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COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT

2021 Report on gender equality in the EU

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
FREE FROM VIOLENCE AND STEREOTYPES	3
Impact of Covid-19 on gender-based violence	3
Ending gender-based violence	7
Online violence	8
Harassment in the world of work	10
Female genital mutilation, ‘honour-related’ violence	12
Trafficking in human beings	13
Supporting victims of gender-based violence	14
Challenging stereotypes through prevention and education	16
THRIVING IN A GENDER-EQUAL ECONOMY	20
Impact of Covid-19 on women’s participation in the labour market	21
Women’s participation in the labour market	26
Segregated labour markets and undervaluation across different sectors of the economy	29
Closing the gender gap in pay and pensions	32
Improving work-life balance and narrowing the gender care gap	34
LEADING EQUALLY THROUGH SOCIETY.....	38
Gender balance in decision making during the COVID-19 pandemic	39
Women in political decision-making	44
GENDER MAINSTREAMING	49
COVID-19 Response	50
Strengthening gender mainstreaming at EU level	52
Strengthening gender mainstreaming in the EU’s new long-term budget	54
An intersectional approach to gender equality	56
Monitoring the Gender Equality Strategy	58
PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT ACROSS THE WORLD.....	58
EU’s global response to the COVID-19 pandemic	59
The EU’s new roadmap for a gender equal world	61
The EU’s external action against gender-based violence	62
EU’s global partnerships and action on gender equality and women’s empowerment	63
Gender mainstreaming in EU’s external action	65

INTRODUCTION

One year ago, on 5 March 2020, the Commission adopted its Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025. The strategy was the first deliverable on President von der Leyen's commitment to a Union of Equality. It sets out an ambitious framework for the next 5 years, formally endorsed by the Commission, on how to advance gender equality in Europe and beyond. The strategy is based on a vision for a Europe where women and men, girls and boys, in all their diversity, are free from violence and stereotypes and have the opportunity to thrive and to lead.

This is the first report under the new strategy. It takes stock of where the EU and its Member States stand on gender equality one year after the adoption of the Strategy. It sets out the EU's achievements and gives inspiring examples from the Member States and EU-funded projects for each of the strategy's five key areas:

- Being free from violence and stereotypes
- Thriving in a gender equal economy
- Leading equally throughout society
- Gender mainstreaming and funding
- Promoting gender equality and women's empowerment across the world.

The past year has been marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has proven to be a major challenge for gender equality. The pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities between women and men in almost all areas of life, both in Europe and beyond. The report presents the available data on the gendered impact of the COVID-19 crisis for each area of the strategy and outlines the measures the EU and Member States have taken to mitigate these effects.

Despite the challenges arising from the COVID-19 crisis, the Commission made significant efforts to move forward with the implementation of the Gender Equality Strategy over the past year. It stepped up its fight against gender-based violence by publishing, in June 2020, its first-ever EU victims' rights strategy and by launching, in February 2021, an open public consultation on a new legislative initiative to better support victims and prosecute perpetrators of gender-based violence. It also continued its efforts to accede to the Istanbul Convention. The Commission addressed the issue of online violence with its proposal for a Digital Services Act, adopted in December 2020, which clarifies the responsibilities of online platforms, thereby contributing to making the internet safer for women. With the adoption of the proposal for a Directive strengthening the equal pay principle through pay transparency and enforcement mechanisms in early March 2021, the Commission has taken a major step to improve the respect of the right to equal pay and tackle pay discrimination. Also in early March 2021, the Commission adopted an Action Plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights, which puts gender equality at its core and establishes, amongst others, ambitious targets for women's participation in the labour market and the provision of early childhood education and care which is very important in this context. In the 2020 Digital Education Action Plan and the European Skills Agenda, the Commission announced a range of actions to ensure that girls and young women participate equally in ICT studies and develop their digital skills. The Commission itself made progress on women's participation in

politics and increased female representation in decision-making, with the first-ever gender-balanced College of Commissioners in the EU's history. The Commission also strengthened gender equality and women's empowerment outside of the EU through the new Gender Action Plan (GAP III) for 2021-2025. The new multi-annual financial framework for 2021-2027 promotes gender-equality both through strengthened gender mainstreaming and targeted actions of specific EU spending programmes. The Next Generation EU recovery instrument requires Member States to explain how the measures in their national recovery plans will contribute to gender equality, thus ensuring a gender equal and fair recovery in the EU.

The implementation of the Gender Equality Strategy takes a dual approach comprising gender mainstreaming and targeted measures to address gender inequality. As intersectionality is a horizontal principle for its implementation, the strategy is reflected in the other equality strategies that have followed after it. This includes the EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation for 2020- 2030, the LGBTIQ equality strategy 2020-2025, the EU Anti-racism action plan 2020-2025 and the Strategy on the rights of persons with disabilities 2021-2030.

FREE FROM VIOLENCE AND STEREOTYPES

At the core of gender inequalities, gender-based violence continues to be an endemic problem disproportionately affecting women and girls.¹ The perpetrator is an intimate partner for one in five women experiencing such acts² and in over half of the female murder victim cases.³ The most recent results of the Fundamental Rights Survey further confirm this phenomenon from the perspective of a broader experience on crime. Women are more likely to experience incidences of violence occurring within the household, of sexual nature and perpetrated more often by a family member or relative.⁴ Gender-based violence constitutes a major barrier in the path toward gender equality. It is a violation of the victim's human rights, dignity and, in the worst cases, right to life. Amid growing threats to gender equality, amplified by the outbreak of COVID-19 and its socio-economic consequences, ending gender-based violence is a key EU policy objective. It remains among the main goals of the EU gender equality strategy for 2020-2025.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified existing gender-based violence against women, confirming long-standing research findings that the risk of domestic violence tends to increase in times of crisis.⁵ Lockdown measures were set to keep people safe at home. However, home turned out not to be safe for everyone and lockdown measures played a demonstrable role in the significant increase in reports of domestic violence and an increase in gender-based violence overall⁶.

¹ One in three women in the EU aged 15 or over has suffered physical and/or sexual violence, one in two have been sexually harassed, around two in five women has endured psychological violence and 1 in 10 has been subject to online harassment, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Violence against women: an EU-wide survey*, 2014, p. 21. Available at https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2014-vaw-survey-main-results-apr14_en.pdf. This survey is still the most up-to-date source of information on gender-based-violence in the EU. In 2020, the Commission launched a new survey, coordinated by EUROSTAT, to provide up-to-date data on gender-based violence, see p. 16 for details.

² Ibid.

³ European Parliamentary Research Service, *Violence against women in the EU: State of play*, 2019, p. 2. Available at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/630296/EPRS_BRI\(2018\)630296_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/630296/EPRS_BRI(2018)630296_EN.pdf).

⁴ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Fundamental Rights Survey: Crime, Safety and Victims' Rights*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021, p.33-48. Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2021-crime-safety-victims-rights_en.pdf

⁵ World Health Organization, *Violence and disasters*, 2005. Available at https://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/publications/violence/violence_disasters.pdf.

⁶ World Health Organization, *The rise and rise of interpersonal violence – an unintended impact of the COVID-19 response on families*, 2020. Available at: <https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/disease->

While the collection of robust EU-level data is ongoing, preliminary findings from an assortment of independently carried-out studies point towards an escalation of psychological and physical violence against women by an intimate partner⁷. In spring 2020, several EU Member States recorded a surge in domestic violence during the first lockdowns⁸. For example, the number of reports of domestic violence in France rose by 32% during the first week of lockdown. Lithuania recorded 20% more reports throughout the first three weeks of lockdown.⁹ Ireland saw a five-fold increase in domestic violence orders.¹⁰ Spanish authorities reported an 18% rise in calls during the first fortnight of confinement.¹¹ Such violence is more prevalent amongst couples with children, with previous experiences of intimate violence, who are economically disadvantaged and in which both members are in lockdown.¹² Stress resulting from the loss of employment or financial uncertainties

[prevention/violence-and-injuries/news/news/2020/6/the-rise-and-rise-of-interpersonal-violence-an-unintended-impact-of-the-covid-19-response-on-families.](#)

United Nations, *WHO warns of surge of domestic violence as COVID-19 cases decrease in Europe*, UN Regional Informational Centre for Western Europe, 2020, available at: <https://unric.org/en/who-warns-of-surge-of-domestic-violence-as-covid-19-cases-decrease-in-europe/>.

⁷ Arenas-Arroyo, E.; Fernandez-Kranz, D.; Nollenberger, N., 'Can't Leave You Now! Intimate Partner Violence under Forced Coexistence and Economic Uncertainty', *IZA Institute of Labour Economics*, Discussion Paper Series No.13570, 2020. Available at <https://covid-19.iza.org/publications/dp13570/>. The surge of domestic violence can have even more devastating effects in couples with children due to the traumatising effects domestic violence can have on child victims or witnesses.

⁸ European Parliament, *Draft Report on the gender perspective in the COVID-19 crisis and post-crisis period, 2020/2121 (INI)*, 2020, p. 6. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/FEMM-PR-653727_EN.pdf.

⁹ European Institute for Gender Equality, *Covid-19 and gender equality: gender-based violence*, 2020. Available at <https://eige.europa.eu/covid-19-and-gender-equality/gender-based-violence>.

¹⁰ European Women's Lobby, *Women must not pay the price for COVID-19: Putting equality between women and men at the heart of the response to COVID-19 across Europe*, 2020, p. 4. Available at: https://www.womenlobby.org/IMG/pdf/ewl_policy_brief_on_covid-19_impact_on_women_and_girls-2.pdf

¹¹ Sosa Troya, M. and Torres Menarguez, A., *Las llamadas al 016 por violencia machista aumentan un 18% durante el estado de alarma*, 2020. Available at <https://elpais.com/sociedad/2020-04-01/el-016-recibe-521-llamadas-mas-por-violencia-machista-durante-el-estado-de-alarma.html>; Mahtani, Noor, *Las llamadas al 016 por violencia machista aumentan un 47,3% en la primera quincena de abril*, 2020. Available at <https://elpais.com/sociedad/2020-04-16/las-llamadas-al-016-por-violencia-machista-aumentan-un-473-en-la-primera-quincena-de-abril.html>. Spain also reported a 269.6% increase in email consultations, 168 requests for psychological support through the WhatsApp service and a 43% rise in the use of geolocation during that period.

¹² Arenas-Arroyo, E.; Fernandez-Kranz, D.; Nollenberger, N., 'Can't Leave You Now! Intimate Partner Violence under Forced Coexistence and Economic Uncertainty', *IZA Institute of Labour Economics*, Discussion Paper Series No.13570, 2020. Available at <https://covid-19.iza.org/publications/dp13570/>. The surge of domestic violence can have even more devastating effects in couples with children due to the traumatising effects domestic violence can have on child victims or witnesses.

during the pandemic further increases the risk of physical, sexual and psychological abuse¹³. Even when lockdown measures will eventually be lifted, there are likely long-term socio-economic consequences are likely to prevail, of which is an increase in intimate-partner violence.

In order to prevent further escalation or long-term consequences, action is needed to end gender-based violence against women and girls. Ensuring that victims can access adequate support at this time of crisis, including in rural areas, should be one of the priorities. In April 2020, the Commission urged Member States to guarantee that their emergency responses to the outbreak took account of the needs of groups in disadvantaged situations, such as victims of domestic violence, in line with their obligations under EU law. The Commission also stressed the importance to allocate resources to relevant support and protection services, helplines and shelters. EU Member States have put in place several types of measures to support victims of violence under the particularly difficult circumstances of the COVID-19 crisis. For example, some EU Member States set up 24/7 helplines, launched awareness campaigns in pharmacies which remained open during lockdowns, increased the capacity of shelters and generally declared support services as essential services to ensure their continued functioning despite pandemic-related restrictions. In a recent study covering the period until September 2020, the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) provides a preliminary overview of national measures to support victims of violence during the Covid-19 outbreak, identifies examples of promising practices and provides recommendations on how to better support victims during the pandemic, as well as in future crises. The report identifies common challenges faced by Member States such as ensuring the continuity and finding new avenues for support services, addressing the increase in demand and the sustained strain on service provider staff, assessing victim's level of risk and overcoming inadequate funding.¹⁴

¹³ Ibid. This impact is more prominent in couples with previous experience of domestic violence or when man-only economic-stress is the case.

¹⁴ EIGE, *The COVID-19 pandemic and intimate partner violence against women in the EU*, March 2021, forthcoming.

In **France**, faced with the dramatic rise in domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of the Interior and the National Council of Pharmacists (Conseil national de l'Ordre des pharmaciens) adopted a common strategy to address the difficulties of victims to access support services during the lockdowns. A code word was set in place for victims to signal pharmacy staff to contact help in a secure way. Following the established procedure, staff would collect the victims' information in a discreet and confidential manner and provide a safe space whilst contacting support organisations. If needed, staff could also call the police to the premises. In order to take care of the victims as quickly as possible, police and gendarmerie had been instructed to intervene urgently for calls from pharmacies.

Slovenia adopted several measures to prevent and combat domestic violence during the first lockdown in spring 2020. Along with a new 24/7 telephone helpline for victims and other callers, it expanded the capacity of the emergency services to cover relationship counselling, therapeutic counselling, counselling for young people, and counselling for female prisoners and employees. Pharmacies were identified as essential contact points for the dissemination of information on the services of NGOs working in the field of domestic violence and violence against women. Additional sanitary measures have been taken in victims' shelters to prevent the spread of COVID-19 amongst service users and staff. Inspections and social skills rehabilitation workshops for perpetrators have gone online to ensure the continuity of preventative and corrective services.

The **Croatian** Ministry for Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy asked social welfare centres to establish crisis teams for rapid intervention to facilitate urgent action during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in cases where victims' safety and even their lives are in danger. The deadlines for exercising victims' rights in criminal and misdemeanour proceedings were extended to prevent the loss of certain rights if the deadline for submitting the claim was missed for COVID-19-related reasons. To prevent the spread of the virus, the State Attorney's office questioned most suspects via video link, except those in detention.

The Commission organised a series of online seminars¹⁵ with Member States on gender-sensitive response measures in the COVID-19 context to help them share good practices and information. A webinar on tackling domestic violence in the COVID-19 context highlighted the importance of establishing domestic violence services as essential services to ensure continued support for victims during lockdowns, in addition to making adequate preparations for such support mechanism during the subsequent recovery phase. The webinar also highlighted the need for awareness raising, communication and outreach initiatives to help victims of all kinds.

In November 2020, the German Presidency of the Council of the EU organised an informal virtual meeting of EU Gender Equality Ministers. A majority of Ministers supported the idea of a Europe-wide phone number through which victims of violence against women and domestic violence could access assistance. Ministers also

¹⁵See https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/webinar-series-gender-sensitive-responses-covid-19-crisis_en

exchanged best practices to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic such as guidelines on first contact with victims, access to victim support services, and awareness-raising campaigns.¹⁶

ENDING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

The EU's accession to the Council of Europe's Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence ('the Istanbul Convention') is high on the political agenda. The Istanbul Convention is the benchmark for internationally binding standards on tackling gender-based violence. However, the EU's accession remains to date blocked in the Council. While 21 Member States have ratified the Convention, 6 have not done so¹⁷, and one Member States announced its intention to withdraw from the instrument.¹⁸ In 2019, the European Parliament seized the Court of Justice of the EU to clarify a number of questions relating to the proposed accession.¹⁹ The Advocate General's opinion will be issued on 11 March 2021 and the Court's ruling is expected in mid-2021.

In order to achieve the objectives of the Istanbul Convention falling within the scope of EU competences while the accession remains blocked, the Commission committed to putting forward a legislative proposal to prevent and combat gender-based violence by the end of 2021.²⁰ Should the ruling of the Court pave the way for EU accession to the Convention, the initiative would ensure that EU Member States have effective measures in place to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence at the time of accession. As part of the preparatory work on the initiative, the Commission launched a study to evaluate the existing EU instruments in this area, identify possible gaps and gather evidence on the impact of different policy options. Work is focusing on the four-pillar structure of the Istanbul Convention: prevention, protection, prosecution

¹⁶ Federal Government of Germany, *Protecting Women against Violence – Best Practices from all over Europe*, 2020. Available at: <https://www.bmfsfj.de/blob/164296/5073c15b7c0939acf236f157e0777a62/protecting-women-against-violence-best-practices-from-all-over-europe-data.pdf>.

¹⁷ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/210/signatures>

¹⁸ <https://www.coe.int/fr/web/istanbul-convention/-/poland-should-not-withdraw-from-the-istanbul-convention-says-secretary-general>

¹⁹ European Parliament, *Resolution 2019/2678(RSP)*, available at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2019-0357_EN.pdf. The 2014-2019 European Parliament

strongly supported the EU's accession to the Istanbul Convention and adopted in April 2019 a resolution seeking an opinion from the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) on the compatibility between the Treaties and the legal bases chosen by the Council; the split of the accession in two Council decisions; and the Council's practice of the 'common accord'.

²⁰ European Commission, *State of the Union 2020: Letter of Intent to President David Maria Sassoli and to Chancellor Angela Merkel*, 2020, available at https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/state_of_the_union_2020_letter_of_intent_en.pdf.

and policy coordination. In order to gather feedback from a broad range of stakeholders on this initiative, the Commission launched an open public consultation in February 2021²¹.

The Istanbul Convention inspired a reform of the **Croatian** Criminal Code which entered into force on 1 January 2020. The reform raises the penalty for a number of criminal offences involving gender-based violence and changes the definition of rape to cover any non-consensual sexual intercourse or sexual activity, making the law's approach to consent broader.

In December 2020, the **Danish** Parliament amended the criminal code to define rape as intercourse without consent, thereby bringing Denmark in line with the Istanbul Convention. In order to inform the public about the new provision, the Minister for Gender Equality launched an information campaign explaining the boundaries between legal and unlawful sexual conduct. The campaign aims to prevent rape, help refer victims to relevant support services and encourage reporting of sexual violence by strengthening the public conversation about consent.

The **Spanish** public hotline for victims of gender-based violence was expanded to cover all forms of violence against women, including domestic or sexual violence, female genital mutilation, forced marriage and workplace harassment. This measure is part of the implementation of the new State Pact against Gender Violence, following the provisions of the Istanbul Convention

As part of the implementation of its obligations under the Istanbul Convention, **Cyprus** set up the *Woman's House*, a multi-agency crisis centre for women victims of violence and their children. The *Woman's House* is based on the Family Justice Centre model, and operates, as of December 2020, as a 'one-stop-shop' providing integrated services for victims of violence against women. The services available are provided irrespective of whether victims are willing to press charges or testify against perpetrators. This integrated approach focuses on the human rights and safety of the victim and takes into account the support needed for any children involved.

ONLINE VIOLENCE

Online violence against women, which includes gender-based hate speech, is a rapidly emerging form of gender-based violence that spreads fast on social media and is often amplified by major platforms' use of opaque algorithms. Research shows that apparent anonymity online gives aggressors a sense of impunity and

²¹ The consultation is open until 10 May 2021; available here: <https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12682-Preventing-and-combatting-gender-based-violence-/public-consultation>.

leads to the use of more extreme language.²² Although face-to-face violence and harassment continue to be more widespread, gender-based online violence has a significant impact on the victims, especially younger women who are more likely to experience this online targeting. Research shows that online harassment begins to be more prominent at schools age with girls more likely to be the targets and boys more likely to be the perpetrators of such harassment²³. Already in 2014, 21.1% of those aged 18 to 29 reported having experienced online harassment.²⁴ The increased use of online communication tools during lockdowns in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic has also increased the risk of gender-based online violence and the spread of misogynist narratives portraying women as enemies and opponents.²⁵

In December 2020, the Commission proposed the Digital Services Act (DSA)²⁶ to ensure a safer and more accountable online environment. The DSA significantly improves the mechanisms for the removal of illegal content and for the effective protection of users' fundamental rights online. It presents a step-change by creating a stronger public oversight of online platforms through robust transparency reporting, in particular for very large platforms with a high reach of users and the highest impacts in the EU, and facilitating access to data. The proposal foresees a greater transparency of how online platforms moderate the content published on their services and what effect their algorithms have. It addresses the systemic risks emerging online by imposing a supervised risk management obligation on very large platforms and empowers users in their interactions with the platforms' systems such as recommender systems or advertising on online platforms.

In her State of the Union letter of intent, President von der Leyen confirmed that the initiative to extend the list of EU-crimes in accordance with Article 83 TFEU to cover all forms of hate crime and hate speech, including misogynist ones, will be presented in 2021²⁷. Furthermore, the Commission, with the support of the

²² Cuenca-Piqueras, C.; Fernandez-Prados, J. S.; Gonzalez-Moreno, M., *Face-to-Face Versus Online Harassment of European Women: Importance of Date and Place of Birth*, 2019, p. 159. Available at <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs12119-019-09632-4>.

