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From: General Secretariat of the Council
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Subject: Beijing +25 – The 5th Review of the Implementation of the Beijing Platform
for Action in the EU Member States
- Executive Summary

Delegations will find attached the executive summary of the report entitled ‘Beijing +25 – The 5th Review of the Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in the EU Member States’ prepared by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) at the request of the Finnish Presidency.

Executive Summary

While the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) was established already 25 years ago, many of the challenges identified in 1995 remain relevant today (such as gender pay gap, unequal distribution of unpaid work, or experiences of gender-based violence, just to name a few). This report both tracks progress against these long-standing challenges and goes beyond them to assess new challenges that have emerged in recent years, including those brought by digitalisation, recent migration flows, and a mounting backlash against gender equality.

The report is the fifth review of the overall developments at EU level related to the 12 BPfA areas of concern. The report focuses particularly on trends and developments observed since 2013, picking up where the last such review (Beijing+20, review period 2007-2012) left off. The report only covers research and policy developments up to March 2019, with a few exceptions in cases where important EU level developments happened more recently (such as the coming into force of the Work-life Balance Directive or the recent Elections into the European Parliament).

Much of this review also reflects on the progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by all UN Member States in 2015. These include a specific SDG related to gender equality (SDG 5), and other goals highly relevant within the context of this review: ending poverty; equal access to education and training; improving health, including universal access to sexual and reproductive health care; addressing gender-based violence; quality employment for both women and men; gender equality in decision-making positions; and equal access to justice.

The executive summary of key findings from the Beijing+25 review is organised around five key themes emerging from this research:

- 1) Gender inequalities in the economy;
- 2) Gender-responsive public infrastructure, social protection and services;
- 3) Freedom from gender-based violence, stereotypes and stigma;
- 4) Parity democracy¹, accountability and gender-responsive institutions;
- 5) Peaceful and inclusive societies

These themes were chosen to highlight key findings emerging from this review, which often cut across multiple BPfA areas and are closely connected together. Presenting key findings in this way allows us to reflect on their different aspects in a comprehensive way while avoiding unnecessary repetition. The way the themes link to individual BPfA areas of concern and individual SDGs is summarised in Annex 0.²

¹ Defined as in this report as the full integration of women, on an equal footing with men, at all levels and in all areas of the workings of a democratic society, by means of multidisciplinary strategy.

² The executive summary for the most part does not feature references, as these are included in the main body of the report where findings are presented in more detail. References are provided only for sources used exclusively in the executive summary and nowhere else in the report. These references are provided in end notes of this document.

1. Gender inequalities in the economy

Women's economic empowerment is considered to be a pre-requisite for a fairer, more inclusive economic growth. It is intimately linked to women's wellbeing and to the protection of their human rights.³ It calls for a broader approach to analysing economic inequalities and the interaction between wellbeing and the economy, known as the "Economy of Wellbeing". This cross-sectoral approach aims to improve and reinforce both the economy and overall levels of wellbeing. It takes a broader view of economic growth than just GDP growth, considering gender equality (among other factors) as an important aspect of growth. It also emphasises the importance of analysing the gendered impacts of economic policies. This is reflected in a wider trend in EU policy towards a more social Europe – for example, gender equality features among the key principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights and work-life balance has become a key EU policy priority, most recently marked by the Directive on work-life balance for parents and carers.

Gender inequalities in the labour market persist

Women's relation to the formal economy continues to be characterised by a number of long-standing gender inequalities. First and foremost, this includes lower employment rates of women compared to men, particularly for women who come from certain vulnerable ethnic and migrant backgrounds and for lone mothers.

³ While individual wellbeing has multiple dimensions, it is increasingly judged based on individuals' capabilities to pursue activities or to experience states that they find valuable or positive (for example, working, participating in politics, enjoying a state of good health, etc.). At individual level, access to income and commodities usually affects personal wellbeing, but it is not an end in itself. For example, higher individual income can ultimately lead to improvements to life satisfaction and health. At population level, a higher GDP correlates with higher average subjective wellbeing, even if continued income growth is not always linked to greater happiness. Conversely, research has shown that loneliness and an extreme gap between the rich and poor are both factors that can undermine wellbeing.

Once in the labour market, women are more likely to have jobs that are precarious, untenured and part-time. This became particularly visible in the aftermath of the economic crisis, which led to reductions in the number of public sector jobs (mostly performed by women) and concerning deregulation of working conditions in private sector job alternatives. Poor working conditions are among the key risk factors for in-work poverty⁴.

In contrast, women continue to be under-represented among entrepreneurs. This can be at least partly linked to additional entrepreneurship challenges faced by women, including difficulties in accessing the necessary finance to start up a business.⁵

Women and men also remain concentrated in different fields of study, sectors, and occupations, partly due to gender stereotypes in education. Women miss out on education and jobs in some high-tech fields, including computer science and information and communication technology. Women are also under-represented within environmental professions (e.g. in the energy sector), which has potential negative implications for environmental policies that could benefit from more diverse ideas and approaches. Men are under-represented in education, health and welfare studies.

⁴ Defined as individuals living in a household with an equivalised disposable income below the risk-of-poverty threshold. This threshold is set at 60% of the national median equivalised disposable income (after social transfers) (Eurostat, 2018, available at <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/DDN-20180316-1>).

