's Commission launched its Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, a notable step up from previous EU-level commitments to tackling gender discrimination. Marialena Pantazi Psatha explores how the issue of gender equality has steadily gained prominence in Europe, the strengths and limitations of the Strategy, and the challenges it faces going forward. While this may be the start of a new chapter for gender equality in Europe, a truly feminist EU is still far off.

The promotion of gender equality is a task for the European Union required by its treaties and a key principle under the European Pillar of Social Rights. According to the [Treaty on the Functioning of the EU](#), the European Union is committed to eliminating inequalities "in all its activities". In 2020, [eight of the top 15 countries ranked for gender equality worldwide](#) were EU member states. However, this is not enough to say that parity has been achieved across Europe.

After the 2019 European elections, the issue of gender equality rose up the political agenda with the backing of President von der Leyen, culminating in the [Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025](#). The Strategy, launched on 5 March 2020, frames the European Commission's work on gender equality and sets out policy objectives for a five-year period. It is the first strategy delivering on the [commitments](#) made by the president in her political guidelines. Looking towards the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration (the UN resolution on gender equality adopted in 1995), the Strategy represents the EU's contribution to shaping a more gender-equal world.

Rising up the agenda

The European Union's history of promoting equality between men and women can be traced back to 1957, when the principle that both sexes should be paid equally for equal work was included in the Treaty of Rome. The principle was introduced to measures falling within economic and social policy to help overcome the historical disadvantages faced by women. In 1976, a [directive](#) was adopted focussing on the implementation of the equal treatment principle in access to employment, vocational training and promotion, and working conditions. The turn of the century brought the adoption of a further two EU directives in aid of this principle: the first, in June 2020, on [equal treatment irrespective of race or ethnic origin](#), followed in November 2020 by another [directive](#) establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation. The notion of gender mainstreaming was also developed through a number of European Parliament resolutions, including the 2016 [Resolution on Gender Mainstreaming in the work of the European Parliament](#) and the 2018 [Resolution on Gender Equality in EU Trade Agreements](#).

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2016 also saw the launch of the [Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality 2016-2019](#), a reference framework to guide the Commission's work to promote gender equality. This strategic engagement identified five key areas for action: equal economic independence for women and men; equal pay for work of equal value; equality in decision-making; dignity, integrity and ending gender-based violence; and promoting gender equality beyond the EU.

While important steps have been made over the past 15 years, progress has been slow and the gap between member states remains wide. In 2020, the EU scored 67.9 (with 100 representing full equality) on the [Gender Equality Index](#) developed by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). The EU's highest points are scored in the domains of health, money, and work, and its lowest in the domain of power, which refers to decision-making across the political, economic, and social spheres. When it comes to political power, women continue to be underrepresented in EU politics: only [30.3 per cent](#) of members of national parliaments are women. In the 2019 European elections, only [39 per cent](#) of elected MEPs were women, though this represented an all-time high.

In the workplace, structural problems which undercut the value of women's work are only fully revealed when combining a macroeconomic perspective with insight into women's experiences of the workplace. [Sectoral segregation](#) – which sees some sectors dominated by women (e.g. education) while others are heavily occupied by men (e.g. construction and agriculture) – work-life balance, and the glass ceiling all play a role in the persistent gender pay gap. While more women are entering full-time employment, they are still overrepresented in part-time work. [EIGE research](#) has also found that less than 10 per cent of CEOs are women, and that women are three times more likely than men to be sexually harassed at work, mostly by a male supervisor.

Gender-based violence also remains a serious issue that affects many women in Europe. According to a [2015 report](#), 33 per cent of women in the EU have experienced physical and/or sexual violence, while 55 per cent of women have been sexually harassed. With the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic, stay-at-home orders to contain the spread of the virus have [intensified domestic violence](#) in Europe as across the world.

Backsliding in member states

This stagnation of progress on gender equality can be understood against the backdrop of an international [backlash](#) against women's rights. While situations vary across Europe, a [2018 study](#) commissioned by the European Parliament identified a backsliding on women's and girls' rights in six countries (Austria, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia) in areas including sexual and reproductive health and the situation of women's rights NGOs.

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In recent years, the EU has also witnessed the rise of “anti-gender” movements in various countries, at times with negative impacts on legal and institutional frameworks. Poland is a notable example: although it ratified the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention on combating violence against women in 2015, there has been significant resistance since the arrival to power of the right-wing Law and Justice party the same year, with the government announcing its intention to [formally withdraw from the Convention](#) [read more on [gender politics in Poland](#)].