²³ Inchley J, Currie D, Budisavljevic S, Torsheim T, Jåstad A, Cosma A et al., editors, *Spotlight on adolescent health and well-being. Findings from the 2017/2018 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) survey in Europe and Canada. International report. Volume 1. Key findings*. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2020. Available at: <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/332091/9789289055000-eng.pdf>

²⁴ Ibid, p. 165.

²⁵ UN Women, *Online and ICT facilitated violence against women and girls during COVID-19*, UN Women Publications, 2020. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/brief-online-and-ict-facilitated-violence-against-women-and-girls-during-covid-19>; WAVE Network, *WAVE Policy Statement: COVID-19 and Violence against Women and Girls*, 2020. Available at: http://wave-network.org/wp-content/uploads/WAVE_Covid19statement.pdf; Sessa, Maria Giovanna, *Misogyny and Misinformation: An analysis of gendered disinformation tactics during the COVID-19 pandemic*, DisinfoLab, 2020. Available at: <https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/misogyny-and-misinformation%3A-an-analysis-of-gendered-disinformation-tactics-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>.

²⁶ COM (2020) 825 final, *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on a Single Market For Digital Services (Digital Services Act) and amending Directive 2000/31/EC*,. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020PC0825&from=en>

²⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/state_of_the_union_2020_letter_of_intent_en.pdf

Radicalisation Awareness Network, is looking into the phenomenon of INCELS (Involuntary Celibates) and the risk they pose as potential instigators and perpetrators of gender-motivated violence. A number of violent attacks against women in Canada and in the US have been linked to INCELS, who are very active on internet platforms, where they tend to disseminate misogynist and hateful content targeting women.

Following the adoption in June 2020 of legislation (law No 2020-766) designed to combat hateful online content, the **French government** set up a prosecutor's office focusing on online hate messages, simplified the reporting of inappropriate content, and established an Online Hate Observatory, attached to the Superior Audiovisual Council.

In 2020, the **Danish** Minister for Equal Opportunities ran a campaign on digital violence and harassment among young people, targeting primarily young people in upper secondary education. Using films, social media and influencers the campaign focused on what is illegal online including online threats, hacking, fake dating profiles, online indecent exposure, non-consensual sharing of private images and pornographic image manipulation

HARASSMENT IN THE WORLD OF WORK

Sexual harassment and gender-based harassment at work are not new phenomena. Yet their extent and impact on work performance, equal opportunities, gender equality and human dignity have been highlighted over the past few years by the renewed worldwide debate sparked off by the *#MeToo* movement.²⁸ In many cases, this harassment takes the shape of intrusive questions about private life, sexually suggestive comments or jokes, inappropriate invitations to go on dates and unwelcome touching, hugging or kissing. In more serious cases, sex-based harassment at work may involve criminal conduct, such as various forms of sexual assault.²⁹ These harmful actions and attitudes in the world of work are not restricted to the workplace in the stricter sense of the word but can also occur in any work-related circumstances such as commuting or external work meetings. Wherever they manifest themselves, they adversely affect the working environment.³⁰

Women are disproportionately affected by work-related harassment³¹ and under-reporting of sex-based work harassment remains an issue across the Union, as with other forms of gender-based violence.³² Victims may

²⁸ European Parliament, *Bullying and sexual harassment at the workplace, in public spaces and in political life in the EU* (Study for the FEMM Committee), 2018, p. 21, available at: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=IPOL_STU%282018%29604949.

²⁹ European Institute for Gender Equality, *Sexism at work: how can we stop it? Handbook for the EU institutions and agencies*, 2020, p.23, available at <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/sexism-work-how-can-we-stop-it-handbook-eu-institutions-and-agencies>.

³⁰ Petroglou, P., 'Sexual harassment and harassment related to sex at work: time for a new directive building on the EU gender equality acquis', *European Equality Law Review* 2019/2, p.16-34, available at: <https://www.equalitylaw.eu/downloads/5005-european-equality-law-review-2-2019-pdf-3-201-kb>.

³¹ The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) highlighted that more women than men report harassment at work: *6th European Working Conditions Survey*, 2016

feel uneasy about sharing their experiences and the limited prospects of litigating against their employers often discourages them from taking action. Moreover, in workplaces where sexual harassment and sex-based harassment are more prevalent, victims and witnesses supporting victims after reporting such incidents may face retaliation in the form of humiliation, subsequent downgrading of their work and attempts to remove them from the workplace.³³

The quality of the working environment is crucial in determining how incidents of harassment at work are prevented and adequately dealt with. A supportive and secure work environment, built on social support from managers and colleagues, company policies and national legislation, can provide preventative and recovery measures for survivors. In turn, this can increase worker's self-esteem and personal development, contributing to better results in performance and innovation.³⁴

In early 2020, the European Commission put forward a proposal to authorise EU Member States to ratify the m (ILO) Convention on combating violence and harassment in the world of work.³⁵ The Convention is the first international instrument setting out specific, globally applicable standards on tackling work-related harassment and violence and specifying the measures required from states and other relevant actors. The application of this Convention in the EU Member States would allow them to build on existing advancements in EU legislation on health and safety at work, equality and non-discrimination³⁶ and pursue a common roadmap at company, state and EU level to safeguard human rights, including the right to fair and just working conditions for all.

(updated in 2019), p.138. Available at:
<https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/report/2016/working-conditions/sixth-european-working-conditions-survey-overview-report>

³² European Parliament, *Bullying and sexual harassment at the workplace, in public spaces, and in political life in the EU*, 2018, p.19 available at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/604949/IPOL_STU\(2018\)604949_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/604949/IPOL_STU(2018)604949_EN.pdf).

³³ Petrogloou, P., 'Sexual harassment and harassment related to sex at work: time for a new directive building on the EU gender equality acquis', *European Equality Law Review* 2019/2, p.30. Available at: <https://www.equalitylaw.eu/downloads/5005-european-equality-law-review-2-2019-pdf-3-201-kb>.

³⁴ Eurofound, *Sixth European Working Conditions Survey – Overview report*, 2017, p.64. Available at https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ef_publication/field_ef_document/ef1634en.pdf.

³⁵ European Commission 2020/0011 (NLE): *Proposal for a Council Decision authorizing Member States to ratify, in the interest of the European Union, the Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190) of the International Labour Organization*. Available at <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/rep/1/2020/EN/COM-2020-24-F1-EN-MAIN-PART-1.PDF>.

³⁶ Directive 2006/54/EC of 5 July 2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council on the implementation of the principle of equal opportunities and equal treatment of men and women in matters of employment and occupation (recast) OJ 2006, L 204, 23; Council Directive 2004/113/EC of 13 December 2004 implementing the principle of equal treatment between men and women in the access to and supply of goods and services OJ 2004 L 373, 37 and Directive 2010/41/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 July 2010 on the application of the principle of equal treatment between men and women engaged in an activity in a self-employed capacity and repealing Council Directive 86/613/EEC, OJ 2010 L 180, 1.

Stepping up action in this area is especially relevant given the rise in gender-based violence during the COVID-19 crisis and the ongoing transformation processes many workplaces are undergoing.

Co-funded by the EU's Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme, the **CEASE project**³⁷ brought together ten partners across the EU to address harassment in companies making sure that women victims of violence can enjoy supportive working conditions and be reintegrated into working life. To achieve this aim, the project developed a series of training programmes for HR professionals and managers and disseminated the project results to raise awareness of the topic.

FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION, 'HONOUR-RELATED' VIOLENCE

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is defined by the World Health Organisation as 'all procedures involving partial or total removal of the female external genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons'³⁸ and has immediate and long lasting consequences for health and wellbeing of the victims. Although EU-wide reliable and comparable data is lacking,³⁹ it is estimated that around 600,000 women living in Europe have suffered FGM, with girls aged 0 to 15 being the group most at risk.⁴⁰ Recent estimates from EIGE SHOW THAT LEGISLATION AND CAMPAIGNS AGAINST FGM ARE WORKING: WHILE THE ABSOLUTE NUMBER OF GIRLS AT RISK HAS GOTTEN BIGGER BECAUSE THERE ARE MORE GIRLS FROM FGM-PRACTICING COUNTRIES LIVING IN THE EU, THE AFFECTED COMMUNITIES ARE INCREASINGLY OPPOSED TO THE PRACTICE AND FREQUENTLY LEAD EFFORTS TO ELIMINATE IT.⁴¹

In an effort to tackle FGM along with forced abortion and forced sterilisation, early and forced marriage, and what is known as 'honour-related violence', the Commission will put forward a Recommendation on the prevention of harmful practices as announced in the Gender Equality Strategy. Building on the Commission's Communication on the elimination of FGM⁴², this Recommendation will address the strengthening of public services, prevention and support measures, capacity-building for professionals and victim-centred access to

³⁷ For more information about this project, please check: <https://cease-project.eu/>.

³⁸ World Health Organization, *Female Genital Mutilation*, 2020, available at <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/female-genital-mutilation>.

³⁹ Baillot, Helen; Murray, Nina; Connelly, Elaine; Howard, Natasha, 'Addressing female genital mutilation in Europe: a scoping review of approaches to participation, prevention, protection, and provision of services', *International Journal for Equity in Health* vol. 17(21), 2018, p.13 available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s12939-017-0713-9>.

⁴⁰ European Parliament, *Female genital mutilation: where, why and consequences*, 2020, accessible at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20200206STO72031/female-genital-mutilation-where-why-and-consequences>.

⁴¹ On 4 February 2020, EIGE released estimations of the number of girls at risk of FGM in Denmark, Spain, Luxembourg and Austria. <https://eige.europa.eu/about/projects/estimation-number-girls-risk-fgm-eu>

⁴² COM(2013) 833 final, *COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL: Towards the elimination of female genital mutilation*, 2013, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52013DC0833&from=EN>

justice. The Commission is currently evaluating relevant EU instruments and possible gaps in the prevention of FGM, as well as support and protection measures, through an open public consultation on preventing and combatting gender-based violence launched in February 2021.⁴³

The Commission also continues to fund projects tackling FGM through the EU's Rights, Equality and Citizenship (REC) programme, and its successor, the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme.

The project '**Let's Change**'⁴⁴, funded under the EU's Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme, focused on tackling FGM in migrant communities in several Member States. The project worked with community members, empowering them to become 'change agents' and to promote the abandonment of female genital mutilation in the migrant communities where it was practiced. The project also trained first-contact professionals to work with victims of FGM.

TRAFFICKING IN HUMAN BEINGS

Trafficking in human beings, a crime with a significant gender dimension, is a form of violence against women. Two Commission publications from October 2020, the Third Report on the progress made in the fight against trafficking in human beings⁴⁵ and a Study on Data collection on trafficking in human beings in the EU⁴⁶, provide insight into the scale of this phenomenon. Of the 14,145 victims registered in the EU-27 between 2017 and 2018, almost three quarters were women and girls. Looking into the forms of trafficking, findings revealed that 60% of all registered victims were trafficked for sexual exploitation, 92% of them being women and girls. In addition, children account for nearly a quarter of all victims in the EU, with more than 60% being trafficked for sexual exploitation.

The Commission is working on a new EU strategy on combating trafficking in human beings, which will be closely interlinked with the upcoming EU strategy to tackle organized crime.⁴⁷ The new initiative is planned to be adopted in spring 2021, following consultations with relevant

⁴³ The consultation is open until 10 May 2021; available here: <https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12682-Preventing-and-combatting-gender-based-violence-/public-consultation>.

⁴⁴ Available at: <https://www.frauenrechte.de/en/our-work/focus-areas/female-genital-mutilation-fgm/news/4447-two-years-let-s-change-how-can-we-end-female-genital-mutilation-fgm-in-the-european-union-and-beyond>

⁴⁵ COM (2020) 661 final, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/anti-trafficking/sites/antitrafficking/files/third_progress_report.pdf.

⁴⁶ European Commission, *Data Collection on trafficking in human beings in the EU*, 2020, p.22-28. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/anti-trafficking/sites/antitrafficking/files/study_on_data_collection_on_trafficking_in_human_beings_in_the_eu.pdf.

⁴⁷ The Commission published a roadmap for a communication on a new EU strategy combating trafficking in human beings, available at <https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12735-EU-Agenda-to-tackle-organised-crime-2021-2025->

stakeholders⁴⁸. It will combat trafficking comprehensively, from prevention through protection of victims to prosecution and conviction of traffickers. Simultaneously, the EU is currently taking the measures covered by the EU strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse, presented in July 2020.⁴⁹ The Commission continues to ensure that the anti-trafficking objectives translate into funding actions, in particular under the Internal Security Police and Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund with a strong gender and child focus. The EU's Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme also financed projects tackling the issue of trafficking.

The **Free2Link** project, funded under the Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme, aims to increase the ability of frontline staff working in asylum systems, integration programmes and support services for victims of trafficking across **Italy, Greece** and other European routes for trafficking of women, to early identify victims of e-trafficking in public and private online networks. The project will provide updated knowledge and evidence of new manifestations of the phenomenon and innovative tools to combat it. The project will help a multi-stakeholder network that includes civil society organisations and public authorities to join forces to elaborate and disseminate information to facilitate the early detection of e-trafficking.

The **FLOW project (2018-2020)**, funded by the EU's Internal Security Fund in which partners from **Estonia, Finland, Bulgaria and Latvia** participate, promotes a holistic approach to preventing and investigating trafficking in human beings (THB) in conjunction with economic crime and engages businesses in preventing THB. The tailor-made tools used by the project equipped business and authorities better to detect, investigate and prevent labour exploitation and human trafficking. These tools include checklists for labour inspectors, guidelines to navigate the local, national, and intra-European human trafficking networks, and policy briefings.

SUPPORTING VICTIMS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Adequate access to services, including in rural areas, is crucial to ensure prevention and the support victims need in order to report gender-based violence. Moreover, awareness of existing institutions or services needs to improve. Supporting victims of gender-based violence should also take into account the position of witnesses who might be able to assist victims in accessing the support they need. In some Member States, up to 30% of calls to domestic violence helplines come from witnesses.⁵⁰ Both victims and witnesses need additional reassurance and to feel safe and protected when reporting incidents involving gender-based

⁴⁸ These stakeholders are the EU Network of National Rapporteurs and Equivalent Mechanisms on trafficking in human beings, EU Civil Society Platform against trafficking in human beings, EU agencies working together to address trafficking in human beings and EU Delegations.

⁴⁹ COM(2020) 607 final, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-security/20200724_com-2020-607-commission-communication_en.pdf.

⁵⁰ European Institute for Gender Equality, *Intimate partner violence and witness intervention: what are the deciding factors?*, 2020, p.24 available at: <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/intimate-partner-violence-and-witness-intervention-what-are-deciding-factors>.

violence. This also applies to professionals, who need clear guidelines on their obligation to report incidents involving intimate partner violence.⁵¹

To be able to understand the extent of gender-based violence and provide adequate measures, comprehensive, up-to-date and comparable data is essential. Building on the experience of the 2014 survey conducted by the European Agency for Fundamental Rights,⁵² Eurostat is currently coordinating an EU-wide survey on gender-based violence and other forms of interpersonal violence, with results expected in 2023. 17 Member States applied for and received co-financing for implementing the survey, while Eurostat is discussing with additional Member States the possibility to gather national data. This joint effort will improve the availability of data on women's experiences of violence in the EU.

The most recent edition of the **Spanish** survey on violence against women introduces new features to provide a better picture of the situation. Thus, it now covers sexual harassment and repeated harassment or stalking. The modules of "sexual violence outside of the couple" and "violence within the couple" now measure all forms of violence from sexual to physical, psychological and economic violence. The survey also evaluates disabilities, injuries, hospital admissions, sick leave and other consequence of gender-based violence.

In addition to combatting specific forms of gender-based violence against women and girls, the European Commission also adopted the Victims' Rights strategy (2020-2025)⁵³, the first EU-level strategy designed to empower victims of crime and to work towards strengthening victims' rights. Its aims are to provide a safe environment for victims to report crimes, improve the support and protection available to the most vulnerable, facilitate their access to compensation and strengthen the cooperation among relevant actors. In this effort to cover all victims of crime, the strategy pays particular attention to the specific needs of victims of gender-based violence, taking an intersectional approach.

In 2020, **Denmark** allocated permanent funding to projects providing outpatient counselling services to victims of violence and their relatives and a treatment scheme for perpetrators of violence. These projects include a counselling service on dating violence for victims of such violence aged 16-24. The service provides individual and group-based psychological counselling to alleviate the consequences of dating violence and help break the cycle. It also includes training sessions for general counselling professionals to enable them to screen target groups for dating violence and refer victims for appropriate help.

The main funding programme to tackle gender-based violence – the Daphne strand of the EU's Rights, Equality and Citizenship (REC) programme – co-funded over 200 projects over the past seven years. From 2019 to 2020,

⁵¹ Ibid, p.55.

⁵² European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Violence against women: an EU-wide survey*, 2014. Available at https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2014-vaw-survey-main-results-apr14_en.pdf.

⁵³ COM(2020) 258, available at:

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0258&from=EN>.

60 projects were selected under calls for proposals to prevent and combat all forms of violence against children, young people and women with a budget of around EUR 26 million. The focus was on the prevention of gender-based violence (including domestic violence, online violence, sexual violence and violence against particularly vulnerable groups) and on protection and supporting victims and potential victims. In December 2020, the European Parliament and the Council reached political agreement on the REC's successor programme, the Citizenship, Equality, Rights and Values programme, for the next seven years⁵⁴.

Since 2018, the **SURVIVOR Project in Greece**, co-financed by the EU's Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme, has been improving services for refugee and migrant survivors of gender-based violence. Refugee or migrant women are more likely to be victims of violence and often have fewer opportunities to defend themselves. The reasons for this greater vulnerability include the fact that many women and girls are unaware of their rights, are unable to inform themselves or are socially isolated. The objectives of the SURVIVOR project have therefore been to improve the quality of services for refugee and migrant victims of gender-based violence in Greece and to improve access to such services. The Survivor Website provides toolkits and other resources for agencies and practitioners in Europe supporting the integration and resettlement of refugees.

The project **Equality**⁵⁵, funded under the EU's Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme, supports local authorities in fostering inclusion and protection of migrants who are at risk, or who survived sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Equality is piloted in four partner cities: **Brussels, Luxembourg, Rome and Gothenburg**, with each partner city focusing on one topic and developing one specific toolbox (practical training tools and awareness raising material on SGBV). The project tools will be disseminated through national and EU city networks with the active support of about 30 "trainee" cities.

CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES THROUGH PREVENTION AND EDUCATION

The European Institute for Gender Equality defines gender stereotypes as "preconceived ideas whereby females and males are arbitrarily assigned characteristics and roles determined and limited by their gender".⁵⁶ Stemming from deeply ingrained attitudes, values, norms and prejudices driven and reproduced by culture and religion, these perceptions arbitrarily push notions about which behaviours and aspirations are acceptable for women, men, girls and boys. In doing so, gender stereotypes feed restrictive expectations of men and women's abilities that are based on their sex alone. This process of internalisation of gender stereotypes and norms,

⁵⁴ The budget of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme (CERV) was increased from the proposed EUR 640 million to EUR 1.56 billion for the period 2021-2027. The budget of the Daphne strand almost doubled.

⁵⁵ Available at: <https://belgium.iom.int/equalcity>

⁵⁶ European Institute for Gender Equality, *Glossary & Thesaurus: Gender Stereotypes*, 2020, available at: <https://eige.europa.eu/thesaurus/terms/1222>.

which is most noticeable during childhood and adolescence, has a life-long impact on individual and social expectations such as participation in the labour market and economic and political decision-making.⁵⁷ When asked about gender stereotypes, many Europeans believe that preconceived ideas of women and men are disseminated mostly through work; this was the view of 51% of Europeans polled in a 2015 special Eurobarometer. 34% of Europeans believe that gender stereotypes are spread by advertising, while 33% of Europeans say they occur in the media.⁵⁸

Unfair gender stereotyping, often combined with other forms of harmful stereotyping based on for example age, migration status, racial or ethnic background, socio-economic status and class, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion or belief or disability, is the root cause of sexism and discrimination against women in all their diversity.⁵⁹ As they often translate into dominant gender roles in society, gender stereotypes feed into gender inequalities and perpetuate underlying power relations used to justify the power of men over women and a baseless perception that women are more passive or less important than men. These beliefs lead to women suffering more sexism, harassment and gender-based violence. In other words, gender stereotypes often lead to violations of women's rights.⁶⁰

Gender stereotyping is not just a phenomenon that harms not only women, but men as well. Narrow definitions of masculinity can lead to physical and emotional harm and hold men back from such things as seeking medical help when ill, fully engaging in parenthood, or forming close emotional bonds, depriving them of nurturing and caring relationships. In their extreme forms, toxic masculinity norms are reflected in the violence that men perpetrate against women and girls, and suffer from other men. Involving men as allies in the fight for gender equality is thus vital to break down the structural discrimination built around gender stereotypes. Men can be agents of change by using positively their position of influence and power as well as their privileged status in decision-making positions.