⁵ This is reflected in the findings of a 2013 survey which found that, on average in the EU, only 24 % of women reported having access to the money needed compared to 32 % of men. OECD (2016), *Entrepreneurship at a glance, 2016*. Available at: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/industry-and-services/entrepreneurship-at-a-glance-2016_entrepreneur_aag-2016-en

The above inequalities contribute to a substantial and persistent gender pay gap in the EU (16 % in 2017), reaching particularly high levels in some Member States (up to about 25 % in Estonia). They also contribute to other inequalities over the life course, since women accumulate less experience in the labour market, lower life-time earnings, and fewer pension rights. This puts them at greater risk of poverty than men, particularly when taking care of children without a partner or in older age. More broadly, this situation undermines social justice, as it stands in opposition to the right of women and men to have equal pay for the same work or for work of equal value, as well as to have equal opportunities to acquire pension rights – both of which are protected under the European Pillar of Social Rights.

While the above inequalities are well known and long-standing, the progress in addressing these has been fairly slow. This can be illustrated on several key indicators from this area:

- The gender pay gap and gender pension gap have reduced somewhat since 2013, but the gaps still remain large (around 16 % and 37 % respectively);
- Even though employment rates have improved for both women and men since 2013, the gender employment gap remains almost the same at 11.5 pp;
- Women are still almost four times more likely to be in part-time employment than men, with little reduction in this difference compared to 2013.

Looking forward, there are some challenges that are likely to become more prominent. The differences in employment patterns and content may put women at disproportionate risk of future job loss due to automation and digitalisation. Women who are less educated, older and employed in low-skilled clerical, services and sales positions are most at risk in this respect. Women are also under-represented in ICT professions and among entrepreneurs, which means that they could lose out on some of the biggest future employment opportunities afforded by technological advancements and digitalisation. Finally, the dominance of men within environmental sectors weakens the influence of women in areas that will become more important as the EU takes further steps to tackle climate change post-2020.

Disproportionate share of unpaid work carried out by women leads to major gender inequalities in the labour market

Many of the economic inequalities described above stem, at least partly, from the unequal distribution of care responsibilities and other forms of unpaid work, whereby:

- Women continue to bear more of the responsibility of caring for children, as well as older relatives, than men. This makes it difficult for them to achieve a good work-life balance, often preventing or reducing their involvement in the (formal) labour market.
- Women are also more likely to carry out other forms of unpaid work, such as housework, shopping, and volunteering.⁶ In the EU, women are estimated to undertake an average of about 13 hours' more unpaid work per week than men⁷.
- While unpaid care work is indispensable to the wellbeing of individuals and wider society, its contribution to economic growth is largely invisible. The most popular economic aggregates used in measuring economic growth (i.e. GDP) do not reflect contribution of such work.
- Despite some progress, the Barcelona objectives for providing formal childcare have not yet been fully met within some Member States.⁸ Cost plays an important role in undermining use of these services; nearly a third of households face some difficulty in affording them.

⁶ Based on the most recent OECD survey data from 21 Member States.

⁷ Here, unpaid work includes routine housework; shopping; care for household members; child care; adult care; care for non-household members; volunteering; travel related to household activities; other unpaid activities. The data covers all women and men aged 15 to 64. For more information see for example https://www.oecd.org/dev/development-gender/Unpaid_care_work.pdf or <https://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?queryid=54757>.

⁸ The Barcelona Targets envisaged that Member States would provide childcare to at least 33 % of children under 3 and at least 90 % of children aged between 3 and the mandatory school age by 2010. At the EU level, the former target has already been met, but the latter target is still some way off. At country level the picture is less favourable, as only 11 Member States meet both targets.

- Similarly, there are gaps in the availability of formal long-term care services for older people and people with disabilities, as well as significant variation when it comes to Member State spending on these services.
- Flexible working arrangements can help women participate in the labour market, but can also reinforce gender differences in unpaid work. Recent research suggests that men who work flexibly often do so to enhance their work performance, whereas women often use such arrangements to meet increased family responsibilities.
- Finally, there are ongoing issues related to variation in eligibility, length and compensation of family-related leave across the EU Member States, and its overall low take-up by men.

Since 2013, at least 20 Member States have introduced changes to their family-related leave, and more than half have introduced changes to childcare and benefit provisions designed to ease the lives of working parents since 2013. At the EU level, the Directive on work-life balance of parents and carers came into force in August 2019, taking first steps towards harmonising minimum entitlements to family-related leave in the EU, improving flexible working arrangements and encouraging the uptake of these among men.

Looking forward, an important challenge will be to ensure the efficient use of flexible working arrangements and family-related leaves to promote gender equality rather than reinforce traditional roles. The increasing need for long-term care for the ageing population of the EU also represents a significant challenge for achieving gender equality, given that women continue to be the main providers of care and that long-term care services remain insufficient across many Member States. Moves towards zero waste lifestyles may place even more pressure on women to take up unpaid work activities, since women are often assigned more responsibility for the domestic environment.