Poland's former Minister of Justice Zbigniew Ziobro openly opposed ratification of the Istanbul Convention, calling it "a carrier of gender ideology". A similar situation has played out in Slovakia, where in 2018 Prime Minister Robert Fico announced that the country would not ratify the Istanbul Convention, claiming it could violate the constitution and question the "natural differences" between men and women. To date, six EU member states have still not ratified the Convention: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovakia.

Aiming for a Union of equality

Against this challenging backdrop, the Commission's Gender Equality Strategy sets out important actions towards equality by 2025. It targets similar areas to the 2016-2019 strategic engagement, with a renewed commitment to combatting gender-based violence and promoting a gender-equal economy, equality in decision making, participation in society, and gender mainstreaming. The 2020-2025 Strategy builds on the former strategic engagement by bringing more concrete proposals and introducing further priority areas.

The first and most crucial step that the Commission proposes in the Strategy is to complete the EU's accession to the Istanbul Convention. The Commission also sets out its intention to extend the areas of crime with a cross-border dimension to include crimes such as human trafficking and the sexual exploitation of women, recognising that a unified European approach would be more efficient in tackling these. It proposes additional measures and new legislation aimed at preventing specific forms of gender-based violence, for example female genital mutilation, sexual harassment, honour killings, or forced marriages. The Strategy outlines a commitment to the prevention of violence and the importance of pre-emptive measures and education, which includes not only teaching gender equality to children from a young age but also reinforcing public services and the criminal justice system.

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In the area of gender-equal economy, the Strategy sets out its aim to offer women and men "equal opportunities to thrive, be paid equally for work of equal value and equally share caring and financial responsibilities." The Work-Life Balance Directive will introduce minimum standards for family leave and will promote equal sharing of caring responsibilities between parents in order to close the gender gap. Furthermore, the Strategy outlines measures to promote women's participation in innovation through the Horizon Europe European Innovation Council, which will provide support to female entrepreneurs and investors in an effort to reverse their under-representation in higher paid professions. Meanwhile, the updated European Skills Agenda will help address horizontal segregation, stereotyping, and gender gaps in education and in training. The legislative initiative on pay transparency that the Strategy proposes, combined with effective means of enforcement such as mandatory pay audits for large companies, constitutes a necessary step to close the gender pay gap.

When it comes to political representation, the Commission pledges to promote the participation of women as voters and candidates in the 2024 European elections. Other notable measures outlined in the Strategy include the appointment of the EU's first Commissioner for Equality, whose work is to be supported by a task force charged with ensuring the implementation of gender mainstreaming across the Commission's major initiatives, as well as the launch of the Gender Action Plan (GAP III) as a policy framework to address gender inequality in all external EU action.

Far from a level playing field

According to a [2017 Eurobarometer survey](#), 91 per cent of Europeans think that supporting gender equality is vital for a democratic society, while 87 per cent deem it important for the economy. However, attitudes to gender equality vary greatly across member states.

The Nordic countries have historically been considered leaders on gender equality in Europe, being among the first in the world to provide women with full voting rights. EIGE ranks Sweden, Denmark, and Finland in the top four places of its 2020 [Gender Equality Index](#) (scoring 83.8, 77.4, and 74.7 respectively). These countries have pioneered [gender-neutral parental leave policies](#), and in 2015 Sweden became the first country in the world to announce it would adopt a [feminist foreign policy](#).

The bottom two places in EIGE's 2020 Gender Equality Index are occupied by Hungary and Greece. In both countries, inequalities are most pronounced in the domains of power and time, meaning that women are under-represented in decision-making positions and spend a significantly high proportion of time doing care and domestic work. In 2020, the Hungarian Parliament [refused to ratify the Istanbul Convention](#), arguing that it promotes “destructive gender ideologies”. The same year, Hungarian Minister for Family Affairs Katalin Novák released a [video](#) encouraging women to embrace their role as mothers and to turn down “false emancipation”. It is hard to imagine that in such a context implementation of the Commission's Gender Equality Strategy will be met with acceptance and enthusiasm.

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Greece faces a different set of challenges. While the country has some of the most liberal [abortion laws in Europe](#) and has taken notable steps to advance gender equality in the past (for example, its 2009 nationwide programme to prevent violence against women), progress [stalled](#) following the 2008 financial crisis which saw higher unemployment rates for women as cuts dismantled the public sector (which predominantly employed women).