In the past year, the Commission continued to support initiatives tackling harmful gender stereotypes at policy level and through its funding programmes. As part of the Inclusion and Gender equality dimension of the European Education Area, announced in September 2020, the Commission is committed to challenging gender stereotypes in education and to open up male- or female-dominated professions to persons of the under-represented sex.⁶¹ The EU's Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme presented a call for proposals in 2020 aimed at raising awareness and tackling gender stereotypes with regard to education and early childhood care

⁵⁷ European Parliament, *Report on eliminating gender stereotypes in the EU*, 2012, p. 5. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-7-2012-0401_EN.pdf.

⁵⁸ European Commission, *Special Eurobarometer 428: Gender Equality*, 2015, p.10. Available at https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/archives/ebs/ebs_428_en.pdf.

⁵⁹ Gender Equality Commission of the Council of Europe. *Gender Equality Glossary*, 2016, p.13. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=09000016805e55eb>

⁶⁰ European Parliament, *Report on eliminating gender stereotypes in the EU*, 2012, p. 5. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-7-2012-0401_EN.pdf.

⁶¹ COM(2020) 625, *Communication on achieving the European Education Area by 2050*, 2020, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/default/files/document-library-docs/eea-communication-sept2020_en.pdf .

with a total funding of EUR 4 million. The projects selected under this call focus on changing attitudes, and practices that hamper progress towards equality and restrict the potential of girls and boys, with a particular emphasis on childhood environments. This complements additional efforts under the EU's Creative Europe and Erasmus+ funding programmes, which acknowledge the considerable impact that culture and education have in shaping people's beliefs, values and perception of reality.

The project **Gender Identity: Child Readers and Library Collections** aims to promote children's literature that is open-minded, plural, varied and free from gender stereotypes, that has positive role models, and that encourages respect and diversity.

The **eMERGE project** (e-Media Education about Representations of Gender) aims to empower teachers' skills in media literacy in order to deconstruct with students the gender representations and stereotypes rooted in their media practices and pop cultures. The '*Gender Matters*' is a pilot project⁶² combats gender-based violence against women and girls amongst young people by combining a theater-based approach together with non-formal education in order to achieve audience development and empowerment.

The **#EUWomen4future campaign**, launched in March 2020, intends to break gender stereotypes by bringing positive role models to young women and girls, and celebrating remarkable women in research, innovation, education, culture and sports. The campaign showcases talented women in a dedicated website⁶³ and on social media.

In the ever-changing digital age, it is crucial to ensure that the use of artificial intelligence (AI) systems avoids perpetuating gender stereotypes and that biases in data or code are addressed to ensure that all can access its opportunities and enjoy its benefits. Certain uses of AI systems could pose a significant risk to gender equality by enabling gender-based or other forms of illegal discrimination.⁶⁴ The Commission made progress with its preparations for the upcoming legislative initiative, which is due to be adopted later this year. The purpose of this initiative is to ensure that authorities and users of AI systems can identify and tackle illegal discrimination resulting from AI use, minimise the risk of perpetuating harmful stereotypes, and ultimately build an environment of trust in this field. The regulatory framework will therefore help address the challenges AI poses to gender equality. The White Paper on AI⁶⁵, published in February 2020, opened a broadly-based public consultation on all aspects of AI, which met with significant interest from a wide variety of stakeholders, including women's organisations. Amongst the responses received⁶⁶, there were significant concerns raised over potential breaches of fundamental rights and discriminatory outcomes in the use of AI. A majority of

⁶² <https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/projects/ce-project-details/#project/616707-CREA-1-2020-1-IT-CULT-COOP1>

⁶³ See: <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/euwomen4future>

⁶⁴ Criado-Perez, Caroline, *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*, 2019; Kaplan, Jerry, *Artificial Intelligence: What Everyone Needs to Know*, 2016.

⁶⁵ European Commission, [White Paper on Artificial Intelligence – A European approach to excellence and trust](#), COM(2020) 65 final, 2020.

⁶⁶ European Commission, *Public Consultation on the AI White Paper: Final Report*, 2020, available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/white-paper-artificial-intelligence-public-consultation-towards-european-approach-excellence> .

respondents in this open public consultations supported a coordinated plan or an updated legislative framework on AI, counting on a human rights oversight as to safeguard equality. In July 2020, the High-Level Expert Group on Artificial Intelligence, established by the Commission in 2018, published an online tool to support AI developers and deployers in developing trustworthy AI⁶⁷ that is conceived to avoid outcomes with a gender bias. In October 2020, the Council Presidency approved conclusions on Fundamental Rights in the context of AI, which underlined the importance of the principles of equality and non-discrimination in the design, development, deployment, use and evaluation of AI and the need to ensure that such systems are subject to adequate safeguards and oversight.⁶⁸ In a similar vein, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on ethical aspects of AI from October 2020. This stressed the importance of safeguarding gender equality in AI and the need to have diverse teams of developers and engineers working alongside key societal actors to prevent gender and cultural biases being inadvertently included in AI algorithms, systems and applications.⁶⁹

Co-financed by the EU Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme, the **'Growing up Equal'** project tackles gender stereotypes in primary education in **Bulgaria**. Its objectives are to raise awareness among education professionals of the need to address the negative effect of gender stereotypes on life choices from primary education onwards, and to equip teachers and school administrations with appropriate tools that will address the issue.

The **Austrian project 'BOYS' DAY'**, a career orientation day for adolescents boys aged between 12 and 18, serves to develop a positive male identity. At the BOYS' DAY, boys can get to know occupations in which men are underrepresented. These are mainly professions in the social, educational and health occupational fields. The BOYS' DAY is designed to motivate teenage boys to consider non-gender stereotypical professions, such as nursing or elementary school teaching, when planning for their future. In addition, they are invited to reflect on their life planning, exchange views on images of masculinity and develop their social skills.

In Finland⁷⁰, the project 'Equal Early Childhood Education', managed by the association *Naisasialiitto Unioni*, trains early childhood education professionals and care professionals to become aware of and to dismantle cultural stereotypes linked to gender in their everyday work during the child's first years. As part of these efforts, the project has developed practical measures and guidelines supporting the basis of the early childhood

⁶⁷ European Commission High-Level Expert Group on Artificial Intelligence,

Assessment List for Trustworthy Artificial Intelligence (ALTAI) for self-assessment, 2020.

⁶⁸ Council of the European Union, *Presidency conclusions – The Charter of Fundamental Rights in the context of Artificial Intelligence and Digital Change*, 11481/20, 2020.

⁶⁹ European Parliament, *Resolution for a Framework of Ethical Aspects of Artificial Intelligence, Robotics and Related Technologies*, point 39. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0275_EN.html.

⁷⁰ See : <http://www.tasa-arvoineenvarhaiskasvatus.fi/in-english>

education curriculum and encourage professionals to encounter children as individuals who are allowed to form their own ways to be and act. Simultaneously, the project has produced and shared information on equality and gender sensitivity in early childhood education since 2006 for research purposes. The Finnish National Agency for Education has awarded the project with the Cygnaeus – prize for its promotion on equity in learning and knowledge.

THRIVING IN A GENDER-EQUAL ECONOMY

Despite improvements in the field of employment and economic growth in the EU prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, women still lack equal access to employment and equal working conditions compared to men.⁷¹ Missing care facilities, gender stereotypes and sexism hamper women's participation in the labour market and in entrepreneurship. They may also lead to lower wages,⁷² thereby affecting women's living standards, quality of life and social inclusion. In addition, these gender stereotypes create patterns in the labour market that disproportionately limit women's professional and personal development.⁷³ The systemic nature of this stereotyping coupled with discriminatory practices and bias causes labour markets in the EU and beyond to be segregated horizontally and vertically by gender, with women overrepresented amongst low wage earners, in part-time work and in precarious working conditions, involving variable working hours and temporary contracts.⁷⁴ Moreover, women are more likely to take career breaks due to care responsibilities. In the EU, about 33% women have taken a career break of at least six months for childcare reasons compared

⁷¹ European Commission, *Proposal for a Joint Employment Report 2021 from the Commission to the Council*, 2020, p. 62. Available at <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8351&furtherPubs=yes>.

⁷² Sevilla, Almudena, 'Gender Economics: An Assessment', *IZA of Labor Economics*, DP No. 13877, 2020, p.11. Available at:

<http://ftp.iza.org/dp13877.pdf>.

⁷³ European Parliament, *Resolution of 12 March 2013 on eliminating gender stereotypes in the EU*, 2012/2116(INI).

⁷⁴ Sevilla, Almudena, 'Gender Economics: An Assessment', *IZA of Labor Economics*, DP No. 13877, 2020.

with just over 1% of men.⁷⁵ Furthermore, 44% of Europeans still think that the most important role of women is to take care of their home and family.⁷⁶

The European Pillar of Social Rights provides for a compass in addressing these challenges, in particular, by calling, in principle 2, for equality of treatment and opportunities between women and men in the labour market, terms and conditions of employment, in career progression and the right to equal pay.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE LABOUR MARKET

The pandemic has hit women particularly hard in several respects, and women's participation in the labour market is no exception. Women's overrepresentation in lower paid sectors and occupations, such as for instance hospitality, retail, or personal services, make them particularly vulnerable in the labour markets struck by the COVID-19 crisis. Preliminary data on labour market trends shows that the impact of the pandemic's first wave on the labour market was more significant for women than for men. While the decline in employment in the second quarter of 2020 was identical for women and for men (by 2,4%), women had more difficulties re-entering the labour market during the partial recovery in summer of 2020 with employment rates rising by 1.4% for men but only by 0.8% for women between the second and the third quarter 2020⁷⁷. The longer lasting negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on women will have to be verified with data on the future evolution of labour market indicators. If further maintained, they risk to yield lower pensions for women in the long run, widening the gender pension gap and other gender inequalities for decades to come. In addition, women, especially in low-paid and low-skilled jobs, not only are experiencing a greater risk of employment loss but also greater barriers to benefitting from extraordinary income support schemes set to mitigate the impact of such employment loss⁷⁸.

In contrast to previous financial crises, the sector worst affected has been the service industry, especially in-person services, which primarily employ women. Accommodation, food, hospitality, retail, and travel are categorised as high-risk in terms of exposure to disease, physical proximity to co-workers, and limited possibility of working remotely.⁷⁹ In contrast, service sectors that were not as disrupted due to the nature of

⁷⁵ Eurostat, *Population by effects of childcare on employment and educational attainment level*, Last update 24-02-2020, Available at: [lfsa_18stwked](#) and *Population with work interruption for childcare by duration of interruption and educational attainment level*, Last update: 08-02-2021, Available at: [lfsa_18stlened](#).

⁷⁶ European Commission, *Special Eurobarometer 465: Gender Equality*, 2017, p.5. Available at https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/SPE_CIAL/surveyKy/2154.

⁷⁷ Gender Equality and Socio-Economic Consequences of the COVID-19 crisis, EIGE's Research note to support the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU (2021, the 1st Semester), *forthcoming*

⁷⁸ International Labour organization, ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Seventh edition. Updated estimates and analysis, 2021. Available at: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_767028.pdf

⁷⁹ Papadimitriou, E.; Blaskó, Z., *Economic sectors at risk due to COVID-19 disruptions: will men and women in the EU be affected similarly?*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2020, p.12.

their activity such as information and communication, finance and insurance, primarily employing men, saw an increase in employment rates, benefitting from the greater demand for digital services.⁸⁰ Overall, 25% of employed women in the EU work in high-risk sectors, exceeding the share of employed men in these sectors (20%).⁸¹ Women, especially those in low-paid occupations in high-risk sectors, are therefore at a greater risk of losing their job and of being unemployed than men in all Member States, as a consequence of the pandemic.⁸² Recent Eurostat figures show that unemployment amongst women grew from 6.9% in April to 7.9% in September 2020, while male unemployment rose from 6.5% to 7.1% in the same period.⁸³

Women, who are the majority of workers in care professions⁸⁴ and in service sector jobs, such as retail and in the hospitality industry⁸⁵ are more at risk of becoming unemployed as a result of lockdown measures when jobs disappear in the wake of the crisis. Given the characteristics of these sectors which have been hardest hit

Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/publication/thematic-reports/economic-sectors-risk-due-covid-19-disruptions-will-men-and-women-eu-be-affected-similarly>

These sectors have reported a higher share of women employees, as reported by the CEDEFOP. Social and personal services employ 5%, accommodation and food services employ 5% and wholesale and retail trade employ 15% of the total of women in the EU labour market. In comparison, these sectors employ 3%, 4% and 13% of the total of men in the EU labour market correspondingly.

⁸⁰ International Labour organization, *ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Seventh edition. Updated estimates and analysis*, 2021. Available at: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_767028.pdf

⁸¹ Papadimitriou, E.; Blaskó, Z., *Economic sectors at risk due to COVID-19 disruptions: will men and women in the EU be affected similarly?*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2020, p.12. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/publication/thematic-reports/economic-sectors-risk-due-covid-19-disruptions-will-men-and-women-eu-be-affected-similarly>.

⁸² Ibid, p.12.

Eurofound, COVID-19: A tale of two service sectors, 2021, available at <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/blog/covid-19-a-tale-of-two-service-sectors>; and Papadimitriou, E.; Blaskó, Z., *Economic sectors at risk due to COVID-19 disruptions: will men and women in the EU be affected similarly?*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2020, p.12. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/publication/thematic-reports/economic-sectors-risk-due-covid-19-disruptions-will-men-and-women-eu-be-affected-similarly>.

⁸³ Eurostat, *Unemployment by sex and age – monthly data*, une_rt_m, Last update: 18-02-2021, Available at: https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=une_rt_m&lang=en

⁸⁴ EIGE, *Gender equality and long-term care at home*,

, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2020. Available at <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-and-long-term-care-home>.

⁸⁵ Papadimitriou, E. and Cseres-Gergelyne Blasko, Z., *Economic sectors at risk due to COVID-19 disruptions: will men and women in the EU be affected similarly*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2020. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/publication/thematic-reports/economic-sectors-risk-due-covid-19-disruptions-will-men-and-women-eu-be-affected-similarly>

by the pandemic, employees, often women, in these jobs are not able to work remotely. This in turn reinforces gender inequalities in the labour market and drives up women's risk of poverty and social exclusion.⁸⁶ Women in informal service jobs, such as domestic workers or informal carers performing on-site work, are also more vulnerable to the impact of the pandemic, as 70% of domestic work is performed under informal arrangements⁸⁷ and few specific support measures to mitigate the impact of the COVID-crisis on these workers have been available in EU countries as a whole.⁸⁸

The number of employees working from home increased to an unprecedented level straight after the outbreak of the pandemic: Eurofound's survey carried out during April and May 2020 suggests that 40% of all European employees switched to teleworking due to the crisis. Teleworking is widely considered as a means to better combine family and work obligations.

However it is questionable whether working from home actually improved the work-life balance during a period when schools and childcare institutions were closed and the amount of unpaid work grew massively.⁸⁹ Research indicates that women have been shouldering the lion's share of the increase in unpaid care and household work during the pandemic.⁹⁰ This includes notably the new task of overseeing children's online schooling.⁹¹ Some data suggest that the crisis only accentuated the previous imbalances in that respect: on average, women spent 62 hours per week caring for children (compared to 36 hours for men) and 23 hours per week doing housework (15 hours for men). Single parents, both male and female, spent longer hours than average on childcare (52 hours for women, 36 hours for men), and female single parents with children under 12 spent the longest hours of all groups (77 hours per week)⁹². Surveys carried out during the pandemic showed that 29% of working women with small children found it hard to concentrate on their job because of

⁸⁶ This gendered effect of the pandemic intersects with other drivers of vulnerability and are particularly acute for women from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups, as well as for persons in LGBTIQ communities. See Wenham, C. *The gendered impact of the COVID-19 crisis and post-crisis period*, Report commissioned by the European Parliament, 2020, available at: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/supporting-analyses>; see also European Women's Lobby, *Women must not pay the price for COVID-19! Putting equality between women and men at the heart of the response to COVID-19 across Europe*, 2020, p.7, available at: https://womenlobby.org/IMG/pdf/ewl_policy_brief_on_covid-19_impact_on_women_and_girls-2.pdf.

⁸⁷ Decker, A. and Lebrun, J., *PHS Industry Monitor: Statistical overview of the personal and household services sector in the European Union*, European Federation for Services for Individuals, 2018. Available at: http://www.efsi-europe.eu/fileadmin/MEDIA/publications/2018/PHS_Industry_monitor_April_2018.pdf

⁸⁸ Birte Böök, F., Linda Senden, A., 'Gendering the COVID-19 crisis: a mapping of its impact and call for action in light of EU gender equality law and policy', *European Equality Law Review* 2020/2, pp. 22-44.

⁸⁹ Blasko, Z., *Working from Home when Teachers Do the Same – Teleworking and Work-Family Conflicts during COVID-19 Lockdowns*, SSRN, 2020. Available at: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3729301>

⁹⁰ Wenham, C. *The gendered impact of the COVID-19 crisis and post-crisis period*, Report commissioned by the European Parliament, 2020. Available at: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/supporting-analyses>.

⁹¹ Gender Equality and Socio-Economic Consequences of the COVID-19 crisis, EIGE's Research note to support the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU (2021, the 1st Semester), *forthcoming*

⁹² Eurofound, *Living, working and COVID-19*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2020, p.23-24, data collected in April and July 2020. Available at: https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ef_publication/field_ef_document/ef20059en.pdf.

family responsibilities compared to 16% of working men in the same situation.⁹³ Women are more likely to reduce working hours or leave employment altogether to provide childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹⁴ These patterns have reinforced traditional gender roles.

However, there has been some reshuffling of the allocation of care responsibilities within households during lockdown with an increase in fathers' involvement in childcare.⁹⁵ This addressed certain aspects of the gender care gap, and can have a positive impact on fathers and children's relationships. Whether these developments will lead to a greater and sustainable shift in traditional gender roles, it is still too early to tell. It may be that the increase in fathers' involvement under these circumstances has remained limited to childcare and home schooling and will not spill over to other types of unpaid care or housework.⁹⁶

The gendered impact on employment of COVID-19 is multi-layered. Women have also been at the forefront of tackling the pandemic risking a higher exposure to the virus as most of the sectors declared 'essential' during the pandemic lockdowns are close contact jobs and female dominated⁹⁷. They make up the majority of frontline workers in the healthcare, care and other essential sectors: 76% of healthcare and social-care

⁹³ Eurofound, *Women and the labour market: has COVID rolled back recent gains*, 2020. Available at <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/policy-brief/2020/women-and-labour-market-equality-has-covid-19-rolled-back-recent-gains>.

⁹⁴ T Alon, M Doepke, J Olmstead-Rumsey, M Tertilt, 'This Time It's Different: The Role of Women's Employment in a Pandemic Recession', *IZA Institute of Labour Economics*, Discussion Paper Series No 13562, p.4, available at <https://covid-19.iza.org/publications/dp13562/>.

⁹⁵ T Alon, M Doepke, J Olmstead-Rumsey, M Tertilt, 'The impact of COVID-19 on gender equality', *National Bureau of Economic Research*, Working Paper 26947, 2020, available at <http://www.nber.org/papers/w26947>;

Mangiavacchi, Lucia; Piccoli, Luca & Pieroni, Luca, Fathers Matter: Intra-Household Responsibilities and Children's Wellbeing during the COVID-19 Lockdown in Italy, *IZA Institute of Labour Economics*, Discussion Paper Series No 13519, 2020, available at <https://covid-19.iza.org/publications/dp13519/> – 'Lockdown had a balancing effect on the parents' division of household tasks, reducing the mothers' share of housework by 4.3 percentage points and mothers' share of childcare tasks by 2.1 percentage points. Although the reduction in childcare tasks is relatively modest, the lockdown increased the probability that the father became the main caregiver by almost 6.6 percentage points.' p. 11.

⁹⁶ D Del Boca, N Oggero, P Profeta, M-C Rossi, 'Women's Work, Housework and Childcare, before and during COVID-19', *IZA Institute of Labour Economics*, Discussion Paper Series No13409, 2020. See also L Farré, Y Fawaz, L González, J Graves, 'How the covid-19 lockdown affected gender inequality in paid and unpaid work in Spain', *IZA Institute of Labour Economics*, Discussion Paper No. 13434, 2020. This study for Spain analyses the gender division of household tasks and childcare, and find that most of the additional household workload due to COVID-19 crisis falls on women's shoulders, with very limited contribution of their partners.