Women are at greater risk of poverty and social exclusion than men, with negative impacts on their wellbeing

Largely as a result of gender inequalities in the economy, women are at greater risk of poverty or social exclusion than men (23.3 % of women compared to 21.6 % of men). This gender gap is likely to be understated in available data, since current approaches to poverty measurement are prone to underestimate women's exposure.⁹ This is because incomes are typically measured at household level, assuming equal sharing of resources within households.

Poverty or social exclusion is often concentrated among certain, particularly vulnerable, groups of women (and men):

- Almost one in three single women and men are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Having children further increases the risk of poverty for single adults, with almost a half of lone parents at risk. The vast majority (87 %) of lone parents are women;
- Around one in two people from a non-EU migrant background are at a risk of poverty and social exclusion;
- Four out of five members of the Roma communities have incomes below the (monetary) poverty threshold in the country they reside in. Fewer than one in five Roma women (aged 16 and over) are in employment, and many Roma girls do not complete secondary education;
- Almost a third of women with disabilities are at risk of poverty or social exclusion, largely due to additional employment challenges they are facing;

⁹ Available data on monetary poverty (one aspect of the AROPE rate) are based on household income and assume that the income of a household is shared equally between its (adult) members. As this often is not the case, these data may underestimate women's poverty risks. See Betti, G., Mangiavacchi, L. and Piccoli, L. (2017), Individual Poverty Measurement Using a Fuzzy Intrahousehold Approach. ZA DP No. 11009. Available at: <http://ftp.iza.org/dp11009.pdf>

- Although older people are less exposed to poverty and social exclusion than younger age groups, the gender gap between women and men is widest amongst those aged 65 and over (20.6 % for women compared to 15.2 % for men). This is partly because women receive on average lower pensions than men.

The increased risk of poverty and social exclusion for the above groups is often associated with (a combination of) unemployment or inactivity, low work intensity at a household level, low educational attainment, poor working conditions, insufficient financial resources material deprivation and/or discrimination.

Since 2013, the total number of women and men at risk of poverty or social exclusion has reduced by 10 million, representing progress against this long-standing challenge but falling short of the EU's 2020 target. More than one in five people in the EU continue to be at risk, and a small yet significant gender gap persists.

Gender inequalities in the economy result in increased vulnerabilities of women that go beyond higher poverty risks. Women with a lower socioeconomic status are at greater risk of poor physical and mental health than both men with the same socioeconomic status and women with a higher socioeconomic status. Due to their lower average resources, women are more likely than men to be affected by the impacts of climate change and are more vulnerable to energy poverty. Moreover, high levels of economic inequality have been linked to worse child wellbeing and impaired economic growth.¹⁰

¹⁰ Pickett, K. E., & Wilkinson, R. G. (2007), *Child wellbeing and income inequality in rich societies: ecological cross sectional study*. *Bmj*, 335(7629), 1080. OECD (2015), *In It Together: Why Less Inequality Benefits All*. OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264235120-en>. OECD (2016), *Entrepreneurship at a glance, 2016*. Available at: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/industry-and-services/entrepreneurship-at-a-glance-2016_entrepreneur_aag-2016-en OECD (2019), *Under Pressure: The Squeezed Middle Class*. OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/689afed1-en>.

2. Gender-responsive public infrastructure, social protection and services

Gender-responsive public infrastructure, social protection and services are those that recognise the specific needs of both women and men, and aim to promote gender equality. ‘Public infrastructure’ can include both social infrastructure (such as childcare services) and physical infrastructure (such as transportation and energy provision).

Welfare, pension and tax systems are often not gender-responsive

The design of some national welfare systems does not recognise the gendered nature of poverty. For instance, means-tested benefits are often delivered at the household level. As such, women’s entitlement is linked to their partner’s status/income, reducing their independence. Tax systems can also reinforce gender inequalities. In some Member States, they may discriminate against the lowest-earning partners within couples (most often women). This can act as a barrier to women’s entry into the labour market.

Similarly, the design of pension systems can increase older women’s exposure to poverty, particularly in countries with low wages. Contributory pension schemes can disadvantage those in non-standard forms of employment, such as part-time, low-paid and temporary workers (the majority of whom are women). These systems can also work against people who take career interruptions – disproportionately affecting women, who are more likely to leave paid work because of their care responsibilities.

Since 2013, the proportion of people taken out of poverty by social transfers in the EU has declined somewhat, even though social benefits continue to play an important role in reducing the risk of poverty. This is, at least in part, due to austerity measures, such as cuts to public services and benefits, adopted in response to the economic crisis. There is some evidence that social transfers have become less effective at tackling poverty amongst women in particular.¹¹

¹¹ This is assessed by consider the risk of poverty amongst women and men, both before and after social transfers. In 2013, the impact of social transfers was approximately the same for women and men. By 2017, social transfers led to a larger reduction of poverty among men than among women (34.5 % vs 33.1 %).

Looking forward, many Member States are projected to reduce their spending on pensions in coming years. This may exacerbate the gender pension gap, as adequate pensions increasingly rely on long and full careers and access to pension top-ups, both of which women may be less able to access. An alternative, implemented in some countries, may be to use minimum income schemes to top-up pensions.