Varying perceptions of issues related to gender in member states will likely be an obstacle to the effective implementation of the EU Gender Equality Strategy. The debate around ratification of the Istanbul Convention demonstrates this. Should the EU's accession to the Convention remain blocked by certain member states, the Commission has announced its intention to propose other measures to reach the objectives set out in the Convention.

Ongoing austerity measures in some countries may also pose a barrier to the successful implementation of the Strategy, a situation that will likely be exacerbated in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. The disruption of women's economic participation due to lockdowns can only make it more difficult to promote a gender-equal economy. Moreover, the increase in domestic violence during the pandemic underlines the need for the Strategy to prioritise combatting gender-based violence.

A welcome step, but room for improvement

The Gender Equality Strategy is a joint effort on the part of the EU institutions to fight the root causes of gender inequality, and for that it is undeniably welcomed by many civil society organisations. President of the European Women's Lobby (EWL) Gwendoline Lefebvre has [hailed the Strategy](#) as “a great first step to accelerate progress on the rights of all women and girls throughout the EU”. Nonetheless, there is certainly room for improvement. One proposal by the EWL is to consider all forms of violence against women as Eurocrimes (offences required to

be dealt with at the European level according to the treaties), as the Strategy currently limits this to “areas of crime where harmonisation is possible”.

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Meanwhile, other civil society organisations such as the European Confederation of Relief and Development NGOs (CONCORD), the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM), and the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) have proposed concrete actions to make gender mainstreaming standard practice and highlighted the infringement of women’s rights by private companies as an area in need of policy intervention. In a public consultation led by the European Commission, gender stereotypes as well as women’s political under-representation were also identified as issues requiring urgent attention.

In the European Parliament, the Greens/EFA group has welcomed the Strategy but remains critical of it, calling for a higher level of ambition and stronger measures that are backed up by clear targets and monitoring mechanisms, in areas such as AI and taxation. In terms of legislation, the Strategy’s prospects are low. Swedish Green MEP Alice Bah Kuhnke voiced her disappointment: “This was a critical opportunity to commit to a directive to combat gender-based violence – and the Commission has wasted it. The crisis of gender-based violence cannot be allowed to continue without a legal framework.”

The Strategy also fails to identify actions to improve the socio-economic situation of women who face multiple forms of discrimination – such as migrant, disabled, and LGBTI+ women – and to combat feminised precarious work. There are no clear commitments on gender budgeting or to unblock the Equal Treatment Directive, an anti-discrimination directive that has been at a political impasse ever since it was proposed in 2008. Beyond the Gender Equality Strategy, the Greens/EFA group highlights the poor introduction of a gender perspective in European climate policies: gender is a glaring absence in both the Commission’s [European Climate Law](#) and the European Green Deal.

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Given the impacts of the Covid-19 crisis on women’s health and social and economic well-being, gender mainstreaming should be at the core of the recovery. The EU’s recovery plan, however, has been found to be **gender-blind**: the Next Generation EU funds fail to address challenges in the care sector (in which women are over-represented as workers) that have been exposed by the pandemic, and other gendered impacts of the crisis. There is much to be gained by adopting a “dual approach” to recovery that incorporates a focus on a transition to a green and care economy as well as clear gender equality objectives.

No one route to equality

The Gender Equality Strategy is an important undertaking by the European Commission that can reinforce and intensify efforts to tackle gender inequalities across member states. Since, broadly speaking, there is support for the Strategy among the European institutions, member states, and European citizens, it is worth considering why it is facing severe obstacles in its implementation. Is the Strategy to be treated as another legal trophy to be added to the long list of directives and resolutions adopted over the years? Should approaches to tackling gender inequality be tailored to reflect the specific issues faced by each member state? Every national context has different needs and capacities. It would therefore be prudent to start by focussing on the areas that pose the most significant challenges. For instance, Greece could begin by concentrating its efforts to address gender inequalities in representation and decision-making, whereas Bulgaria faces a bigger challenge in the area of domestic work. The Strategy should try to strike a balance between offering a unifying approach and recognising the different realities in each member state.

It is undeniable that important victories for women's rights have already been achieved in legal and institutional frameworks. However, the promotion of gender equality also requires deeper cultural change and greater solidarity. There is no linear development towards gender equality, but through national and international cooperation (for example, building alliances with international organisations such as UN Women), the EU can respond to discriminatory norms that continue to stand in the way of progress.



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Published March 19, 2021

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/eu-gender-equality-strategy-too-little-but-not-too-late/>

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