⁹⁷ European Institute for Gender Equality), *Gender Equality Index 2020: Digitalisation and the future of work*, 2020, available at <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2020-digitalisation-and-future-work>.

workers, 86% of personal care workers in health services⁹⁸. With the pandemic, women in these sectors saw an unprecedented rise in workload, health risk and challenges to work-life balance.⁹⁹ Yet these sectors in many Member States continue to be characterised by relatively low salaries, which calls to question how much the value of their essential work is appreciated. A similar case is for example that of food store cashiers, who face similar health risks and disruption of work-life balance.¹⁰⁰

The COVID-19 crisis reinforces the need to recognise the importance and contribution of frontline work, promoting equal sharing of care responsibilities, breaking the glass ceiling and better valorising women's skills, efforts and responsibilities in undervalued and underpaid sectors by addressing the pay gap heads on. Hence, the Commission underlined the urgency of tackling these gaps in the wake of COVID-19 when marking the European Equal Pay day on 10 November 2020.¹⁰¹ It also organised an online seminar on the gender equality aspects of work and care in the context of COVID-19 where Member States presented examples of policies they were implementing to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on female employment and measure to support equal sharing of care work.¹⁰²

At the end of March 2020, **Spain** adopted measures to deal with the social and economic impact of COVID-19. The government introduced an extraordinary subsidy for household employees who were registered under the General Social Security Regime but could not work due to the lockdown. This financial support helped mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic on domestic workers, primarily women, and specifically women with a migrant background, who were already facing a lack of recognition of their work and inadequate access to social security protection.

The **Belgian** Government introduced an extraordinary "Covid" parental leave available to all parents of children up to the age of 12 and parents caring for a dependent child or adult regardless of age. This measure grants parents a right to unpaid parental leave for the period where schools and childcare centres are closed due to COVID-19. Employees taking parental leave receive a EUR 500 allowance (a higher amount is set for single parent families and families with dependent persons).

⁹⁸ Birte Böök, Franka van Hoof, Linda Senden, Alexandra Timmer, 'Gendering the COVID-19 crisis: a mapping of its impact and call for action in light of EU gender equality law and policy', *European Equality Law Review* 2020/2, pp. 34, available at: <https://www.equalitylaw.eu/downloads/5300-european-equality-law-review-2-2020-pdf-1-446-kb>. See also EIGE (2020), COVID-19 and gender equality: Frontline Workers, available at: <https://eige.europa.eu/covid-19-and-genderequality/frontline-workers>.

⁹⁹ Eurofound, *Work, teleworking and COVID-19*, 2021, available at: <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/data/covid-19/working-teleworking>.

¹⁰⁰ European Institute for Gender Equality, *Gender Equality Index 2020: Digitalisation and the future of work*, 2020, p.28, available at <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2020-digitalisation-and-future-work>.

¹⁰¹ European Commission, *Equal Pay Day: Statement by Vice-President Jourová and Commissioners Schmit and Dalli*, 2020, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_20_2010.

¹⁰² European Commission, *Webinar series on gender-sensitive responses to the COVID-19 crisis*, 2020, available at https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/webinar-series-gender-sensitive-responses-covid-19-crisis_en.

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE LABOUR MARKET

Employment rates since 2005 in the EU (before the outbreak of the pandemic) have remained systematically higher for men than women. In 2019, 79% of men were employed compared to only 67.3% of women. This resulted in a gender employment gap for the EU27 of 11.7 percentage points.¹⁰³ Women in rural areas have more difficulties accessing the labour market: the differences in the employment gap between rural women and women in cities amounts to 2 percentage points.¹⁰⁴ While the gender employment gap narrowed by 4.6 percentage points between 2005 and 2019, the rate of this improvement has slowed down and stagnated since 2015.¹⁰⁵ Taking into account part-time work, more prevalent amongst women, the gender gap for full-time equivalent employment in 2019 amounts to 17.4 percentage points.¹⁰⁶

Although the EU and its Member States have set themselves the objective of a 75% employment rate for women and men under the Europe 2020 strategy, they have a long way to go in improving women's situation in the labour market. The EU's score in the domain of "work" of the Gender Equality Index published by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) increased from 70 in 2005 to 72.2 in 2020¹⁰⁷, showing slow progress and reflecting the heterogeneity of this process across the Union. Looking at individual Member State level, performances vary. 15 countries show good labour market outcomes in terms of gender employment gap, while 14 face key challenges in this area.¹⁰⁸ Parenthood remains a crucial determining factor for women and men's employment. Being the parent of one child under 6 years of age reduces women's employment rate by 14.3 percentage points, while it increases men's employment rate by 9.6 percentage points.¹⁰⁹ There are stark gender differences in labour force participation rates across different types of family composition, defined in terms of marital status and parenthood. The gender gap is the highest between married men and women with children and the smallest between men and women who are not married and have no children in the household.¹¹⁰ In a similar vein, the gender gap in the share of unemployed people is widest at women's

¹⁰³ Eurostat, *Employment and activity by sex and age - annual data*, 2020. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/lfsi_emp_a/default/table?lang=en. The figures correspond to the population 20-64 year old and using the concept Total employment (resident population concept – LFS)

¹⁰⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/product/page/LFST_R_ERGAU__custom_443889

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Men recorded a rate of 76.1% in contrast to 58.7% for women; (20-64), Eurostat, JER 2021, p. 63...

¹⁰⁷ European Institute for Gender Equality, *Work in the European Union for 2020*, 2020, available at: <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2020/domain/work>.

¹⁰⁸ Council of the European Union, *EMCO Annual Employment Performance Report. Doc. 11372/20*, 2020, p3 Available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11372-2020-ADD-1/en/pdf>.

¹⁰⁹ European Commission, *Proposal for a Joint Employment Report 2021 from the Commission to the Council*, 2020, p.64, available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8351&furtherPubs=yes>.

¹¹⁰ Grubanov-Boskovic, S. Tintori, G., [Biagi, F.](#), *Gaps in the EU Labour Market Participation Rates: an intersectional assessment of the role of gender and migrant status* Publications Office of the European

prime childbearing age group 30-44.¹¹¹ The situation of women in the labour market is far from homogenous. The above-mentioned gender gaps are even wider amongst groups of women in disadvantaged or vulnerable situations, such as young and older women, women with disabilities, single mothers with dependent children, women with a minority racial or ethnic background and from migrant communities or other minority groups.¹¹² The full time equivalent employment rates are up to 20 percentage points lower for women with low educational attainment or women born outside the EU.¹¹³ A study shows that only 16% of Roma women are employed in examined Member States.¹¹⁴ Women with disabilities continue to face a significantly lower full time equivalent employment rate of 21% compared to 29% for disabled men, despite recent positive developments in reducing the gender employment gap.¹¹⁵

With the aim of fighting poverty, a **Spanish** Royal Decree¹¹⁶ of March 2020 established a minimum income scheme ranging from a minimum ranging from EUR 461.5 to EUR 1,015. This is expected to benefit around 850,000 households in total and 2.3 million people, 1 million of whom are currently suffering from extreme poverty. It provides special protection to single-parent households and children, helping to mitigate women's risk of social exclusion. Older women, victims of gender-based violence or victims of human trafficking and sexual exploitation can also benefit from this income.

Progress towards a gender equal labour market is both a necessity and an opportunity for the EU and society as a whole, not only a women's issue. Increased participation in paid work and challenging gender-based discrimination in employment benefits individual women, empowering them to shape their own lives, to play a role in public life and to be economically independent.¹¹⁷ The inclusion of both women and men in all of their

Union, Luxembourg, 2020. Available at:

<https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC121425>

This applies to both natives and non-natives (EU mobile and non-EU born).

¹¹¹ European Commission, *Proposal for a Joint Employment Report 2021 from the Commission to the Council*, 2020, p.63, available at:

<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8351&furtherPubs=yes>.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid, p.63.

¹¹⁴ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey: Roma women in nine EU Member States, 2019*, p.27. Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2019-eu-minorities-survey-roma-women_en.pdf.

¹¹⁵ European Institute for Gender Equality, *Gender Equality Index 2020: Digitalisation and the future of work*, 2020, p.30, available at <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2020-digitalisation-and-future-work>.

¹¹⁶ Available here <https://www.boe.es/buscar/pdf/2020/BOE-A-2020-5493-consolidado.pdf>.

¹¹⁷ Sevilla, Almudena, 'Gender Economics: An Assessment', *IZA of Labor Economics*, DP No. 13877, 2020. Available at:

diversity in the labour market has a strong, positive impact on the economy, notably in the context of a shrinking workforce and skills shortages.

The European Commission remains committed to increasing women's participation in the labour market, especially following the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Action Plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights, adopted on 3 March 2021, will play a key role in this context. The Commission will notably support Member States in closing gender gaps in the labour market, pay and pensions, and providing more and better early childhood education and care. The Action Plan notably sets the aim to halve the gender employment gap compared to 2019 in order to achieve the employment target¹¹⁸ for the entire working age population, and to increase the provision of formal early childhood education and care, to support stronger female labour market participation.

The Commission also monitors labour-related gender equality challenges as part of its broader monitoring of Member States' labour market, social and skills challenges in the annual European Semester process and the Social Scoreboard. In this context, the Commission issued in 2020 country specific recommendations, stressing the necessity of increasing women's labour market participation and tackling gender pay and pension gaps to several Member States. Financial support for implementation of the reforms and investments is available through EU funding tools, such as for instance the European Social Fund +. Moreover, under the Structural Reform Support Programme (as of 2021 replaced by the Technical Support Instrument), the Commission provides Member States upon request an analysis of the causes of their gender employment gap to inform their policy making at national level.

Women's participation in the labour market can also be boosted through female entrepreneurship and participation in innovation. Although women make up more than half of the EU's population, only 34.4% self-employed people and 30% of start-up entrepreneurs in the EU are women.¹¹⁹ To change this, the Commission has integrated a gender perspective in the Industrial and SME strategy¹²⁰ by investing in digital skills development in order to encourage women to create and lead businesses and develop targeted measures promoting the participation of women in innovation. This effort will complement ongoing work in the Europe-wide online platform WEgate¹²¹, through which the Commission facilitates the exchange of good practices and networking for female entrepreneurs. Furthermore, the European Innovation Council launched a pilot programme on women-led start-ups and innovative small and medium-sized enterprises in 2020.¹²² These

<http://ftp.iza.org/dp13877.pdf>.

¹¹⁸ In the period 2014-2020, the European Social Fund (ESF) notably included a dedicated investment priority on gender equality. Member States have earmarked EUR 1.6 billion for 2014-2020 (EU share) under this dedicated investment priority. Other specific targeted actions for gender equality are programmed across all investment priorities. The indicative amount for these targeted actions is EUR 5.6 billion (EU share) for the programming period.

¹¹⁹ WEgate, *Women entrepreneurship: facts and figures*, 2020, available at <https://wegate.eu/women-entrepreneurship-facts-and-figures>.

¹²⁰ COM(2020) 102. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-conhttps://ec.europa.eu/research/eic/index.cfm tent/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0102&from=EN>.

¹²¹ For more information, please access: <https://wegate.eu/>.

¹²² <https://ec.europa.eu/research/eic/index.cfm>

measures have been further backed by a series of workshops on female entrepreneurship in all economic fields, organised by the Executive Agency for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises.

SEGREGATED LABOUR MARKETS AND UNDERVALUATION ACROSS DIFFERENT SECTORS OF THE ECONOMY

Despite the increase in women's employment in recent years before the outbreak of COVID-19, women have access to a narrower spectrum of employment opportunities than men do. Jobs in which men account for most of the workforce are especially prone to gender discrimination at hiring.¹²³ Little progress has been made in challenging sectoral and occupational gender segregation in the labour market. This situation is reflected in EIGE's Gender Equality Index score on work quality and segregation; the EU achieves a mere 64 out of 100 in 2020, a score that has barely increased since 2010¹²⁴.

A better understanding of the state of play of gender segregation in specific sectors is key to addressing this problem. The Commission is collecting gender disaggregated data on employment in the energy sector and compiled a number of good practices in mitigating the gender impact of automation of the transport sector.¹²⁵ Both the Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy, adopted in December 2020¹²⁶, and ongoing negotiations between EU sectoral social partners put forward commitments to address the gender segregation in transport sectors and increase the employment of women. The Commission also monitors women's participation in the digital economy through the annual Women in Digital Scoreboard¹²⁷ and implementing the Ministerial declaration of commitment on Women in Digital.¹²⁸ Furthermore the Commission set up an expert group in

¹²³ Koch, A. J., D'Mello, S. D., Sackett, P. R., 'A meta-analysis of gender stereotypes and bias in experimental simulations of employment decision making', *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 100, 2015, 128-161.

¹²⁴ European Institute for Gender Equality, *Gender Equality Index 2020: Digitalisation and the future of work*, 2020, p.27, available at <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2020-digitalisation-and-future-work>.

¹²⁵ The Commission has commissioned a study on 'The social dimension of the transition to automation and digitalisation in transport, focusing on the labour force' to look at possible policy measures to accompany the transition, including those targeting women.

¹²⁶ European Commission, *Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy – putting European transport on track for the future*, SWD(2020) 331 final, Available at:

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0331&from=EN>

¹²⁷ European Commission, *Women in Digital Scoreboard*, 2020, available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/women-digital-scoreboard-2020>.

¹²⁸ Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/document.cfm?doc_id=58562

As part of the implementation of the six measures included in the Ministerial Declaration, Member States committed to produce a national strategy for women in digital to increase gender equality in the sector by focusing on education and qualification, equal opportunities, non-discrimination in the labour market. The Commission and EU Member States jointly establish a Europe-wide Girls and Women in ICT Day.

November 2020 to formulate concrete measures and recommendations to improve the participation in the sport sector, kick-starting the Renewed strategic framework for gender equality in sport.¹²⁹

Networks and sector role models can be a driving force in professional development, boost opportunities for mentorship and exchange of good practices, and improve individuals' expectations of success in any sector. Yet such tools are often unavailable to women working in male-dominated sectors. The Commission supports platforms promoting women's participation and countering the gender stereotypes that are engrained in male-dominated sectors. Since its launch in 2017, the EU-funded *Women in Transport – EU Platform for Change*¹³⁰ has been the flagship network enabling organisations in the field of transport to commit to increasing female employment and share best practices. Its success has inspired similar action in the energy sector, where the Commission is planning to launch a similar platform aimed at promoting equality at large in the sector.

In addition to these networks, the Commission is continuing to offer a variety of funding programmes addressing gender segregation in specific sectors under the Multi-Annual Financial Framework for 2021-2027. For instance, the EU common agricultural policy's strategic plan, currently in negotiation with the co-legislators, envisages measures to support women in agriculture through training and advisory services. The InvestEU programme will promote gender-smart financing, including by aiming to increase the number of women in decision-making roles in private equity and venture capital funds to address the existing gender gap in the field. It will also support and promote investment into funds with gender-focused investment strategies. Gender equality is an overarching priority of the Erasmus+ Sport Actions, which supports projects promoting participation, empowerment as well as encouraging leadership positions of girls and women in sport. The new MEDIA Programme¹³¹ includes two new actions involving skills and mentoring programmes for female filmmakers, producers and screenwriters. It has also launched a dedicated communication campaign to encourage women to engage in the audio-visual and news media sector. The Creative Europe programme continues to support projects addressing the underrepresentation of women in the music and arts sector.

For example, the project "**Keychange**"¹³² addresses the gender gap in the music industry and places women in the main stage through training, mentoring, and network support.

Room to Bloom is a training programme for young feminist and migrant background artists that aims at supporting them in their career development, by giving them access to knowledge, exchanges opportunities and artistic production possibilities within the frame of three innovative European biennales.

The gender segregation in the labour market reflects, among other factors, the horizontal gender segregation in education and training. Stereotypes and expectations based on gender rather than academic performance play a significant role in perpetuating the barriers that impede individuals from freely and equally pursuing career choices. As of 2018, fewer than 3 out of 10 graduates in education, health and welfare, the humanities and art are men, with women accounting for 74.1% of the total. In contrast, the share of female graduates in

¹²⁹ See https://ec.europa.eu/sport/news/high-level-group-gender-equality-sport_en

¹³⁰ For more information, see: https://ec.europa.eu/transport/themes/social/women-transport-eu-platform-change_en.

¹³¹ The MEDIA program is one of Creative Europe's programme strands, see <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/policies/media-programme>.

¹³² For more information about this project, see: <https://www.keychange.eu/>.

Information and Communications Technology (ICT) fields is just over 20%.¹³³ A recent survey showed that education institutions continue to face challenges when implementing inclusion policies.¹³⁴

The Commission is committed to increasing girls' participation in ICT and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and continues to encourage Member States to tackle the gender segregation in education. The Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027, presented in September 2020¹³⁵, sets out measures to improve development of digital skills in education and training, including a targeted measure to encourage women's participation in STEM, which is led, among others, in cooperation with the European Institute of Innovation and Technology. The plan stresses the need to ensure that girls and young women are equally represented in digital studies and careers.¹³⁶ A similar objective is set in the updated European Skills Agenda, adopted in July 2020, where the Commission suggested to work in close cooperation with EU Member States to implement measures to promote gender-balanced participation in ICT-related occupations. These involve increasing the proportion of women studying science, technology, engineering, and mathematics and fostering women's entrepreneurial skills. The European Institute of Innovation and Technology for its part also supports the development of new higher education curricula in engineering and ICT fields of study, as well as accompanying mentorship and guidance programmes to make these fields more attractive for women.

The Commission also encouraged Member States to adopt gender responsive measures and challenge gender stereotypes in education and training.¹³⁷ In November 2020, the Council of the EU adopted a Recommendation on vocational education and training (VET), which recommends targeted measures to achieve gender balance in traditionally "male" or "female" occupations. The Reinforced Youth Guarantee adopted by the Council in October 2020¹³⁸ complements these action as it supports measures to address gender bias and discrimination in employment counselling and guidance. Through the Recovery and Resilience Plans, Member States are

¹³³ Eurostat, *Graduates by education level, programme orientation, sex and field of education*, 2021. Available at: https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=educ_uae_grad02&lang=en.

¹³⁴ While 93% of respondents can confirm that policies are in place to broader diversity in education, gaps in their implementation often occur due to underfunding and lack of clear guidelines for education institutions to develop such strategies, see ETUCE, *Embracing diversity in education*, 2020. Available at: <https://www.csee-etuue.org/en/projects/education-trade-unions-and-inclusive-schools-embracing-diversity-in-education/3578-research>

¹³⁵ COM(2020) 624. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12453-Digital-Education-Action-Plan>

¹³⁶ The STEAM (Science- Technology- Engineering- Art- Math) approach for learning and teaching, included in the Digital Education, promotes cross-cutting, 'transversal' skills such as digital skills, critical thinking, problem-solving, management, and entrepreneurship. It also promotes cooperation with non-academic partners and responds to economic, environmental, political and social challenges. STEAM encourages the blending of knowledge that is required in the real world and natural curiosity.

¹³⁷ COM(2020) 625, *Communication on achieving the European Education Area by 2050*, 2020, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/default/files/document-library-docs/eea-communication-sept2020_en.pdf .

¹³⁸ European Commission, *Support for reinforced Youth Guarantee: Council adopts Commission's proposal for a Recommendation on a Bridge to Jobs*, 2020. Available at <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&furtherNews=yes&newsId=9838>.

encouraged to make STEM curricula and programmes more attractive for women and to motivate the transition to STEM occupations, as a way to address gender segregation in the labour market.

In November 2020, a new 18-month research project “**Nudging to Support Stereotype-free Career Choices and Working Conditions**” got under way, co-funded by the Estonian Research Council using the European Regional Development Fund and funding from the Ministry of Social Affairs. The project’s aim is to develop nudging tools for teachers and career advisers to support and promote career choices that are free of gender stereotypes, and to support employers in ensuring equal and fair working conditions and stereotype-free recruitment and promotion. The effect of the tools is tested by using randomised controlled trials and an implementation analysis specifying the scalability of the measures carried out.

CLOSING THE GENDER GAP IN PAY AND PENSIONS

Although the right to equal pay for equal work or work of equal value has been enshrined in the EU Treaties for more than 60 years, women still earn less on average than men do. More importantly, they tend on average to engage in lower-pay occupations than men, even if working in the same sector and in jobs that have the same observable characteristics in all other respects.¹³⁹ A recent evaluation of the enforcement of the equal pay principle¹⁴⁰ shows inadequate progress on the enforcement of the right to equal pay and a limited follow up of the 2014 Commission’s Recommendation on pay transparency.¹⁴¹ According to the latest available data from Eurostat, the unadjusted gender pay gap¹⁴² for EU27 in 2018 was 14.1 %, a meagre improvement from the 15.8% in 2010. This means that women throughout the EU earn an average of 86 cents for every euro a man earns.

Following the announcement by Commission President von der Leyen’s in her political guidelines that binding pay transparency measures would be introduced, confirmed in the Gender Equality Strategy, the Commission adopted a proposal for a Directive strengthening the application of the principle of equal pay for equal work or work of equal value between men and women through pay transparency and enforcement mechanisms on 4 March 2021. The proposal’s aim is to empower workers to enforce their right to equal pay and to encourage employers to ensure that their pay setting mechanisms are free from gender bias and systemic undervaluation

¹³⁹ Support study for Impact Assessment on Pay Transparency Directive, forthcoming

¹⁴⁰ [SWD \(2020\) 50](#) – a REFIT evaluation of the existing legal framework regarding equal pay and the 2014 Pay Transparency Recommendation was published in March 2020.