Healthcare services do not always fulfil gendered needs

Women and men have a range of gendered health needs, linked both to biological differences and psycho-social factors. While non-communicable diseases are responsible for the vast majority of ill health in Europe, women experience higher levels of morbidity and mortality from certain non-communicable diseases compared to men, such as cardio-vascular diseases and cancer. Women and men also have different mental health needs – for example, women are more likely to experience depressive symptoms than men, and nearly twice as likely to experience major depression (estimated at 3.5 % compared to 2.2 %).

While self-reported unmet health needs have halved overall since 2013, gendered health needs continue to go unfulfilled due to a lack of available services in some cases. For example, there is a significant variation in the level of services available by mental health disorder and by Member State, leaving substantial proportion of people who require treatment without access. Many women and girls (particularly among migrants, refugees, those living in rural areas, and women from Roma communities) continue to lack access to necessary prenatal, maternal, sexual and reproductive health services. Nearly half of pregnant refugees and migrants in Europe may lack access to appropriate antenatal care.

Where required services are available, women may face gendered challenges in accessing and using these, particularly when they belong to certain marginalised or minority groups (such as Roma, refugees or LGBTQI*). This is reflected in the slightly higher proportion of women who report unmet need for medical examination compared to men, usually because they are not able to afford them. There are also some concerns around gender sensitivity of such services. For example, women's health services tend to focus on their sexual, reproductive and maternal health, while other health needs remain overlooked, particularly in case of non-communicable diseases.

In the future, it will be important to ensure that medical research adequately responds to gendered health needs. The prevalence of various medical conditions differ between women and men, as does their response to pharmaceuticals. Despite this, pharmaceuticals have been primarily tested on men so far¹². This means that adverse side effects that are more common, or only appear in, women, may go unidentified. To some extent, the EU has addressed this issue through the 2014 Clinical Trials Regulation, which requires the consideration of gender in clinical trials. However, the full effects of this Regulation (due to be implemented in 2019) remain to be seen.

New transport and smart home technologies present an opportunity to challenge gendered behaviours

The gender differences in mobility and transport are well documented. Women are less likely to own or use a car. They often travel shorter distances, have more complex trip patterns, and walk, cycle or use public transport more frequently than men. Much of these differences can be traced to the disproportionate care responsibilities of women. Despite this, there is a lack of consideration of these gendered patterns within transport policy, perhaps in part explained by the strong masculinity embedded in this sector at all levels and the small share of women in decision-making.

Looking forward, new transport technologies may present opportunities to challenge gendered behaviours. For example, autonomous driving might challenge the symbolic connection between automobility and masculinity, which may help to redefine the gendered human-car-relationship and contribute to less car use and to a more environmentally-friendly form of mobility.

¹² Liu, C. (2018), Are women greener? Corporate gender diversity and environmental violations. *Journal of Corporate Finance*. 52. 10.1016/j.jcorpfin.2018.08.004. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327007472_Are_women_greener_Corporate_gender_diversity_and_environmental_violations

Smart home technologies may also have potentially transformative effects for care and domestic work (for example, through ambient assistant systems) if gender-differentiated use and users' needs of the new technical devices are taken into account.

3. **Freedom from gender-based violence, stereotypes and stigma**¹³

Women face gender-based violence, stereotypes and stigma in their daily lives, which leads to persistent gender inequalities across various areas of life and their ongoing acceptance. They contribute to, for example, gender-differentiated choices within education (see above), training and the economy, as well as to the under-representation of women in positions of power (see below).

Gender stereotypes persist in media and education

Gender inequalities, sexism and stereotypes persist across different media sectors,¹⁴ for example in television advertising, visual media, the gaming sector and social media. This is alarming, since even 'minor' stereotypes presented in the media can serve as a basis for escalating acts of gender bias and discrimination, and ultimately lead to (gender-based) violence.¹⁵

¹³ 'Stigma is a powerful social process of devaluing people or groups based on a real or perceived difference—such as gender, age, sexual orientation, class, race, ethnicity, or behavior. Stigma is used by dominant groups to create, legitimize, and perpetuate social inequalities and exclusion. Stigma often leads to discrimination, which is the unfair and unjust treatment of an individual based on that socially identified status' (USAID, available at https://www.healthpolicyproject.com/pubs/272_StigmaandDiscriminationResourceGuide.pdf)

¹⁴ The BPfA framework identifies media as electronic, print, visual and audio media communications, including new technologies of communication. For this review, media includes the following: news; adverts; commercial audio-visual materials; entertainment industry; social media (including users); pornography.

¹⁵ For more on this, see Pyramid of Hate: <https://study.com/academy/lesson/pyramid-of-hate-definition-examples.html>

There are multiple examples of inequalities and stereotypes in the media: women are frequently portrayed in stereotypical roles in advertising; they are more likely than men to be portrayed naked or in sexually-revealing clothing in films; if they feature in video games at all, they are often depicted in sexualised, secondary roles; and recent technological developments in online social media platforms may propagate gender stereotypes through built-in artificial intelligence algorithms.

Such inequalities are driven, at least in part, by gender imbalances among those responsible for developing, producing and regulating media content. Since 2013, the proportion of women employed in motion picture, video and television programme production, sound recording, or music publishing activities has remained under 40 %, with no overall increase in this period. Women also only account for around 30 % of media regulatory authority employees.

Overall, there is a lack of EU-wide comparable data on a range of gender related issues (such as women's presentation in the media or online harassment on social media platforms) in the sector. Existing monitoring initiatives have been under-financed, and data collection has not been consistent or comparable.

Against this backdrop, some online entertainment services appear to be having a positive impact on the portrayal of gender and the visibility of the LGBTQI* community through influential television programmes. Looking forward, the increasing use of such services gives them power to shape public perceptions in a positive manner.

Beyond the media, gender stereotypes play an important role in education. Crucially, gendered expectations affect study and career choices of young people and significantly contribute to the segregation of study fields and labour markets. The stereotypes that contribute to segregation can be found in many contexts, including educational materials and curricula, distribution of household roles, and many others.

New forms of violence against women emerge in the context of digitalisation

It is not yet possible to know the full extent of violence against women, to large extent due to differences in national legal and monitoring systems and under-reporting of violence. Despite these limitations, it is clear that gender-based violence continues to be a daily reality for millions of women and girls living in the EU. As many as 1 in 2 women in the EU have experienced sexual harassment and 1 in 3 are affected by physical and/or sexual violence. Women and girls account for more than two-thirds of victims of trafficking in human beings and they are overwhelmingly trafficked for sexual exploitation. Certain life circumstances, including living with a disability, being a refugee, asylum-seeker or being economically dependent on a partner, can further increase women's vulnerability to different forms of gender based-violence.

Women are also subject to gender-based harassment and bullying in the workplace, which was visibly demonstrated by the recent #MeToo movement. There are concerns that women will be discouraged from participating in politics and public life as a result of harassment; for example, a global survey found that over 80 % of women parliamentarians experiencing some form of psychological violence. Women in other public functions, such as journalists and those fighting for women's and minority rights, are victims of sexist cyber harassment.

Despite the pervasiveness of the problem, there is currently no EU-level legislation that comprehensively addresses violence against women and girls; and the efforts to prevent violence and support its victims are often insufficient at Member State level. The ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women (Istanbul Convention) by the EU would be decisive in addressing this situation - the EU has already taken steps in this direction, but there has been resistance from several Member States. The implementation of the previously adopted Victims' Rights Directive and European Protection Order Directive also helped address some aspects of violence against women and girls, even though important limitations in their implementation were highlighted in assessment reports.

Against these long-standing challenges, little progress has been seen. The total number of recorded instances of rape and sexual assault has steadily increased since 2013. Regarding support for victims of gender-based violence, there has been a small increase in the number of telephone helplines for women, but a significant decline in the number of women's shelters. Judged against the standards outlined in the Istanbul Convention, it was estimated that there were only 1 in 20 of the necessary women's centres and less than a half of the expected number of beds within the women's shelters in 2017.¹⁶

Looking forward, the emergence of cyber violence (including online hate speech, cyber stalking, bullying or harassment, and non-consensual pornography) is of increasing concern. Such violence can silence women and discourage them from taking a prominent role in public life - for example, around four in ten journalists have reported self-censorship following online abuse. It also amplifies other types of victimisation through digital means, and may be the precursor to other forms of abuse - around one in five young women living in the EU has experienced cyber sexual harassment, and those who have experienced it are more likely to have also faced violence from an intimate partner. Certain aspects of the digital world have a particularly negative impact on girls, including the impacts of pornography, child sexual abuse material and cyberbullying.

Despite these challenges, there is no specific instrument at EU level to tackle these forms of cyber violence. As such, some cases of online abuse are not recognised as harassment and go unpunished. The definitions of harm on online platforms also rarely acknowledge violence against women.

¹⁶ WAVE (2017), *WAVE Country Report 2017: The Situation of Women's Specialist Support Services in Europe*. Available at: http://files.wave-network.org/researchreports/WAVE_CR_2017.pdf

Women face barriers to accessing justice and support for victims of gender-based crimes is insufficient

Women face a range of challenges in accessing justice, especially in legal cases relating to rights violations. These challenges include certain broad social stereotypes (e.g. people still often think that victims exaggerate abuse or rape claims), discrimination through gender-blind legislation, inconsistent application of gender-related legislation, high costs of legal proceedings and judiciary gender-biases.

These challenges are apparent from the application of legislation on gender-based violence. Gender-based violence is often under-reported, and has low prosecution and conviction rates. In some cases, criminal proceedings regarding cases of domestic violence can be discontinued and lenient sentences are sometimes awarded to perpetrators. Moreover, the subsidiary nature of domestic violence means that when a more serious crime has been committed in an intimate relationship, prosecution generally proceeds under this offence, which obscures the gendered dimension of the crime. Besides facing challenges in accessing justice, women who have experienced gender-based crimes may not receive sufficient support services. In 2016, the EU fell well short of the recognised international targets on minimum levels of service availability.

Since 2013, several important improvements in the gender-responsiveness of justice systems in the EU have been noted. This includes the steps taken towards ratifying the Istanbul Convention and the implementation of the Victims' Rights and the European Protection Order Directives.