¹⁴¹ OJEU [2014/124/EU](#), *Commission Recommendation of 7 March 2014 on strengthening the principle of equal pay between men and women through transparency Text with EEA relevance*, 2014, p. 112–116

¹⁴² EUROSTAT, *GENDER PAY GAP IN UNADJUSTED FORM*, 2020, AVAILABLE AT: [HTTPS://EC.EUROPA.EU/EUROSTAT/DATABROWSER/VIEW/SDG_05_20/DEFAULT/TABLE?LANG=EN](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/SDG_05_20/default/table?lang=en). THE GENDER PAY GAP INDICATOR MEASURES THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE AVERAGE GROSS HOURLY EARNINGS OF MALE AND FEMALE PAID EMPLOYEES AS A PERCENTAGE OF AVERAGE GROSS HOURLY EARNINGS OF MALE PAID EMPLOYEES. EUROSTAT CALCULATES THE GENDER PAY GAP IN ALL MEMBER STATES ON THE BASIS OF DATA DIRECTLY GATHERED THROUGH THE FOUR-YEARLY STRUCTURE OF EARNINGS SURVEY. NATIONAL ESTIMATES PROVIDED BY NATIONAL SOURCES ARE THEN USED TO COVER THE YEARS IN BETWEEN THE FOUR YEAR PERIOD. THE QUOTED NATIONAL FIGURES WERE LASTLY UPDATED ON 29/10/2020.

of women's work. The proposal will also increase workers' and employers' awareness and spur debate on the reasons for differences in pay.

In October 2020, the Commission published the proposal for a directive on adequate minimum wages in the EU.¹⁴³ In practice, the majority of minimum wage earners being women, hence this proposal indirectly supports the reduction of the gender pay and pension gap by setting a framework for adequate minimum wages in the EU.

Gender inequalities in the labour market, especially as regards the number of years in employment, work intensity and remuneration, result in the gender pension gap, the size of which also depends on the design of the pension system.¹⁴⁴ Although the gender gap in pensions has narrowed gradually over the last decade, it remains wide. The most recent data point out that the pension gap in the EU27 was 29.5% in 2018, having slowly decreased from 33.9% in 2010.¹⁴⁵ With pensions being the single most important source of income for older people, this gap exacerbates the higher risk of poverty among elderly women.¹⁴⁶

Providing adequate access and equal savings opportunities for women and men, along with ensuring a minimum income in old age, should be at the heart adequate, inclusive and sustainable pension systems. The remaining inequalities are of serious concern, given the socio-economic impact of the outbreak of COVID-19, as women's pensions are often used to support their unemployed dependents during crises.¹⁴⁷ The Commission and the Social Protection Committee, in consultation with employers' organisations, trade unions and AGE Platform Europe, are assessing how risks and resources are being shared in pensions systems and will publish the results of this analysis in 2021 edition of the Pension Adequacy Report. Simultaneously, the EU-funded project "Mind the Gap in Pensions" (MIGAPE)¹⁴⁸ is currently analysing gender differences in pension's income in Europe to provide an insight into the consequences of the gap, identify trends and raise awareness of employment choices. The Commission's Structural Reform Support Programme is helping Member States to reduce the gender pension gap by strengthening national systems for supplementary pension savings. Last but not least, the Commission, together with EU Member States and key stakeholders, is also exploring the provision of pension credits for care-related career breaks in occupational pension schemes.

¹⁴³ COM(2020) 682 final, *Advancing the EU social market economy: adequate minimum wages for workers across Member States*, 2020. Available at:

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020PC0682&from=EN> .

¹⁴⁴ European Parliament, *The gender gap in pensions in the EU*, 2019, available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/631033/IPOL_BRI\(2019\)631033_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/631033/IPOL_BRI(2019)631033_EN.pdf).

¹⁴⁵ Eurostat, *Gender pension gap by age group – EU-SILC survey [ilc_pnp13]*, 2020. Available at: https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=ilc_pnp13&lang=en. The pension gap figures given correspond to the population 65 years and over.

¹⁴⁶ European Parliament, *The gender gap in pensions in the EU*, 2019.

¹⁴⁷ European Women's Lobby, 'Women must not pay the price for COVID-19! Putting equality between women and men at the heart of the response to COVID-19 across Europe', *EWL Policy Brief* April 2020. Available at: https://www.womenlobby.org/IMG/pdf/ewl_policy_brief_on_covid-19_impact_on_women_and_girls-2.pdf.

¹⁴⁸ For more information: <http://www.migape.eu/>.

Acting on the prevailing gender pay gap, a **Spanish** Royal Decree of 13 October 2020 addresses the challenge of indirect discrimination through failure to assess the value of work positions adequately. This legislative initiative is designed to establish greater transparency on pay inspired by the Commission's preparatory work on a proposal on pay transparency. The Decree has made it mandatory for all companies to have pay records, to develop an equality plan and conduct a remuneration audit. The pay records must include mean and median values of salaries, wage complements, and additional remuneration other than wages broken down by occupational category, level, or job position, as well as by gender. The Decree also introduces job evaluation systems, including an appropriate assessment of posts within the company, and the right of workers to be informed so as to ensure greater transparency in collective bargaining.

IMPROVING WORK-LIFE BALANCE AND NARROWING THE GENDER CARE GAP

A specific challenge connected to a gender-equal economy is working towards a better gender balance in unpaid care and housework and a reasonable work-life balance accessible to women and men. The existing distribution of housework and childcare activities between women and men is still very uneven. Before the COVID-19 outbreak, women in the EU spent an average of 13 hours more than men on unpaid care and housework every week.¹⁴⁹ This has a disproportionate impact on women's participation in the labour market, contributing to women's high degree of part-time work and to the gender gaps in employment and pay. Women often work part time for reasons related to childcare or care of dependent adults.¹⁵⁰ Furthermore, 16.9% of women in the EU27 in 2019 reported that they were not seeking employment because of care responsibilities, a far higher percentage than the 1.4% of men. That means that 7.7 million women between the ages of 20-64 are kept out of employment compared to 450 000 men. The impact of the uneven distribution of care responsibilities and unpaid work is expected to be aggravated by the limited if not lack of access to care facilities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2019, the EU took a step forward with the adoption of the Work-Life Balance Directive¹⁵¹, which looks at family-related leaves from the perspective of an individual's life and encourages sharing of family leave and flexible working time arrangements among women and men. The Directive addresses the unequal sharing of care responsibilities, the perpetuation of traditional and stereotypical gender roles and gender inequalities in earnings and employment prospects stemming from inadequate family-related leave policies. Most Member

¹⁴⁹ European Institute for Gender Equality, *Health: Unpaid care and housework*, 2020. Available at: <https://eige.europa.eu/covid-19-and-gender-equality/unpaid-care-and-housework>

¹⁵⁰ Eurofound, 'Gender equality at work, European Working Conditions', *Survey 2015 series*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2015, p.13. Available at: https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ef_publication/field_ef_document/ef19003en.pdf.

Men, on the contrary, take up flexible working arrangements to a lesser extent than women do, and often for reasons such as participation in education, training, or because they do not find full-time employment

¹⁵¹ Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32019L1158>

States have started transposing the Directive into national legislation¹⁵² and have until August 2022 to complete transposition. To ensure the smooth and complete transposition of the Work-Life Balance Directive, the Commission continues to discuss and monitor legislative developments in Member States. In December 2020, the **Employment Committee** and **Social Protection Committee** recommended a set of work-life balance indicators to measure uptake and duration of paternity, parental and carers' leave and flexible working arrangements. The report also includes results of a pilot project in eight EU Member States. An implementation workshop was held with Member States to discuss technical issues and maintain the momentum set by the adoption of the Directive.

The **French** Senate voted in November 2020 to extend paternity leave. From 1 July 2021, paid paternity leave (available for fathers and second parents) will be expanded from 14 to 28 days, and 32 in case of multiple births. Employers are obliged to grant seven days of paternity leave immediately following childbirth. Under this new paternity leave, the first three days will be fully paid by the company and the remaining days paid by the state.

The Family Act, adopted by the **Italian** Council of Ministers in June 2020, puts forward a full policy package proposal from paternity leave to taxation, childcare services and family subsidies. Through this Act, the Government establishes new parental leave entitlements, at least two months of which cannot be transferred to the other parent for each child. A mandatory paternity leave period of not less than 10 working days is introduced for the working father to be taken during the first few months after the child's birth; the right to leave is granted regardless of marital or family status. A paid leave of at least 5 hours during a school year is provided for both parents to enable them to meet with their children's teachers. This leave can be taken up flexibly, to the extent compatible with the needs of the employer.

The transposition of the Work-Life Balance Directive alone will not close the gender care gap. The Council Conclusions¹⁵³ approved under the German Presidency in December 2020, and supported by EIGE's research report on gender inequalities in care and pay,¹⁵⁴ called to step up efforts to reduce gender gaps in care work.

On 21 January 2021 the European Parliament adopted a Resolution on the Right to Disconnect¹⁵⁵. The Resolution takes note of the impact of digital-based telework - particularly accentuated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic - on the work-life balance of employees exercising care functions, the majority of which tend to be women. The Resolution calls on the Commission to propose legislation to ensure that workers are able to exercise their right to disconnect, and highlights the fundamental role of social partners in identifying

¹⁵² Koslowski, A., Blum, S., Dobrotić, I., Kaufman, G.; Moss, P., *International Review of Leave Policies and Research*, 2020. Available at: http://www.leavenetwork.org/lp_and_r_reports/.

¹⁵³ Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on the Gender Pay Gap: Valuation and: Distribution of Paid Work and Unpaid Care Work*, 2020. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/47063/st13584-en20.pdf>.

¹⁵⁴ European Institute for Gender Equality, *Gender inequalities in care and pay in the EU*, 2020. Available at: <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-inequalities-care-and-pay-eu>.

¹⁵⁵ P9_TA-PROV(2021)0021 *European Parliament resolution of 21 January 2021 with recommendations to the Commission on the right to disconnect (2019/2181(INL))*. Available at : <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20210114IPR95618/right-to-disconnect-should-be-an-eu-wide-fundamental-right-meps-say>

and implementing appropriate measures.¹⁵⁶ Alongside work-life balance measures, the availability of affordable and high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) services for children and long-term care for the elderly and for people with a chronic illness or disability are fundamental for women's participation in the labour market. That is why the Social Protection Committee¹⁵⁷ is mapping childcare and long-term care across all EU Member States to support the upward social convergence in Member States.

Given that women's participation in the labour market in a long-term perspective depends on the availability of long-term care services, the Commission recently assessed the impact of demographic ageing on our social systems and our society¹⁵⁸. The report concludes that infrastructure for long-term care is insufficient to meet the rising needs of an ageing population. This is exacerbated for some remote and rural regions that typically face challenges in terms of quality and scale of social services provided. The Commission Green Paper on Ageing, adopted in January 2021, therefore called for an increase in investment in long-term care services infrastructure and to improve working conditions for professionals in the sector to cover the expected increase in service users in the coming decades.¹⁵⁹ It launched a public consultation about the long-term impacts of demographic ageing on our societies, including in the area of long-term care¹⁶⁰.

The impact of the lack of long-term care services on women's labour market participation was discussed at the conference organised by the Croatian Presidency in January 2020,¹⁶¹ based on the research report drawn by

¹⁵⁶ BusinessEurope, SMEunited, CEEP and the ETUC (and the liaison committee EUROCADRES/ CEC), *European Social Partners Framework Agreement on Digitalisation*, 2020. Available at: https://www.etuc.org/system/files/document/file2020-06/Final%2022%2006%2020_Agreement%20on%20Digitalisation%202020.pdf

¹⁵⁷ The Social Protection Committee (SPC) is an advisory policy committee to the Ministers in the Employment and Social Affairs Council (EPSCO). The SPC uses as its main policy framework the social Open Method of Coordination (OMC), which aims to meet EU goals in the social policy area. It encompasses all major social policy strands from social protection and social inclusion to pensions, healthcare and long-term care.

¹⁵⁸ European Commission, *Report on the Impact of Demographic Change*, COM (2020) 241 final of 17.6.2020. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/demography_report_2020_n.pdf.

¹⁵⁹ COM (2021) 50 final. *Green Paper on Ageing. Fostering solidarity and responsibility between generations*, 2021, p.16. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/1_en_act_part1_v8_0.pdf

According to predictions made in the 2018 Ageing Report, the number of potential users of long-term care need is expected to dramatically increase in the coming decades in the EU to 30.5 million in 2015, up from 19.5 million in 2016.

¹⁶⁰ See <https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12722-Green-Paper-on-Ageing>

¹⁶¹ EU Presidency of Croatia, Conference on Gender Equality: *Participation of women in the labour market – benefit for the society*, Zagreb, 30-31 January 2020. Available at: <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/events/eu-presidency-of-croatia-conference-on-gender-equality-participation-of-women-on-the-labour-market/>.

EIGE¹⁶². Both the outcome of the conference and the research report were reflected in the Presidency Conclusions on the Impact of Long-Term Care on Work-Life Balance, adopted in June 2020.¹⁶³ These called for improvements in the provision of quality long-term care services and in working conditions in the care sector.

A key aspect of address the infrastructure needs in both early childhood education and care and long-term care services is the need to ensure that there are enough personnel available for the care sector. Yet recent research by EIGE shows that the sector continues to face severe staff shortages, as challenging working conditions and low pay fail to attract a large enough labour force.¹⁶⁴

The Commission is encouraging Member States to increase efforts in securing sustainable fair working conditions and decent wages and to tackle gender stereotypes in the early childhood education and care and long-term care sectors. These changes should attract a more gender-balanced workforce and ensure that workers are willing and able to work in these jobs until retirement age. The current pandemic, with intensified the need for well-functioning health care and care systems and with the experience of closure of schools, has heightened appreciation of these services among EU citizens.

Under the EU's Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme, EUR 2,85 million was granted to eight countries¹⁶⁵ through a call for proposals to national authorities published in 2019. The topic of the call was 'closing gender gaps over the life cycle-work-life balance for women and men – a better sharing of care'. The purpose was to support projects designed to raise awareness and tackle gender stereotypes with regard to roles in work and in private life. The project had a particular focus on conciliating work and private life, including the promotion of the uptake of family-related leaves by men.

The **Latvian** Ministry of Welfare launched the communication campaign called "Daddy can!"¹⁶⁶ in September 2020. The aim of the campaign was to strengthen the father's role in family and society by questioning existing prejudices and perceptions about women and men's respective responsibilities for and tackling stereotypes about divorced and single fathers. The campaign was based on three inspiring video stories by three divorced dads who share their experience in raising children, explaining why the father's involvement and presence in childcare is even more important when the parents are divorced.

In July 2020, **Greece** initiated the "Neighbourhood Nannies" project as part of policy efforts to achieve greater balance between work and family life. It provides childcare services for infants up to 2.5 years of age by certified nurses with the prospect of universal implementation throughout the country between 2021 and 2027. As part of the pilot phase in a number of selected cities, the project provides financial support for

¹⁶² European Institute for Gender Equality, *Gender Equality and long-term care at home*, 2020. Available at: <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-and-long-term-care-home>.

¹⁶³ Council of the European Union, *Impact of long-term care on work-life balance – Presidency Conclusions*, 2020. Available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8764-2020-INIT/en/pdf>.

¹⁶⁴ European Institute for Gender Equality, *Europe needs to care more about care*, 2020. Available at: <https://eige.europa.eu/news/europe-needs-care-more-about-care>.

¹⁶⁵ Estonia, Greece, Croatia, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania and Slovenia.

¹⁶⁶ Amongst its many deliverables, the campaign produced the following video (with English subtitles) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NfwZwy3n45c>.

parents, which can be used to pay a certified nurse to take care of the infant either at their home or at the nurse's location. This project is designed to improve work-life balance among parents. It also provides working opportunities for unemployed childcare professionals and establishes avenues to formal employment for those working in the childcare sector, thus reducing undeclared work in the sector. A specialised platform has been set up to provide service staff with the appropriate credentials to ensure the safety of the children being looked after.

Financed via the EU Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI), the **'Men in Care'** project (2019-2022) is helping reducing the barriers for men who want to become involved in caring activities. The project is improving workplace conditions to promote men taking up caring roles and helps assess how policies and workplace cultures can change to enable men to become more active in caring for children, older persons, partners, co-workers and friends. By involving workers, trade unions, employers, and families, the project will enable men to take time to care for themselves and others. The project involves partners from different European countries (**Austria, Germany, France, Slovenia, Poland, Spain, Norway and Iceland**) and is led by the Universidad Nacional de Educacion a Distancia (UNED) in Spain.

LEADING EQUALLY THROUGH SOCIETY

Women in the EU make up about half of the population and the electorate, yet women continue to be under-represented in high-level positions, whether in elected office, the civil service, corporate boardrooms or academia.¹⁶⁷ In politics, gender-balanced participation is an important condition for effective democracy and good governance, and it contributes to citizens' trust in democratic institutions. Gender balance in management and leadership functions can boost innovation, competitiveness and productivity, and contribute to the prosperity of the EU.

The EU has come only halfway towards gender equality in key decision-making positions in major political, economic and social institutions. Reasons for the persistent under-representation and participation of women are broad and multifaceted. Root causes include traditional gender roles and stereotypes, unequal sharing of household and care responsibilities, as well as political and working cultures favouring long working hours that clash with care responsibilities traditionally assigned to women. Movements such as **#MeToo** have provided further evidence of the extent to which women are subject to gender-based harassment and bullying in the workplace, with the emergence of on-line violence as an increasing concern¹⁶⁸. These factors discourage and limit women's participation in politics and public life, and ultimately hinder gender equality in decision-making.

¹⁶⁷ Data available in the EIGE Gender statistics database:

<https://eige.europa.eu/gender-statistics/dgs/browse/wmidm>.

¹⁶⁸ This includes online hate speech, cyberstalking, bullying or harassment, and non-consensual image based sexual abuse. A study from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) found that 82 % of female parliamentarians have experienced some form of psychological violence, 44 % had received threats of death, rape, beatings or abduction; and 65 % had been subjected to sexist remarks. Only 28 % had a procedure for settling complaints.

Women's underrepresentation in political decision-making represents a 'democratic deficit' that undermines the legitimacy of political decisions.

The Gender Equality Index 2020¹⁶⁹ published by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) shows some encouraging progress on gender balance in decision-making. However, progress remains slow and is concentrated in a few Member States. With a score of 53.5 out of 100 points on the Index, the EU and Member States have a long way to go to achieve parity in decision-making.¹⁷⁰ The findings of the Index confirm that legislative measures such as quotas for the underrepresented sex are important tools for speeding up progress. Progress is possible, but it requires action, commitment and determination on the part of all decision-makers at the highest level.

GENDER BALANCE IN DECISION MAKING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted the creation of committees and task forces to respond to the pandemic at different levels of governance. Health ministers, experts and organisational leaders have come together to formulate and approve contingency measures and actions to address the social and economic crisis resulting from the pandemic. However, the lack of women in these decision-making bodies is striking. A 2020 study found that men greatly outnumber women in decision making related to the pandemic. Of 115 national dedicated COVID-19 task forces in 87 countries, including 17 EU Member States, 85.2% were made up mainly of men, 11.4% comprised mainly women and only 3.5% had gender parity. Furthermore, 81.2% of task forces were led by men.¹⁷¹ Although women make up the vast majority of healthcare workers in the EU, women are held back from leadership positions in the healthcare sector. At the political level, only 30% of health ministers in the EU are women. The European Commission's task force for the COVID-19 crisis¹⁷² is led by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and includes five other Commissioners, three of whom are women. However, women experts only account for just two of the nine members (25%) of the European Commission Advisory Panel on COVID-19¹⁷³. Women's inclusion in crisis response decision-making is crucial to address gender biases in decision-making and to ensure effective responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Women in economic decision-making European companies have a long way to go to achieve gender-balanced leadership. Despite progress, the gender imbalance in the corporate leadership of most

¹⁶⁹ Available at <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2020>.

¹⁷⁰ Despite significant progress since 2013, when it scored 41.9 out of 100, the EU's score in the domain of "power" has always remained the lowest of the Index's domains.

¹⁷¹ van Daalen KR, Bajnoczki C, Chowdhury M, et al., *Symptoms of a broken system: the gender gaps in COVID-19 decision-making*, *BMJ Global Health* 2020; 5:e003549. doi:10.1136/bmjgh-2020-003549, p.1. Available at <https://gh.bmj.com/content/bmjgh/5/10/e003549.full.pdf>.