4. Parity democracy, accountability and gender-responsive institutions

Parity democracy involves “the full integration of women on an equal footing with men at all levels and in all areas of the workings of a democratic society, by means of multidisciplinary strategies”.¹⁷

There are a range of factors that can contribute to achieving parity democracy, which include:

- Gender mainstreaming as a key transformative strategy to support the realisation of gender equality in practice;
- Balanced representation of women and men in different areas of life, as well as equal representation of women’s and men’s concerns and interests in decision-making;
- High quality, relevant, comparable and comprehensive data collection to accurately assess progress against various gendered challenges facing the EU;
- Strong and effective Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) that promote gender equality and women’s rights, and hold governments accountable when they threaten these.

¹⁷ Council of Europe (2003), *Genderware – The Council of Europe and the Participation of Women in Political Life*. Integrated project “Making democratic institutions work”.

EU and Member State efforts towards gender mainstreaming show an overall lack of progress

The approach to mainstreaming gender across different areas of EU policy is fragmented and suggests a lack of continuity and progress. Gender mainstreaming tools, such as gender impact assessments¹⁸ or gender budgeting¹⁹, are used infrequently at EU level throughout different stages of the policy-making process. Even where gender equality objectives are included, a cross-cutting gender mainstreaming approach is often lacking. For instance, whilst it is promising that the European Pillar of Social Rights includes a gender-specific principle, it lacks a gender dimension across some of its other key principles.

Notably, efforts to mainstreaming gender into the EU budget are not improving. The proposals for the 2021-2027 MFF regulations show an even lower level of ambition in supporting gender equality objectives than those of MFF 2014-2020 and 2007-2013. The understanding and approach towards gender mainstreaming continues to be based on the definition of gender equality as a horizontal principle, with no standalone quantitative target.

Some EU funds, strategies and processes have a strong gender mainstreaming element in their design, but fail to follow up sufficiently at the monitoring and evaluation stages. This is the case with the 2014-2021 European Structural and Investment Funds, which provide a gender-specific ex-ante conditionality for funding, but often fail to include gender-specific indicators and sex-disaggregated data (except for the ESF). In other cases, such as with the Europe 2020 Strategy, a lack of gender mainstreaming at the design stage was later addressed within the EU's mechanism for coordination of economic and social policy (European Semester). Here, efforts were made to improve reporting on the gender dimension through important instruments, particularly the Joint Employment Reports.

¹⁸ I.e. Policy tool for the screening of a given policy proposal, in order to detect and assess its differential impact or effects on women and men, so that these imbalances can be redressed before the proposal is endorsed (EIGE).

¹⁹ Defined as Application of gender mainstreaming in the budgetary process. It entails a gender-based assessment of budgets, incorporating a gender perspective at all levels of the budgetary process, and restructuring revenues and expenditures in order to promote gender equality (EIGE)

While the EU increasingly focuses on tackling climate change and drastically reducing carbon emissions, gender mainstreaming is strikingly weak within the EU's environmental policies. Despite growing evidence of gender differences in environmental behaviours and the gendered impacts of climate change, EU climate change policy has largely remained 'gender-blind'. Its solutions focus on market, technological and security measures, thereby excluding a people-focused approach that could enable gender-sensitive policy. Gender is also rarely mentioned in the Draft National Energy and Climate Plans (NECPs) for 2012-2030 that Member States submitted to the European Commission in 2018.

At Member State level, already low levels of achievement in the area of gender mainstreaming in 2012²⁰ have weakened in 18 Member States in 2018, reflecting changes in the structures of gender mainstreaming and reduced use of certain gender mainstreaming methods and tools.

Progress towards gender balance in decision-making is slow and uneven

Women continue to be under-represented in virtually all fields of decision making considered under the Beijing Platform for Action, including the areas of politics, economics, business, health, research and innovation, armed conflict, environment, media, science and sports. While the proportion of women in decision-making roles has mostly increased since 2013, progress has typically been slow and uneven.

The extent of women's under-representation varies across and within sectors and Member States. Particularly poor levels of representation of women (around 20 % or less) are seen in many economic and business decision making positions, within sports, in the diplomatic sector and in the European Court of Justice. In contrast, representation is better (35 % to 41 %) among science decision-making bodies of funding organisations, EU representatives elected to the European Parliament, national public administrations and supreme courts, regional political executives, and on the boards of public broadcasting organisations, including TV, radio and news agencies.

²⁰ Comparator year as no data available for 2013

The systemic under-representation of women in decision-making roles is linked to gender stereotypes, inequalities, discrimination in employment practices and gender-based violence. Gender stereotypes contribute to gendered education and career choices and affect the ways in which employed women (especially women in leadership) are perceived, treated and valued. Gender inequalities – particularly unequal caring responsibilities – limit women’s participation in the labour market and thus restrict their career and progression opportunities. In some fields, such as politics, there is also increasing concern about the issue of online harassment and the risk that it will discourage women from engaging in political debate or running for office.

Government action has been a significant driver of gender balance in decision-making

While women continue to be underrepresented in political and economic decision-making, there have been some signs of improvement. For example, the share of women on the boards of large companies across the EU has visibly increased since 2013 (from 16.6 % to 27.7 % in 2019). The proportion of women in national parliaments has also increased, albeit at a slower pace (by about 4 percentage points since 2013).