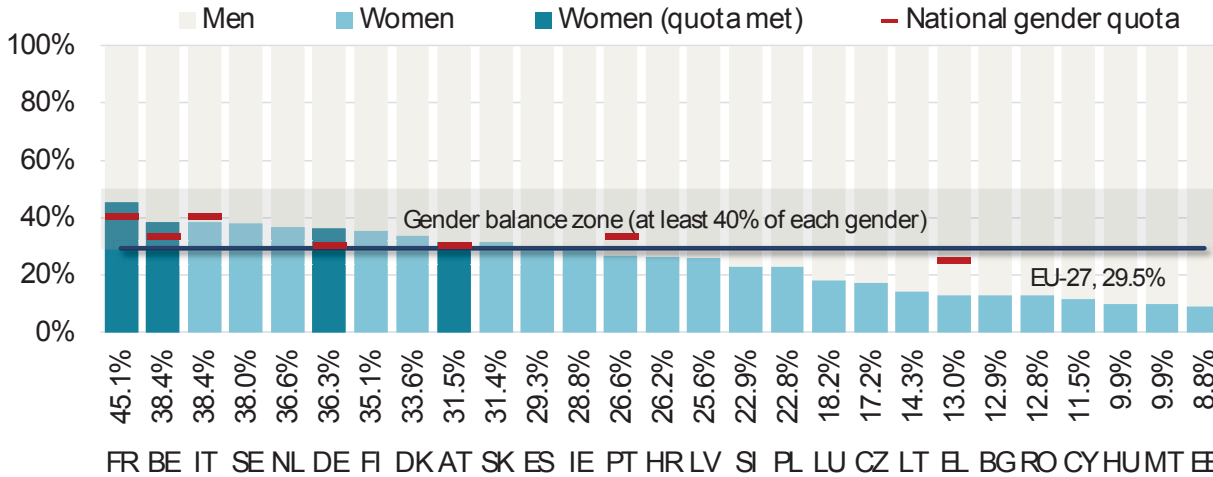
¹⁷² European Commission's coronavirus response team, established on 2 March 2020, see https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/european-commissions-action-coronavirus_en.

¹⁷³ European Commission's advisory panel on COVID-19, available at

<https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regexpert/index.cfm?do=groupDetail.groupDetail&groupID=3719&NewSearch=1&NewSearch=1>.

publicly listed companies registered in the EU remains stark. According to the latest data from EIGE in October 2020, women account 29.5% of board members in the largest publicly listed¹⁷⁴ companies registered in the EU Member States, a mere 1.0 percentage point increase since October 2019¹⁷⁵. France remains the only EU Member State in which the largest listed companies have at least 40% of each sex at board level. Belgium, Italy, and Sweden all have around 38% women, while women accounted for at least a third of board members in the Netherlands, Germany, Finland, and Denmark. However, women make up less than a fifth of board members in 10 Member States, and they account for only one in ten or fewer in Estonia, Malta and Hungary (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Share of women and men on the boards of the largest listed companies in the EU, Oct-2020¹⁷⁶



Source: EIGE, Gender Statistics Database

Legislative action to address the gender imbalances in economic decision-making continues to drive progress. Seven Member States have so far adopted mandatory national quotas for the under-represented sex for listed companies¹⁷⁷ with Greece being the latest addition to this list in 2020.

¹⁷⁴ *Publicly listed* means that the shares of the company are traded on the stock exchange. The ‘largest’ companies in each country are taken to be the members (max.50) of the primary blue-chip index maintained by the national stock exchange, which covers the largest companies by market capitalisation and/or volume of market trades. Only companies registered in the country concerned (according to the ISIN code) are taken into account.

¹⁷⁵ The annual change figures show an acceleration of the rate of progress between 2010 and 2016, but subsequently – apart from a blip in 2019 – the rate of change has slowed down.

¹⁷⁶ National gender quota targets: FR & IT (40%), BE & PT (33%), DE & AT (30%), EL (25%).

¹⁷⁷ Belgium, France, and Italy adopted the national quotes in 2011, followed by Germany (2015), Austria and Portugal (2017).

Nine further EU countries¹⁷⁸ have taken a softer approach. The remaining 11 Member States¹⁷⁹ have not taken any significant action.

The impact of legislative measures is clear: the presence of women on the boards of the largest publicly listed companies¹⁸⁰ has increased strikingly where these measures have been adopted. In October 2020, women accounted for 37.6% of the board members of the largest listed companies in the six Member States with binding quotas, following an increase of 3 percentage points per year.¹⁸¹ In comparison, 24.3% of board members were women in countries that had taken either soft measures or no action at all, figure increasing only by 0.7 percentage points per year. Because of the adoption of measures, the subdomain of economic power in EIGE's Gender Equality Index 2020¹⁸² has increased by 17.9 points since 2010, with Italy and France leading in this change.

Legislative action has had a clear positive impact on the representation of women at board level. However, quotas typically only apply to the top-level board, which tends to be wholly or predominantly (depending on the local corporate governance system) comprised of non-executives so that executive positions may not be affected. As a result, progress towards gender parity amongst executives is also slow and very few women reach the top positions in large companies. In October 2020, women held just 19.3% of executive positions in largest listed companies and less than one in ten board chairs or CEO positions.

Gender imbalance is likewise a persistent phenomenon in central banks, cornerstones of economic-decision making and which shape social, political and economic realities. Currently, all central banks of EU Member States are governed by a man and 13 out of the 27 vice- or deputy governors are women. In October 2020, women held a quarter (24.6%) of seats in the key decision-making bodies of national central banks in the EU. Whilst this has improved since 2003 (15.4%), only Bulgaria, Spain, and France have gender balanced decision-

¹⁷⁸ These are Denmark, Ireland, Spain, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia, Finland and Sweden. Spain has equality legislation that effectively recommends at least 40% of each sex on company boards but is not enforceable as legislation did not foresee sanctions for non-compliance. Slovenia has a legislative target for state-owned companies but not publicly listed companies. Other countries in this group have preferred to encourage companies to self-regulate in order to redress the gender balance in boardrooms.

¹⁷⁹ These are Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Croatia, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Romania, and Slovakia.

¹⁸⁰ *Publicly listed* means that the shares of the company are traded on the stock exchange. The 'largest' companies in each country are taken to be the members (max.50) of the primary blue-chip index maintained by the national stock exchange, which covers the largest companies by market capitalisation and/or volume of market trades. Only companies registered in the country concerned (according to the ISIN code) are taken into account.

¹⁸¹ Legislation underpinning a national gender quota often provides a timescale for compliance that allows companies to deliver change within the normal cycle of board renewals so that change is progressive. Based on the companies covered by EIGE's sample, quota targets have been fulfilled in France, Germany, Belgium, and Austria. Italy achieved its initial quota target of 33% in 2017, and is now close to the updated target of 40%. Of the remaining two countries with established gender quotas, Portugal has seen significant progress since application of the quota in January 2018, while Greece's quota is too recent for a noticeable effect.

¹⁸² Available at <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2020>.

making in the central bank. In Austria, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Romania all key decisions are taken by men with no women in key decision-making positions.

In the case of EU financial institutions, key decisions have historically been overwhelmingly controlled by men, and as of 2020, there are still only 2 women amongst the 25 board members (11.5%) of the European Central Bank (ECB), albeit including the first ever female governor, Christine Lagarde. In the European Investment Bank (EIB) women make up 3 out of 27 board members. (10.7%).

Research shows¹⁸³ a positive link between improved performance and gender balance, strengthening the case for gender balance. By making full use of the under-utilised talent pool of qualified, competent and motivated women, companies can better understand their customers and stakeholders and bring diversity of thought to the boardroom and to other management positions, thus strengthening the company's competitive advantage. Furthermore, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, gender equality and inclusive leadership matter more than ever. The under-representation of women in all their diversity in economic power positions means that women are not part of shaping the decisions that affect the future of their lives.

Governments, social partners and companies must ensure a work environment conducive to equal opportunities for women and men in decision-making and, in doing so, create a new narrative for action and change in the labour market. Policies that can lead to greater inclusivity and work-life balance for both men and women, such as flexible working arrangements and paid paternity leave, are needed. Companies can attract and retain talented women by developing a strategy suited to their circumstances and needs including numerical targets, timelines, and collecting data to monitor and evaluate the situation. Building a strong pipeline of female talent is key to increasing gender balance in senior management, boards and leadership positions. Furthermore, companies should ensure that women and men have equal opportunities for career progression, responsibility, visibility and variety of positions that prepare them for higher positions to achieve a sustainable and meaningful change.

The Netherlands tabled a legal proposal to improve the gender balance on boards in November 2020. The proposal introduces an 'ingrowth quota' for listed companies, which obliges them to ensure that at least one third of the members of their supervisory boards are women. If a man is appointed while this target has not yet been met, the appointment would be declared null and void. In that case the 'chair' on the supervisory board will remain empty until a female director is appointed. If a company has a one tier board, the same rule will apply. The rule also applies to the non-executive members of the board. In addition to the quota the proposal would oblige large corporations to set appropriate and ambitious targets on the numbers of men and women in the management board, the supervisory board and the sub-top to make them more balanced. The proposal will be discussed in Parliament¹⁸⁴.

¹⁸³ Examples: ILO, *Women on boards - Building the female talent pipeline*, 2015, available at https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---gender/documents/briefingnote/wcms_410200.pdf.

ILO, *Women in leadership bring better business performance*, 22 May 2019, available at https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_701767/lang--en/index.htm; McKinsey, *Delivering through Diversity*, 2018, available at https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/McKinsey/Business%20Functions/Organization/Our%20Insights/Delivering%20through%20diversity/Delivering-through-diversity_full-report.ashx.

¹⁸⁴ The law proposal is available at <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-35628-2.html> and the explanatory memorandum at <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-35628-3.html>.

The **Finnish** Government's action plan for gender equality includes targets and measures connected to gender equality in decision-making. One such target is to increase gender balance in listed companies so that big and medium-sized companies have at least 40 % of each sex on the boards. The government will monitor progress towards this target every year. The government also continues its actions to increase the share of women on the boards of state-owned companies, in line with the targets set in 2004.

With the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (REC), the Commission supported Member States and stakeholders to promote gender balance in politics, public fora and management and leadership positions in the corporate sector. This support will continue for the financing period 2021-2027 by the successor of the REC, the Citizenship, Equality, Rights and Values programme.

The **'Women's Empowerment in Leadership Positions' (WELP) project**,¹⁸⁵ funded by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme and led by the association European Women on Boards, aims to support senior women leaders in preparing European corporations for the new digital era. Activities include empowering senior women of all levels by enhancing their skills and knowledge; sensitising the corporate sector to increase the participation of women in the executive pipeline and on boards; and measuring and tracking changes by developing and rolling out a gender diversity index. The index benchmarks 600 companies listed on STOXX Europe 600 covering 17 countries¹⁸⁶ on the participation of women on their highest decision-making bodies and gives examples of good practice.

The **EU Platform of Diversity Charters**, funded by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme, is supporting over 12 000 signatories (companies, public institutions and non-profit organisations) representing over 16 million employees in advancing diversity, inclusion and equal opportunities regardless of gender, disability, race or ethnic origin, religion or sexual orientation. In April 2020, the European Commission celebrated 10 years of the EU Platform of Diversity Charters and, as of September 2020, the Bulgarian and Cypriot Diversity Charters raised the number of European Diversity Charters to 26¹⁸⁷. The Platform is involved in the exchange of good practices and develops common tools in areas such as gender

¹⁸⁵ Available at <https://europeanwomenonboards.eu/about-welp/>.

¹⁸⁶ Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Norway, United Kingdom and Switzerland.

¹⁸⁷ European Commission, *Welcome to Bulgarian and Cypriot Diversity Charters!*, 29 October 2020, available at https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/just/item-detail.cfm?item_id=692254&newsletter_id=883&utm_source=just_newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Diversity%20Charters%20%20&utm_content=Welcome%20to%20Bulgarian%20and%20Cypriot%20Diversity%20Charters&lang=en.

balance in executive boards and managerial positions.

To address the issue of the so called ‘glass ceiling’ affecting women’s access to leading positions in business, the process of the selection of board members in large EU listed companies should be transparent and based on objective criteria. The Commission’s proposal from 2012 for a **Directive on improving the gender balance among non-executive directors of companies listed on stock exchanges**¹⁸⁸ aims to address this instead of imposing gender quotas. The proposal requires that such preconditions would be applied where the proportion of the under-represented sex at corporate board level is below 40%. Such an approach makes candidates’ qualification and merit the main criterion for board membership. The proposed directive leaves Member States the flexibility to keep and apply their own existing, effective measures to improve gender balance in corporate boards. Despite support from the European Parliament and some Member States, a compromise in the Council of the EU has yet to be reached. The Commission remains committed to its proposal from 2012. The objective of unblocking the negotiations on the directive was announced in Commission President von der Leyen’s political guidelines and confirmed in the Gender Equality Strategy for 2020-2025. The adoption of the directive is also highly relevant to address the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, which requires inclusion of women and men in all their diversity in leadership positions.

In January 2021, the 2020 **European Women on Boards Gender Diversity Index**¹⁸⁹ was published. Co-funded by the REC-programme, this index was developed to allow companies to benchmark themselves against other companies in their country or sector with regard to the diversity of their boards and other key positions. The 2020 edition indicates a positive trajectory. It highlights that substantially more companies have over 40% women in leadership than in 2019 (13% today compared to 8% in 2019). But it also shows that progress remains slow and uneven across companies and countries.

WOMEN IN POLITICAL DECISION-MAKING

The composition of political assemblies and executives too often fail to reflect the population they represent, with women often significantly under-represented. Women’s political representation in most EU countries remains below the 40% recommended by the Council of Europe¹⁹⁰. The goal should be to achieve parity (50%) in line with the Sustainable Development Goal on gender equality. Yet, progress is slow and differs significantly between EU Member States.

In November 2020, the proportion of women participating in elected assemblies is similar across all levels of government in the EU as a whole: 32.7% at national level, 34.1% at regional level¹⁹¹ and 34.1% at local level¹⁹²

¹⁷⁰ COM(2012) 614 final. Available at:

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52012PC0614&from=EN>.

¹⁸⁹ <https://europeanwomenonboards.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Gender-Equality-Index-Final-report-2020-210120.pdf>

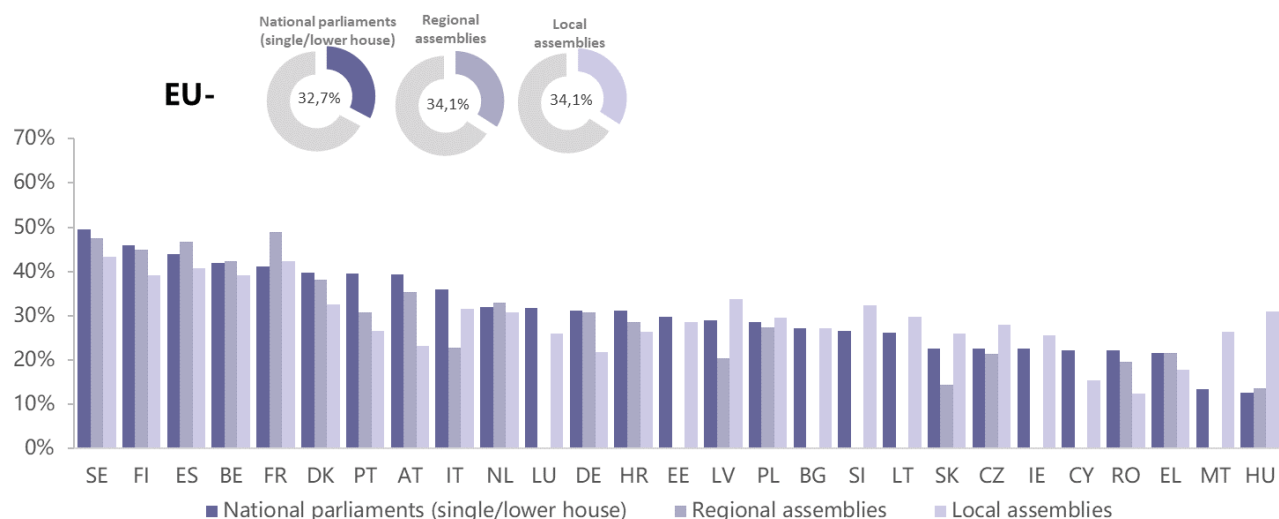
¹⁹⁰ Council of Europe, *Recommendation Rec(2003)3 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision making*, 2003, available at

https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectID=09000016805e0848.

¹⁹¹ EIGE’s data collection covers the assemblies of regions endowed with powers of self-government and acting between the central government and local authorities (though not necessarily within any formal

(Figure 2). Although the base level of women’s representation varies between EU countries, within each country there is less than a 10 percentage point difference between the shares of women at national, regional and local levels in 20 of the 27 EU Member States¹⁹³. Sweden, Spain and France are the only EU Member States with gender-balanced representation (at least 40% of each gender) in the national parliament, regional and local assemblies. In contrast, Romania and Greece have less than 25% women at all three levels, as does Cyprus in two levels, which does not have regional assemblies.

Figure 2: Share of women in national parliaments, regional assemblies and local assemblies, EU-27, 2020



Source: EIGE, Gender Statistics Database

Note: Countries are sorted by descending share of women in the national parliament.

The 2019 European elections saw the proportion of women members of the European Parliament exceed the 40% threshold for the first time, with women accounting for 304 out of 747 MEPs (40.7%)¹⁹⁴. The departure of UK MEPs in January 2020 brought that level slightly down to 39.3% women and 60.7% men. There is a steady progress towards gender balance in the European Parliament, as the proportion of women has doubled since the first elections in 1979¹⁹⁵. While half of the Member States have at least 40% of each gender among their

hierarchy). The following EU Member States do not have any regions conforming to this definition and therefore have no data for the regional level: Bulgaria, Estonia, Ireland, Cyprus, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, and Slovenia.

¹⁹² The EU level figure for local politics is heavily influenced by France, which contributes over 40% of the councillors recorded. Excluding France, women account for 26.7% of councillors in the remaining countries.

¹⁹³ The exceptions are Spain, Portugal, Austria, Italy, Latvia, Slovakia and Hungary.

¹⁹⁴ Situation at the time of the constitutive session of the new parliament in July 2019.

¹⁹⁵ Data available in the EIGE Gender statistics database: https://eige.europa.eu/gender-statistics/dgs/indicator/wmidm_pol_parl_wmid_eurparl (the figure excludes the elected UK MEPs in 2010 and 2015).

MEPs¹⁹⁶, the majority of members in the other half are men. Most notably, men account for 85% of MEPs for Romania and Cyprus has no women MEPs at all.

Legislative action generally stimulates progress. Over the last 20 years, a number of countries have taken steps to improve gender balance in their parliaments by applying legislative quotas ensuring a minimum proportion of each gender amongst candidates, sometimes with additional requirements on where to place candidates on the lists.¹⁹⁷ Such quotas are currently in place in eleven Member States¹⁹⁸. The use of gender-balanced candidate lists does not necessarily translate into gender-balanced electoral results, however¹⁹⁹. To date, the proportion of elected women members matched (or exceeded) the quota target only in Portugal and Spain.

As of January 2021, 22 of the 27 EU Member States had a man as head of government, the exceptions being Estonia, Denmark, Germany, Finland and Lithuania. Only eight other Member States have had a woman prime minister since 2004; the remaining sixteen have only had men in this role. Out of the 21 Member States that have elected heads of state, only three (Estonia, Greece and Slovakia) have women as presidents.

Of senior ministers, two thirds were men as an EU average²⁰⁰. Eleven governments were gender balanced,²⁰¹ often due to the strong commitment and determination of the respective prime minister to achieve such balance. Governments were predominantly male in seven others²⁰². However, it is important to look beyond the numbers to see where the real power lies, as numbers on their own do not provide the full picture. Evidence suggests that women are often in charge of portfolios considered to be of lower political priority, such as socio-cultural policies. Despite these also being important areas, women should also be in charge of the more prestigious and male-dominated portfolio such as finance, defence and security, while men also have important value to add in social affairs and education.

Political parties are the gatekeepers of gender equality in parliaments and governments, as they set party policy and select the candidates. Yet top party positions are still largely held by men. In 2020, women accounted for just 1 in 5 (21.5%) leaders of major political parties²⁰³ across the EU Member States, and 1 in 3 deputy leaders (34.0%). The proportion of women party leaders is at an all-time high, but the proportion of

¹⁹⁶DK, IE, ES, FR, HR, LV, LU, NL, AT, PT, SI, FI, and SE.

¹⁹⁷ For example 'zippering' (alternate women and men), or at least one woman in every three on a ranked list.

¹⁹⁸ In chronological order: FR (50%), 2000; BE (50%), 2002; PT (33%), 2006; SI (35%), 2006; ES (40%), 2007; EL (33%), 2008; HR (40%), 2008; PL (35%), 2011; IE (30%), 2012; IT (40%), 2017; and LU (40%), 2016.

¹⁹⁹ This divergence in the results may be due to different roles of candidate lists in national election laws. National legislation might combine the gender balance requirements with List position rules or sanctions for non-compliance.

²⁰⁰ Ministers with a seat in the cabinet are 65.7% men and 34.3% women.

²⁰¹ Governments in Estonia, Finland, Austria, Belgium, Sweden, France, Lithuania, Spain, Germany, Netherlands, and Portugal were composed of at least 40% of each gender.

²⁰² In Poland, Malta, Greece, Slovenia, Slovakia and Hungary, the percentage of women make up 20% or less of the senior ministers.

²⁰³ I.e. those with at least 5% of seats in parliament. Data collection in May 2020 covered 149 major political parties across the 27 EU Member States.

women deputy leader has fluctuated around the current level throughout the same period with little sign of progress. In the Czech Republic, Hungary, Malta and Slovakia, none of the major parties has had a woman leader since data were first collected in 2011.

Portugal adopted a new law on political participation in March 2019. It raises the minimum percentage of women and men in the electoral lists to the national and European parliaments, elected bodies of municipalities and parish councils from (the previously established) 33 % to 40 %. Another law adopted in March 2019 requires women and men each occupy at least 40% of top civil servant posts in public administration, as well as in public higher education institutions and associations.

To ensure balanced political representation at state level, **Brandenburg** has become the first **German** Land or state to introduce a legally-binding quota. On 2019, the Brandenburg State Parliament adopted the Act on Inclusive Parity. Under the Act, women and men will in future be given equal consideration when drawing up the state list of electoral candidates. When drawing up the lists, equal representation will be prescribed by the alternate listing of women and men.

The **project ‘Brussels Binder Beyond (BBBeyond)’**, funded under the Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme, is a joint project by the Bruegel think tank, the German Marshall Fund of the United States and the Brussels Binder organisation, to promote women’s participation and visibility in public fora. It aims at challenging the under-representation of women in public debates by creating a pan-European network of women expert databases and like-minded organisations to help develop practical tools and give women’s voices the platform they deserve.²⁰⁴

The Commission is leading by example demonstrating that rapid progress can be achieved with political will and high-level commitment. The appointment of the new European Commission in December 2019 not only saw the first ever female President, Ursula von der Leyen, leading the institution but it is also the most gender-balanced Commission to date. With the replacement of the Irish Commissioner on 12 October 2020²⁰⁵, the European Commission has achieved a gender balance with 13 women (48.1%) and 14 men (51.9%). The first-ever gender-balanced College of Commissioner is a result of Member States responses to President von der Leyen’s call to nominate both female and male candidates.

The Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 further reaffirms the importance of ensuring equal opportunities for women and men to participate and lead in society. To implement these new objectives, the European Commission uses all available tools, including legislation, policy measures and funding to promote gender balance in decision-making.

²⁰⁴ Available at <https://brusselsbinder.org/bbbeyond>.

²⁰⁵ Council of the EU, *Council appoints Mairead McGuinness as new member of the European Commission*, 12 October 2020, available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/10/12/council-appoints-mairead-mcguinness-as-new-member-of-the-european-commission/>.

The Commission remains committed to promoting the participation of women as voters and candidates in the 2024 European Parliament elections, in collaboration with the European Parliament, national parliaments, Member States and civil society, including through funding and promoting best practices. As announced in its report on the 2019 elections²⁰⁶, in January 2021 the Commission organised a joint session of the European Cooperation Network on Elections and the expert group on electoral matters, which also considered inclusiveness and equality in democratic participation. The 2020 Citizenship report²⁰⁷ published in December 2020 also announced further measures to support inclusiveness in democratic participation, including a high-level meeting with European political parties in 2022 to promote gender balance and a greater diversity of candidates. The Commission's Structural Reform Support Programme is helping Member States developing strategies to empower women in political decision-making at local level.

Within the European Democracy Action Plan adopted in December 2020²⁰⁸, the Commission committed to ensuring that equality is mainstreamed in actions at all levels to foster access to democratic participation. This includes inclusiveness and equality in democratic participation, gender balance in politics and in decision-making and taking proactive steps to counter anti-democratic attacks seeking to dissuade women or minority groups from being politically active. It will commit to a range of actions to protect journalists, including strengthening media freedom and media pluralism, taking into account new online threats and danger faced in particular by women journalists.

The European Commission is committed to reaching a gender balance of 50% at all levels of its management by the end of 2024. As of 1 December 2020, women in the European Commission constituted up to 43% in management overall, specifically 41% of senior management and 43% of middle management. A majority of women (56%) were also designated as deputies to Directors. To reach the above-mentioned goals, the Commission has put forward a series of binding measures and targets, amongst which were mid-term targets for first female appointments at middle management level; a target to have 'Deputy Head of Unit' positions to be held in equal proportions by men and women by 2022; introducing the designation of "Deputy to the Director" to a majority of female middle managers to experience senior management responsibilities, and identification, monitoring and support of female talents via tailored talent development programmes. The third edition of the female talent development programme for aspiring middle managers was launched in November 2020 with 119 participants from 42 different European Commission Directorates-General. In January 2021, the Commission established a new Diversity and Inclusion Office responsible for development, implementation and monitoring of various initiatives addressing all aspects of diversity and inclusion amongst Commission staff, notably gender equality, in collaboration with the Task Force for Equality.

A target to increase the share of female managers and improve gender balance amongst staff has also been set for EU Agencies and EU Delegations. On the appointment of Directors of regulatory agencies, general guidance has been developed to provide gender-balanced shortlists for adoption by the College of Commissioners in view of final appointment by the management board of the agency concerned. As for EU Delegations, the European External Action Service (EEAS) is improving the selection and recruitment panels, making training on bias and interview techniques mandatory, and is strengthening the talent-spotting, coaching, mentoring, and networking programmes at both management and pre-management levels. Far-reaching work on spouse

²⁰⁶ European Commission, *Report on the 2019 elections to the European Parliament*, COM(2020) 252 final, available at https://ec.europa.eu/info/files/com_2020_252_en.pdf.

²⁰⁷ European Commission, *EU Citizenship Report 2020*, 2020, available at https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/eu_citizenship_report_2020_-_empowering_citizens_and_protecting_their_rights_en.pdf.

²⁰⁸ European Commission, *European democracy action plan*, COM (2020) 790 final, 2020. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0790&from=EN>

employment at post has been undertaken together with the EU Member States. The Service has also further raised awareness against harassment and improved measures for facilitate a better work-life balance, through improved working arrangements also in the EU Delegations.

To ensure the above-mentioned progress is maintained a new recruitments, the European Personnel Selection Office continues to promote a gender-balanced approach in its inter-institutional selection procedures. It deploys gender-neutral test methods and raises gender awareness in its training of Selection Board members. The European Commission and the EEAS also continue to work on its pledge to ensure a gender-balanced representation in Commission-organised panels and conferences. For example, a recently launched awareness-raising initiative with the slogan ‘No women – no panel’ prompts staff to ensure the required diversity in panels.²⁰⁹

GENDER MAINSTREAMING

To achieve gender equality it is essential to include a gender equality perspective in all stages of decision-making, when priorities are set, policies are developed and resources allocated. As an essential strategic tool to advance on gender equality, gender mainstreaming supports a gender equal redistribution of power, influence and resources, and ensures equal opportunities for women and men, and girls and boys, in all their diversity. Mainstreaming gender equality into policymaking uncovers and mitigates unperceived biases embedded in societies, ensuring that policies do not reinforce existing gender inequalities or gender stereotypes. Multiple studies demonstrate that gender equality positively affects economic growth and sustainable development, creates fairer societies and increases the effectiveness of the resource use and policies.²¹⁰

The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) has found that the performance of EU Member State in gender mainstreaming has been decreasing since 2012²¹¹. Despite a slight rise in of governments’ commitment to mainstream gender into public administration²¹², the availability of gender mainstreaming structures and the

²⁰⁹ At conferences held between March and December 2020, 38% of all panelists or speakers have been women and 62% men. In additional, no male-only panels were accepted at the 2020 virtual edition of the European Week of Regions and Cities.

²¹⁰ OECD, *Is the Last Mile the Longest? Economic Gains from Gender Equality in Nordic Countries*, 2018, available at <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264300040-en>;

EIGE, *Economic benefits of gender equality in the EU: How gender equality in STEM education leads to economic growth*, 2017, available at <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/economic-benefits-gender-equality-eu-how-gender-equality-stem-education-leads-economic-growth>;

²¹¹ EIGE, *Gender Statistics Database: H3. Gender Mainstreaming*, 2020, available at https://eige.europa.eu/gender-statistics/dgs/indicator/genmain_cont_bpfa_h3_bpfa_h3/line/year:2012,2018/geo:EU28/unit:SCORE/indicator:TOTAL.

²¹² EIGE reports the EU-28 having a score of 1.5 out of 2 for 2018, indicating the average score reflecting a de-facto binding decision. This is an improvement from the EU-28 average score in 2012 of 1.4.

use of gender mainstreaming tools has decreased. According to the EIGE's survey, which rates key gender mainstreaming elements on a scale of 0 to 16²¹³, the average score of Member States declined from 8.4 in 2012 to 7.4 in 2018. ²¹⁴ Only nine²¹⁵ Member States improved their score during this period.

Gender mainstreaming remains a priority for the European Commission. The 2020-2025 gender equality strategy is built on a dual approach consisting of specific initiatives to address gender inequalities and the mainstreaming of gender into all EU policies.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Evidence presented in previous chapters of this report points to the gendered impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has had disproportionate negative effects on women and girls. Mainstreaming a gender equality perspective into the pandemic response is vital to deliver the needed relief and overcome the social and economic consequences of this pandemic. Ensuring gender equality in the recovery phase is of the essence to ensure positive developments towards gender equality. This challenge was acknowledged in the joint event organised by EIGE and the German Presidency of the Council of the EU. ²¹⁶ In particular, the European Pillar of Social Rights provides a strong basis to ensure gender mainstreaming across the socio-economic policies. The Action Plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights will further support this approach.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic in Europe, the Commission has supported research and innovation projects to tackle the spread of COVID-19 and prepare the EU for further outbreaks by investing EUR 1 billion in research in 2020. As part of this extraordinary initiative, the second Horizon 2020 emergency call for expression of interest for research and innovation on the COVID-19 pandemic, ²¹⁷ addressed gender as a crosscutting issue, requiring that all data be sex and gender disaggregated and that gender dynamics be investigated. Furthermore, the Horizon Europe work programme for 2021-2022 introduces several actions to address the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on gender equality, including an action examining impacts on women researchers' work and productivity. The Commission established a website²¹⁸ dedicated to all COVID-19 research and innovation initiatives related to gender equality under Horizon 2020.

²¹³ The statistical exercise on gender mainstreaming carried out by EIGE, which started in 2005, was last carried out in 2019. It contributed to EIGE's report on 'Institutional Mechanisms for Gender Equality and Gender Mainstreaming'. More information on the metadata behind this survey is available at: https://eige.europa.eu/gender-statistics/dgs/indicator/genmain_cont_bpfa_h3_bpfa_h3/metadata.

²¹⁴ EU28 data. The highest score in 2018 being that of Austria (14) and the lowest for Greece (1), EIGE, *Beijing +25 policy brief: Area H – Institutional mechanism for the advancement of women: reduced efforts from Member States*, 2020, available at <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/beijing-25-policy-brief-area-h-institutional-mechanisms-advancement-women>.

²¹⁵ AT, BE, BG, PT, LV, LT, IE, SK, and NL.

²¹⁶ Available at: <https://eige.europa.eu/lt/events/event/19010>

²¹⁷ Examples of Horizon 2020 projects researching into the gender impact of COVID-19 can be found on the dedicated website available at https://ec.europa.eu/info/research-and-innovation/research-area/health-research-and-innovation/coronavirus-research-and-innovation/gender-equality_en.

²¹⁸ European Commission, *Gender equality: Projects and initiatives related to gender equality and the outbreak of coronavirus, Research and Innovation, 2021*. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/info/research-and->

To help report key information on the spread of the virus, the European Centre for Disease prevention and Control (ECDC) has updated its reporting protocol under the European Surveillance System to breakdown data on COVID-19 cases by gender following the example of the World Health Organization²¹⁹. This has allowed EU Member States to consider the gendered impact of the virus. Moreover, ECDC provided guidance to civil society and non-governmental organisations as well as for national and regional authorities in the European Union, the European Economic Area and the United Kingdom, to identify medically and socially vulnerable groups including people living in abusive household settings (mainly women and children), and evaluate mitigation measures²²⁰.

To mitigate the socio economic impact of the pandemic, the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council agreed on NextGenerationEU, Europe's recovery plan of EUR 750 billion to rebuild a greener, more digital and more resilient Europe. This unprecedented increase in budgetary resources strengthens the EU's ability to provide the help needed in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, and obliges Member States to explain how their planned reforms and investments that will be funded via the Recovery and Resilience Facility will contribute to mainstreaming gender equality²²¹. As part of the EU budget for recovery, the Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe (REACT-EU) operational programmes are required to take into account and promote gender equality and gender mainstreaming.²²²

The **Finnish** Institute of Health and Welfare is conducting research on the short- and long-term impact of COVID-19 on gender equality, in cooperation with Statistics Finland, the University of Tampere and the National Institute for Social Insurance. The project, which monitors the health, economic and social impact of COVID-19 on women and men, brings together experts from fields such as social sciences, demography,

[innovation/research-area/health-research-and-innovation/coronavirus-research-and-innovation/gender-equality_en](#).

The website also features a case study on *The impact of sex and gender in the current COVID-19 pandemic* developed by the Horizon 2020 Expert Group on 'Gendered Innovations'.

²¹⁹ ECDC, *Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) data Reporting Protocol Version 4, 26 October 2020*, available at <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/COVID-19-Reporting-Protocol-v4.pdf>.

²²⁰ For instance in a recent study on which ECDC has based the guidance on the provision of support for medically and socially vulnerable populations, specific attention is provided for people living in abusive household settings (mainly women and children).

ECDC, *Guidance on the provision of support for medically and socially vulnerable populations in EU/EEA countries and the United Kingdom during the COVID-19 pandemic*, 2020, available at <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/Medically-and-socially-vulnerable-populations-COVID-19.pdf>.

²²¹ Art 18.4(o) of Regulation (EU) 2021/241 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 February 2021 establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility, Commission guidance to Member States, SWD(2021) 12 final, p. 11.

²²² Regulation (EU) 2020/2221 as regards additional resources and implementing arrangements to provide assistance for fostering crisis repair in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its social consequences and for preparing a green, digital and resilient recovery of the economy (REACT-EU), recital 18. Available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32020R2221>

economics and gender studies to analyse the different phases of the pandemic. The project's results will feed into gender equality public policy and inform the general public about the gender equality implications of the COVID-19 crisis as a gender equality issue.

The **Spanish** government's recovery, transformation and resilience plan outlining the use of the European Recovery fund to address the impact of COVID-19 is built on four pillars: gender equality, ecological transitions, social and territorial cohesion and digitalisation. The government acknowledges the need to address how COVID-19 and the green and digital transitions specifically affect women and to therefore mainstream gender into the modernisation of the Spanish economy

STRENGTHENING GENDER MAINSTREAMING AT EU LEVEL

The Gender Equality Strategy emphasises gender mainstreaming as a key tool for the Commission's gender equality work. A Taskforce on Equality has been created to support this work and 'equality coordinators' have been appointed in all Commission services and the European External Action Service. As well as supporting Commissioner Dalli in her daily work and helping to deliver concrete equality promoting initiatives, the Taskforce on Equality plays a key role in mainstreaming equality on grounds of gender, age, disability, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief and sexual orientation into all policies, from their design to their implementation. This includes providing strategic guidance, designing a toolbox for policy-makers, organising trainings and facilitating the work on equality undertaken by different Commission services.

The EIGE supports the Commission and Member States, as well as other stakeholders with technical expertise on gender mainstreaming. It has developed a gender mainstreaming platform, an online toolbox for policy makers and practitioners. The platform supports gender mainstreaming implementation, by providing methods and tools²²³. In addition, EIGE also produces sector specific analysis on gender equality issues in various policy areas, which contributes to capacity building and knowledge-based development. To assist responsible authorities in the Member States to apply gender budgeting tools in managing the European Union Funds under shared management EIGE has developed a dedicated toolkit.²²⁴

The Commission is also mainstreaming gender into its health policy. To understand and address women's and men's different health expectations, experiences and risks, the Commission, in collaboration with the OECD and the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, takes account of gender disparities in terms of health outcomes and healthy lifestyles in its analysis of national health systems ("State of Health in the EU Cycle")²²⁵. The Joint Action on Health Equity in Europe (JAHEE)²²⁶ identified gender as a factor of inequities in

²²³ <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/what-is-gender-mainstreaming>

²²⁴ <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/toolkits/gender-budgeting>

²²⁵ The two-year State of Health in the EU cycle has four stages: (i) a joint OECD-Commission report, (ii) individual country health profiles, (iii) a companion report showcasing bigger trends in health systems; and (iv) the open request for voluntary exchanges with health experts to discuss findings and optional policy options.

access to healthcare and related social services, together with barriers to appropriate education and training. The Commission also monitors specific challenges faced by women and girls under the 2021-2025 EU Agenda and Action Plan on Drugs²²⁷, and the EU Drugs Strategy 2021-2025²²⁸, adopted in July and December 2020, respectively. Europe's Beating Cancer Plan, adopted in February 2021,²²⁹ acknowledges gender differences in cancer and the strong gender dimension in treating it, calls to address any potential gender and other biases in diagnosis, and to reduce gender differences in access to cancer care. The gender dimension was also included when preparing the 2021-2027 Health and Safety Strategic Framework and the Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030. The Commission also continues to monitor data on women and men's participation in clinical trials to respond to gendered needs. As a driving principle, unless otherwise justified, clinical trial participants should represent the population groups, for example gender and age groups, that are likely to use the investigated medicinal product.

Gender mainstreaming has helped increase women's representation in the European Green Deal. As one of the major initiatives under this package, the Renovation Wave strategy²³⁰ cites a need to increase the number and role of women in the construction sector, not only to improve gender balance in the sector but also to increase the pool of skills and qualified professionals. The strategy will also be crucial in addressing energy poverty, a phenomenon that disproportionately affects women.²³¹ The new EU strategy on adaptation to climate change, presented on 24 February 2021²³² ensures that external adaptation actions are developed so as to effectively address the disproportionate impact climate change has on women, older persons, children, people with

The 2020 edition of the 'Health at a Glance: Europe', published in November 2020, covers a total of 36 European countries and has two thematic chapters of EU interest (health system resilience to COVID-19 and impact of air pollution on health):

It is available at: <https://doi.org/10.1787/82129230-en>.

²²⁶ More information on this programme are available at:

https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/chafea_pdb/health/projects/801600/summary.

²²⁸ Available at <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14178-2020-INIT/en/pdf>

²²⁹ European Commission, *Europe's Beating Cancer Plan*, COM (2021) 44 final. Available at:

https://ec.europa.eu/health/sites/health/files/non_communicable_diseases/docs/eu_cancer-plan_en.pdf

²³⁰ European Commission, *A Renovation Wave for Europe - greening our buildings, creating jobs, improving lives* COM(2020) 662 final, available at

https://ec.europa.eu/energy/sites/ener/files/eu_renovation_wave_strategy.pdf.

²³¹ Clancy, Joy et al, *Gender Perspective on Access to Energy in the EU*, European Parliament Study for the FEMM Committee, 2017. Available at:

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/596816/IPOL_STU\(2017\)596816_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/596816/IPOL_STU(2017)596816_EN.pdf)

²³² Forging a climate-resilient Europe - the new EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change, COM (2021) 82 final.

disabilities, indigenous and other vulnerable groups. The Commission is also committed to ensuring a gender balance amongst its Ambassadors for the European Climate Pact²³³.

Furthermore, the Commission set gender equality as a new priority of the new European Research Area (ERA), adopted in September 2020.²³⁴ Building on the strengthened provisions in Horizon Europe, the Commission proposed the development of inclusive gender equality plans as part of ERA, with inclusiveness addressed on three levels: intersectionality with other social factors such as ethnicity, disability or sexual orientation; geographical inclusiveness; and better inclusion of the private sector. These measures are complementary to those of other EU programmes, such as ERASMUS+, with strong synergies with the transformative agenda for higher education institutions, as well as the Digital Education Action Plan.

In 2020, the **Austrian** Ministry for Social, Health, Care and Consumer Protection specified health equity, mental health and empowerment of women, as the three current priority themes for the implementation of its Women's Health Action Plan. To support the work on the Action Plan, Women's Health Dialogues are organised every year to discuss progress on the action plan's priority measures of the and facilitate the exchange of information and best practices between national and international experts.

STRENGTHENING GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN THE EU'S NEW LONG-TERM BUDGET

Strengthening gender mainstreaming in the new long-term budget, as well as the temporary COVID-19 relief instrument and the supporting funding programme covering all policy fields, will have a significant impact on the EU's progress towards gender equality in the coming years.