Such improvements have not happened by chance - legislation and other government actions have helped stimulate change. Thus, the most significant improvements in the share of women on the boards of large companies (+18.3 percentage points since 2013) were seen in Member States that have adopted binding quotas in this area.²¹ Similarly, countries with legislative electoral quotas²² have on average achieved almost twice as much improvement in the proportion of women in parliament compared to those without quotas in the last decade, although much of this difference resulted from pre-2013 developments.

²¹ FR, IT, BE, DE, AT and PT have adopted binding quotas and now have 35.3% women on boards. In the 11 Member States where no substantial action has been taken, women make up just 15.4 % of board members and there has been little progress since 2013.

²² BE, IE, EL, ES, FR, HR, IT, PL, PT, SI

Supporting more women into corporate and political decision-making has been shown to have positive consequences. In addition to supporting good governance and democracy, it can lead to improvements to corporate financial performance, better career progression of other women at lower levels of the same organisation, and lower corruption. Recent research also suggests that companies with more gender-equal boards tend to be more mindful of protecting the environment.

Significant challenges remain in collecting high quality gender-sensitive data

There are significant shortcomings when it comes to the quality, relevance, comparability and comprehensiveness of the EU monitoring framework used to measure progress under the Beijing Platform framework. Some objectives and sometimes entire critical areas (i.e. Human Rights of Women) continue to lack indicators to measure progress against them, even after 25 years.

Such data limitations are most apparent in the area of violence against women, where challenges with data quality and its harmonisation across Member States severely limit the accuracy and comparability of national monitoring of gender-based violence. Limitations are also apparent elsewhere, including: poverty measurement is currently based on incomes at household rather than individual level, which is likely to lead to underestimation of gender gap in poverty; pharmaceuticals have been primarily tested on men, which means that adverse effects more common among women may remain unidentified.

There are also substantial gaps in collection and analysis of data to explore how gender interacts with other characteristics (age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.) that affect women's experiences in various areas of life.

Since gender sensitive data is crucial for effective gender mainstreaming, including gender impact assessments, these shortcomings impede the integration of gender perspective in various policy areas.

The rise of so-called ‘anti-gender’ movements create serious threats to the wider agenda for equality

So-called ‘anti-gender’ movements consider the concept of ‘gender’ in opposition to traditional views of family, femininity and masculinity and misinterpret it to oppose at least some rights of women and LGBTQI* people.

These movements have gained a greater following in some countries in recent years. They have contested the role and significance of the Istanbul Convention, with misinformation being spread by politicians to suggest that ‘gender’ has a hidden, politicised meaning, in order to generate opposition to the Convention’s ratification at national and European level.²³

Certain ‘anti-gender’ movements focused their attention on trying to ban sexual reproductive health and rights education in schools, because they see this as ideological. While such opposition is not new, it is now extending to other areas such as gender studies. Currently this is most notable in Hungary, where the government has banned gender studies in higher education and has taken actions that seriously threaten the human rights of women, asylum seekers and LGBTQI* people.

Other movements threaten to limit women’s access to legal and safe abortions. Some Member States only permit abortion under specific restricted circumstances (or not at all in case of Malta), while there have been moves to restrict abortion in other Member States such as introducing additional requirements, restricting available methods of abortion, and permitting conscientious objection among gynaecologists.

²³ See the Commissioner’s video message: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/no-excuse-should-obstruct-the-ratification-and-implementation-of-the-istanbul-convention>

The role of Civil Society Organisations has been undermined in several Member States

The rise of the so-called ‘anti-gender’ movements has also been connected to attempts to decrease the importance of CSOs and women’s rights NGOs in several Member States. This backlash has led to measures and initiatives hostile to women’s rights NGOs, including smear campaigns and restrictive legislative measures. This complicated the sustainable operation of these organisations, for example by creating additional barriers to accessing funding through restrictive criteria and administrative burdens; increasing the control placed on CSOs; and additional restrictions in access to government information.

It has led to some particularly hostile actions in a few Member States. For example, in Romania, CSOs have been blacklisted from nationalist media outlets. Similarly, in Hungary there has been a backlash against NGOs from the media and State, with the Parliament adopting a new law that criminalises activities that support asylum seekers, refugees and migrants: legislation likely to affect women’s human rights CSOs.

5. Peaceful and inclusive societies

Promoting peaceful and inclusive societies based on respect for human rights of all is an important condition for achieving women’s empowerment, particularly for women affected by armed conflicts, women who face serious human rights violations and women from minority backgrounds. The efforts to promote such societies include measures that help prevent or reduce impacts of armed conflicts, gender-sensitive asylum processes in place to receive victims of serious human rights violations, and respect for the rights of various minorities.

Gender mainstreaming in the EU's external action has improved

In the last five years, there have been important improvements in gender mainstreaming within the EU's policies linked to armed conflict. In 2017, the Council of the EU highlighted 'considerable advances' in gender mainstreaming in Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions, mandates and strategic documents. All strategic planning documents now include a commitment to integrating human rights and gender. In its Strategic Approach to Women, Peace and Security (2018), the EU commits to systematically integrating a gender perspective into all peace and security activities.

Within diplomatic missions, providing appropriate gender-sensitive training and the use of gender advisors are key tools in developing the capacity and expertise to ensure that the overlapping issues of conflict and gender are tackled appropriately, and that gender is mainstreamed throughout security and defence activities. Available data suggests that gender-sensitive training and gender advisors are reasonably widespread among Member State diplomatic missions (within UN or Common Security and Defence Policy missions). However, there is limited information to assess their day-to-day impact.

The gender sensitivity of asylum processes varies by Member State

Asylum-seeking women and girls face a range of grave challenges during their displacement. They are at a high risk of being subjected to gender-based violence during their journeys, including human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation. They usually take on caring roles for children and older relatives, which increases their need for support and protection. When making asylum claims, they often lack full awareness of their rights and have greater difficulties establishing the harm they have experienced, which puts them into more vulnerable situations. Reception conditions and gender-sensitive support in making asylum claims also varies a lot by country.

These issues are particularly important in the context of the increases in migration from certain countries that took place mainly between 2013 and 2015 (and have often abated since). The response across the EU to these migration flows revealed a securitized approach focused on border control, which is often exploited for political purposes at the expenses of migrants' human rights.

To improve the gender-responsiveness of asylum processes, the EU is taking steps to accede the Istanbul Convention, which requires violence against women to be recognised as a form of persecution and as a form of serious harm giving rise to grounds for asylum. At Member State level, some positive developments in identifying and supporting vulnerable asylum seekers have been identified, such as specific services for pregnant women and lone parents in Belgium. There have been some negative developments as well, such as the lack of reception of asylum seekers and integration of refugees in Hungary, the severe inadequacy of the Greek's reception facilities and general allegations of violence occurring in the Western Balkan route against migrants.

People from certain minority backgrounds continue to face everyday discrimination

Women (and men) from certain minority groups continue to face additional challenges arising from societal prejudices and stereotypes, including:

- Around one in four people from Roma communities report experiences of discrimination in various areas of their life. Infringements of reproductive rights of Roma women, such as forced sterilisations, are a particularly concerning example in this respect.
- People of African descent face “widespread and entrenched prejudice and exclusion” in the EU, with one in four reporting an experience of discrimination in the last year. For women of African descent, the challenges with access to employment seem to be particularly exacerbated.

- Almost one in five Muslim respondents reported discrimination based on religious identity over the past five years; and more than a third of Jewish respondents reported incidents of anti-Semitic harassment over the same period. Findings from national research show that Muslim women may face particularly high level of discrimination in the context of employment.
- Out of the people with non-heteronormative sexual orientation or gender identity, around a half of women and a third of men felt discriminated against because of being L, G, B or T. Transgender women are among the most vulnerable, with 44% of them suffering three or more physical/sexual attacks or threats of violence in the last 12 months in the EU (FRA, 2014a).
- Women with disabilities are at increased risk of having their reproductive rights violated (notably, forced sterilisation, abortion and other forms of control on fertility remain a reality for many) and face a number of harmful gender and disability stereotypes in education and employment.

Looking forward

Many long-standing challenges are still present even 25 years after the BPfA was launched. In some cases the situation has actually worsened in recent years, despite repeated calls for action (e.g. setbacks to gender mainstreaming and reduced access to sexual and reproductive services). This may be indicative of a lack of political will at EU and Member State level to address these challenges, even though this is vital for building a more social Europe and for achieving Sustainable Development Goals related to poverty, health, education, affordability of energy, climate action, decent work, reducing inequalities and achieving peaceful and inclusive societies.

To sustain economic growth and foster (women's) individual wellbeing, it is crucial to strengthen care services across the EU and reduce the burden of unpaid care on individuals, particularly women. Currently EU-level targets on care cover only childcare, but they should be expanded to cover long-term care for people with disabilities and older persons. It will be important to review the regulation of the care sector, to ensure paid carers (most of whom are women) are sufficiently valued for their work and enjoy a sufficient quality of employment. More widely, it will be important to foster women's economic independence through changes to work and social protection. Responding to shortcomings in public services, such as healthcare, will also help to move towards higher levels of individual wellbeing. Ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health services is key, in light of some retrogressive policies at Member State level.

To help overcome challenges related to gender-based violence, the accession and implementation of the Istanbul Convention is crucial. This will strengthen the European legal framework to address violence against women and girls and help ensure sufficient prevention efforts and support for victims at Member State level. To address online gender-based stereotypes and violence, the EU and its Member State should develop further monitoring and guidance. Ensuring that education is free of gender stereotypes and supports young people in navigating the digital world will also be important.

To progress towards parity democracy, increased gender mainstreaming efforts are needed. Targeted measures such as quotas have been demonstrated to be particularly effective in increasing the participation of women in decision-making, and should be considered. Measures to support CSOs at Member State level should be taken to ensure they are able to hold those in power to account and support parity, gender equality and the human rights of people in vulnerable situations. It is necessary to take steps to improve data collection across several areas of the Beijing Platform for Action in order to improve gender-sensitiveness of policy-making, especially in monitoring and evaluation stages. In this context it is important to promote new research for gaining insights into intersectional forms of disadvantage and discrimination.

Finally, the increased levels of migration between 2013 and 2015 demonstrated the shortcomings in the gender sensitivity of current asylum processes. Gender-sensitive asylum processes are needed to take into account the gendered challenges women face during displacement and when accessing such processes.