In December 2020, the European Parliament and the EU Member States in the Council reached a final agreement on the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the period 2021-2027, which at EUR 1.074 trillion is the largest of its kind to this day. In line with its commitment in the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, the Commission is working on a methodology to track expenditure related to gender equality at programme level, thereby promoting gender equality. To support this work, and in line with the Inter-institutional Agreement for the MFF 2021-2027, the Commission committed to explore how to reinforce the gender dimension in the impact assessments under the better regulation framework. The Commission is also drafting guidelines on socially responsible public procurement to fight discrimination and promote gender equality in public tenders.

Under the 2021-2027 MFF, over EUR 1.5 billion will be made available for the new Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme. This programme will promote the EU's core values and rights, to support citizens' engagement and participation, and to prevent and combat violence against women, domestic violence and other forms of violence against children and groups in vulnerable situations. The CERV programme will provide financial support to civil society organisations in order to sustain and further develop open, rights-based, democratic, equal and inclusive societies based on the rule of law.

²³³ European Commission, *European Climate Pact*, COM(2020) 788 final, available at <https://europa.eu/climate-pact/system/files/2020-12/20201209%20European%20Climate%20Pact%20Communication.pdf>.

²³⁴ European Commission, *A new ERA for Research and Innovation*, SWD(2020) 214 final. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0628&from=EN>

According to the agreement reached by the co-legislators on the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR)²³⁵, which lays down the rules for seven shared management funds for 2021-2027²³⁶. Gender equality is a horizontal principle to be taken into account and promoted throughout the preparation, implementation, monitoring, reporting and evaluation of the programmes. The legal requirements foresee the respect of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights as well as the existence of a national strategic framework for gender equality as prerequisites for Member States use of the corresponding funds. Ahead of the final adoption of the CPR, the Commission organised a webinar for Member States on the pre-conditions for funding under all the eight Funds, related to the application of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and the UN Charter of Rights for People with Disabilities.²³⁷ During the 2020 European Week of Regions and Cities, the Commission prepared two additional workshops on gender equality and on the integration of people with migrant background to inspire the use of funds for these purposes.

The European Parliament and the Council reached an agreement to allocate EUR 95.5 billion to the EU's flagship research and innovation programme, Horizon Europe. Delivering on its objective to promote and support the European research community in driving systemic changes for a green, healthy and resilient Europe, the new programme introduced strengthened gender equality provisions.²³⁸ These include inter alia: requiring that all applying public bodies, research organisations and higher education establishments have in place a gender equality plan, increasing the target for gender balance to 50% in all Horizon Europe decision-making bodies and evaluating committees; more inclusive family and long-term leave allowances for researchers and organisations to increase the participation female researchers in EU research and innovation projects, and making the integration of the gender dimension into research and innovation content a requirement by default across the programme. In addition, specific funding will be allocated to gender studies and intersectional research.

The promotion of gender equality is also one of the actions supported by the new Technical Support Instrument, which replaces the Structural Reform Support Programme, for the period 2021 – 2027.²³⁹ Through

²³⁵ COM (2020) 450 final. Available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020PC0450>

²³⁶ The eight funds in question are the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Funds Plus (ESF+), the Cohesion Fund (CF), the Just Transition Fund (JTF), the Asylum and Migration Fund (AMIF), the Border Management and Visa Instrument (BMVI), and the Internal Security Fund (ISF). The individual legal proposals for each of the funds for the new programming period, currently under negotiation between the European Parliament and the Council of the EU, include additional gender equality provisions.

²³⁷ European Commission, *2021-2027 technical seminars: Webinar on horizontal enabling conditions*, EU Regional and Urban Development: Events, 2020. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/newsroom/events/2020/10/2021-2027-technical-seminars-webinar-on-horizontal-enabling-conditions

²³⁸ European Commission, *Gender Equality: a strengthened commitment in Horizon Europe*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the EU, 2021. Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/web/eu-law-and-publications/publication-detail/-/publication/c0b30b4b-6ce2-11eb-aeb5-01aa75ed71a1>

²³⁹ Regulation (EU) 2021/240 of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a Technical Support Instrument, OJ 2021 L 57, p. 1.

the Programme, the Commission notably helped Member States to mainstream equality in public administration and state budgeting.²⁴⁰

In May 2020, the **Estonian** Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Competence Centre for the use of the Cohesion Policy Funding analysed a number of education projects co-financed by EU funds. The research examined to what extent the planning and implementation of projects took into account gender equality considerations and were able to promote equal opportunities. The researchers developed recommendations on how to enhance the gender equality principle in educational projects and prepared a communication project to disseminate best practices.

The **Swedish** government presented a new plan for gender mainstreaming in government agencies in the 2020-2025 programming period. The new plan, which currently encompasses 60 government agencies, coordinates the agencies' gender mainstreaming efforts to better contribute to national gender equality objectives. Based on a tailor-made approach, each agency is trusted to integrate a gender equality perspective into their budgets and activities, in close collaboration with relevant social actors. Simultaneously, the Gender Equality Agency has strengthened its coordinating efforts to develop a systematic exchange of experiences and mutual learning on gender mainstreaming and gender budgeting in state agencies

AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH TO GENDER EQUALITY

The Commission continues to address the different ways gender-based discrimination is intertwined with other discrimination based on personal characteristics or identities to avoid leaving anyone behind and ensure progress for all women and girls. In 2020, the Commission adopted several equality strategies, thereby strengthening the intersectional approach²⁴¹ to gender equality. For example, the EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation for 2020-2030²⁴² includes a proposal for EU Member States to develop national Roma plans that include targeted measures for Roma women and girls. The Commission encourages EU Member States to halve gender employment gap by 2030, increase Roma women's life expectancy by 5 years, and actively spur participation in society of Roma women and youth. The Commission is

²⁴⁰Support to mainstream gender equality in state budgeting was provided, for instance, to Ireland, Belgium (Brussels Region) and Spain.

²⁴¹ EIGE defines 'intersectionality' as an "analytical tool for studying, understanding and responding to the ways in which sex and gender intersect with other personal characteristics/identities, and how these intersections contribute to unique experiences of discrimination" (See: <https://eige.europa.eu/thesaurus/terms/1263>).

²⁴² COM(2020) 620 final, available at https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/union_of_equality_eu_roma_strategic_framework_for_equality_inclusion_and_participation_en.pdf.

also co-funding a project to improve access to justice for Roma women by training the judiciary, law enforcement and human rights advocates to combat discrimination²⁴³.

The Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-27²⁴⁴, provides another example of the intersectional approach to gender equality, by including gender and anti-discrimination priorities in measures to promote the inclusion of migrants in the EU. In support for the preparation of the Action Plan, the Commission conducted consultations, through which the need for a stronger focus to support migrant women was acknowledged.²⁴⁵ The Commission also organised a strategic dialogue with civil society on migrant women in July 2020 and a workshop on overcoming barriers to employment and social inclusion of migrant women in November 2020²⁴⁶. Also, a thematic discussion report was published on gender perspectives in integration policy approaches²⁴⁷. In line with the action plan's objectives, the Commission has co-funded five transnational projects to support the social and economic integration of migrant women under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund.²⁴⁸ The Canada-EU Migration Platform dedicated a series of webinars, a report and two podcast on the integration of migrant women in the labour market and their social inclusion and access to healthcare.²⁴⁹

To empowering groups of women in vulnerable situations, the **Cypriot** Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth mapped the needs and aspirations of women from multiple ethnic backgrounds and provides them with Greek language lessons and vocational/professional guidance. The initiative also raises awareness on multicultural issues, encourages respect of the many types of diversities in schools, and promotes computer literacy among women and in rural areas. It includes specific measures for school girls in vulnerable situations, such as free of charge access to all-day school, including participating in extracurricular sport and academic

²⁴³ The project JUSTROM3 is a joint European Commission and Council of Europe initiative. It aims to empower Roma women, increase synergies and partnerships and enhance professional resources. JUSTROM3 will continue until August 2021 with a budget of €1.750.000. More information available at <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/access-to-justice-for-roma-women/about-justrom3>.

²⁴⁴ European Commission, *Action plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027*, COM(2020) 758 final. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0758&from=EN>

²⁴⁵ European Commission, *Report on the consultation on the integration and inclusion of migrants and people with a migrant background*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union 2020. Available at https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/summary/summary_of_consultations_in_view_of_the_action_plan_on_integration_and_inclusion.pdf

²⁴⁶ <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=89&furtherNews=yes&newsId=9814&langId=en>

²⁴⁷ Wolffhardt A., Long O. (2020, MPG):

<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=89&furtherNews=yes&newsId=9814&langId=en>

²⁴⁸ European Commission, Union actions grants under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), 2021, Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/union-actions-grants-under-the-asylum-migration-and-integration-fund-amif>

²⁴⁹ European Commission, Canada-EU Migration Platform: Integration of Migrant Women, 2020. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/news/canada-eu-migration-platform-integration-of-migrant-women>

activities. Free lunch is also provided for vulnerable students.

The **German** project **HEROES brings together** boys and young men to discuss topics such as equal rights, honour, human rights, homophobia, sexism and racism. Participants are trained to raise awareness among their peers and make a lasting commitment to equal rights. A national coordination centre is being created to help support and scale up the project. The centre can be used by national-level NGOs – the main partners- for networking and other activities.

MONITORING THE GENDER EQUALITY STRATEGY

A tailor-made monitoring framework has been developed for the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 to monitor progress towards its objectives. It was created in close collaboration between the European Commission and the European Institute for Gender Equality and brings together indicators reflecting the main dimensions and key policy objectives of the Strategy. Data from the monitoring framework has been gathered and are presented in this annual progress report, and in addition, an online platform²⁵⁰ has been created, to serve as a gateway to the wealth of indicators that form the framework.

The portal provides stakeholders with an instant overview regarding the progress in the whole of the EU. The user is able to zoom in on individual EU Member States' performance, identify strengths and opportunities, track progress and compare performance of each of the 27 Member States at a given moment in time, through a series of interactive maps and graphs. The transparency and visibility created by the online availability of the data will allow Member States, civil society organisations, academia, social partners, businesses and other stakeholders to steer their work on gender equality in line with political priorities. The online monitoring platform should also facilitate continued policy debate and policy development, and support the implementation of the Strategy's objectives. The monitoring framework and portal overall aims are to provide ready and easy access to a rich evidence base with a view to foster a fact-based debate on gender equality.

PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT ACROSS THE WORLD

²⁵⁰ The Gender Equality Strategy monitoring portal can be found on

<https://composite-indicators.jrc.ec.europa.eu/ges-monitor/>

The year 2020 marked the 25th anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the most encompassing global blueprint for gender equality and empowerment of women and girls. At the 2020 UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), the EU welcomed the UN Secretary General's report²⁵¹ as well as national progress reports on implementing the Beijing Declaration, reaffirming its firm commitment to gender equality²⁵². Despite some progress, no country is on track to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls by 2030, meaning that they all fall behind the equality targets set out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased inequalities and undermines or even diminishes hard-won gains. Against

this backdrop, the Commission has strengthened its commitment to building a gender-equal world in the past year, and increased its efforts to promote gender equality on a global scale and to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, along with EU Member States and international partners.

EU'S GLOBAL RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

When in the first weeks of the COVID-19 crisis, the UN Secretary General called on all governments to put women and girls at the heart of their pandemic response plans and address the dramatic rise in gender-based violence²⁵³, the EU and its Member States expressed their wholehearted support. The EU signed a statement²⁵⁴, supported by 146 UN Members and Observers, calling for zero tolerance towards gender-based and domestic violence and recognising the role of women in the fight against COVID-19.

²⁵¹ UN Secretary General, *Review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcomes of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly*, E/CN.6/2020/3, available at <https://undocs.org/E/CN.6/2020/3>.

²⁵² UN Women published the 'Women's rights in Review 25 Years after Beijing' Report, examining progress and obstacles in women's rights since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/03/womens-rights-in-review>.

EIGE published a report in March 2020 titled 'Beijing +25: the fifth review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in the EU Member States'. Available at: <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/beijing-25-fifth-review-implementation-beijing-platform-action-eu-member-states>.

²⁵³ See statement of 5 April 2020 by the Secretary-General of the United Nations António Guterres, available at <http://webtv.un.org/watch/ant%C3%B3nio-guterres-un-secretary-general-on-gender-based-violence-and-covid-19/6146979361001/?term>. See additional statements on the rise in gender-based violence at

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/7/statement-joint-w20-women-during-covid-19-and-beyond>.

²⁵⁴ Statement by 146 UN Member States and Observers, *Answering the UN Secretary-General's Call on Gender-Based Violence and COVID-19*, available at <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/news%20and%20events/stories/2020/answering-the-secretary-generals-call-on-covid-19.pdf>.

The Commission has stepped up its action against gender-based violence during the COVID-19 crisis. In partnership with the UN, the Commission advanced more than EUR 21 million from the EU-UN Spotlight Initiative towards prevention and victim support measures in 24 countries worldwide to address the increase of domestic violence as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of these comprehensive efforts supported under the Spotlight Initiative have been the use of new technologies and community networks to deliver prevention messages; improving availability and accessibility to services, as well as rapidly scaling up remote service delivery; integrating measures to ending violence against women and girls into COVID-19 response plans, and supporting the work of civil society and women's organisations.

Through the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP), the Commission launched new actions to support at-risk women and girls in vulnerable positions in conflict and hard-to-reach areas. These measures provided access to basic health and support services for victims of domestic violence, offered temporary alternative care for children and strengthened protection and surveillance mechanisms. For example, the EU increased its funding for basic health services in its ongoing action in Syria. In Tunisia and in Bangladesh, support services such as contact cells and psychosocial help were set up using EU funds and support for its implementation from Unicef. The EU also supported Haiti and the Dominican Republic in their efforts to strengthen COVID-19 protection and surveillance mechanisms in the border region paying special attention to unaccompanied children. The Commission also increased its cooperation with local women's rights organizations to support their efforts to disseminate information on available support services to victims of gender-based violence to address the rise of violence during the COVID-19 pandemic²⁵⁵.

In April 2020, the EU launched a "Team Europe" package of EUR 20 billion²⁵⁶ to support partner countries affected by the crisis. Protecting and promoting human rights of all women and girls was at the centre of the initiative. EU funding has been redirected to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on women and girls and address its economic and social consequences. The EU also issued guidelines to all EU Delegations around the world to ensure a gender-responsive approach to the crisis, drawing attention to implications for women's access to health services, in particular sexual and reproductive health and rights, the situation of women healthcare workers and the importance of creating the conditions to enable women to participate in decision making processes. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the EU has worked to continuously adapt EU funded humanitarian actions to factor in the COVID-19 pandemic whilst ensuring that the delivery of life-saving humanitarian assistance continues, including prevention and response to gender-based violence.

The EU has also, as part of the G20, been striving for gender equality in the world of work²⁵⁷, and urged world leaders to adopt common action to counter the growing gender inequalities and support women's

²⁵⁵ For example, the Commission has prepared indexes for each Southern Neighbourhood/MENA region beneficiary on referral services for them to distribute amongst the local population.

²⁵⁶ Delegation of the European Union to the United Nations, *Gender Equality and COVID-19: How the EU is answering the UN Secretary-General's Appeal*, 8 May 2020, available at https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-new-york/78148/gender-equality-and-covid-19-how-eu-answering-un-secretary-general's-appeal_en.

²⁵⁷ See for instance, Declaration of Labour and Employment Ministers, 10 September 2020, available at <http://www.g20.utoronto.ca/2020/2020-g20-employment-0910.html>

empowerment following the crisis²⁵⁸. To increase the business community's commitment to ensure a gender-sensitive business response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Commission built strong partnerships with UN Women and ILO and promote female entrepreneurship and leadership via a higher participation of women in the labour market around the world. The "WE EMPOWER/G7"²⁵⁹, "WE EMPOWER/Asia"²⁶⁰, and "WIN-WIN in Latin America and the Caribbean"²⁶¹ programmes are implemented jointly by the ILO and UN Women and funded by the EU, have become essential to safeguard women's empowerment during the COVID-19 crisis, ensuring that women are not left behind. The Commission has developed concrete tools, gender analysis, data and expertise on business-to-business matchmaking to support these programmes and encourage women's empowerment in these times of crisis.

THE EU'S NEW ROADMAP FOR A GENDER EQUAL WORLD

In November 2020, the Commission and the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy jointly adopted the Gender action plan III for 2021-2025 (GAP III)²⁶² which sets out an ambitious agenda for gender equality and women's empowerment in all EU external action. The GAP III sets objectives and targets for the promotion of gender equality throughout all external policies, political dialogue and diplomacy, sectors and aid modalities at country, regional and multilateral levels, while ensuring internal-external policy coherence. The GAP III intends to promote equal participation of women and men in the social, economic, and political life, ensuring that policies and their implementation, projects and programmes aim for gender transformation encompassing an intersectional and rights-based perspective. It further emphasises the importance of working together with all partners on gender equality, including EU Member States; multilateral, regional and bilateral partners' civil society and particularly women's organisations as well as communities. GAP III also calls upon the EU to lead by example, including gender-balanced and gender-responsive leadership. Moreover, GAP III provides a set of objectives and indicators to monitor progress of its implementation and measuring its results at country, regional and international levels.

Through GAP III, the EU aims to achieve progress in the following key areas: (i) freedom from all forms of gender based violence, (ii) promotion of sexual and reproductive health and rights, (iii) strengthening of economic and social rights and empowerment of women and girls, (iv) advancement of participation and leadership, (v) the implementation of the EU policy framework on Women, Peace and Security agenda and (vi) harnessing the challenges and opportunities of the green transition and digital transformation. In December

²⁵⁸ G20 Riyadh Declaration commits G20 members to a stronger multilateral cooperation to fight against the COVID-19 virus and work on a more inclusive, sustainable and resilient future. Available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/46883/g20-riyadh-summit-leaders-declaration_en.pdf.

²⁵⁹ Available at <https://www.empowerwomen.org/en/projects/we-empower-g7>.

²⁶⁰ Available at <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/focus-areas/women-poverty-economics/weempowerasia>.

²⁶¹ Available at <https://lac.unwomen.org/es/que-hacemos/empoderamiento-economico/ganar-ganar>.

²⁶² JOIN(2020) 17 final, available at https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/join_2020_17_en_final.pdf and SWD (2020) 284 final, available at https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/swd_2020_284_en_final.pdf.

2020, the action plan was endorsed by the 24 EU Member States in the Council²⁶³ welcoming an ambitious agenda for gender equality and women's empowerment in external action.

THE EU'S EXTERNAL ACTION AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

In 2020, the Commission continued to invest in the joint EU-UN "Spotlight initiative" programme, the world's largest initiative to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls by 2030. With the launch of a regional initiative for Central Asia and Afghanistan in December 2020, the programme currently covers 26 countries and 6 regions. To respond to the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Commission mobilised further USD 137 million in direct and flexible aid to ensure continuation of ongoing work on prevention of and protection from gender-based violence as well as the on the ground support for women's organisation. The Spotlight initiative also extended its reach to a wider audience by launching the #WithHer campaign in March 2020 to raise awareness on gender-based violence, challenge harmful gender norms and stereotypes and highlight the work of activists and partners throughout the globe. Since its launch, the campaign's hashtag has been shared by more than 5,500 social media accounts reaching more than 220 million users on Twitter and Facebook.

In July 2020, the Commission in coordination with the EEAS was selected as one of the 15 co-leaders of the Action Coalition on Gender-based Violence in the context of the UN Women's Generation Equality Forum, a civil-society centered, global gathering for gender equality convened by UN Women which will take place in June 2021.²⁶⁴ The Commission is now working to identify the key commitments and priorities for the next 5 years on the Action Coalition's aim. The Commission also helped draft the co-leaders statement on gender-based violence and the COVID-19 crisis.

The Commission continued its targeted action to end gender-based violence against women and girls in the candidate countries and potential candidates and in the EU's Neighbourhood region. The 'Regional Support to Reinforce Human rights, Rule of Law and Democracy in the Southern Mediterranean' (South Programme IV)²⁶⁵, a joint EU-Council of Europe initiative, was launched in March 2020 and will run until 2022. Following the success of previous programmes, South Programme IV provides advocacy support and technical assistance to inspire the required legal reform for beneficiary countries²⁶⁶ to sign and ratify the Istanbul Convention. This project complements the ongoing Campaign to Combat Violence against Women, which the Commission is taking in the region. The EU-UN Women programme 'Ending violence against women in the Western Balkans

²⁶³ Presidency conclusions on the Gender Action Plan (GAP) III 2021-2025, ST 13947/20, available at <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-13947-2020-INIT/en/pdf>

²⁶⁴ The UN Generation Equality Forum gathers approximately 2,500 people from all over the world, mostly from feminist organisations and movements to develop joint strategies for advancing gender equality.

²⁶⁵ Available at: <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/south-programme>

²⁶⁶ The Southern Neighbourhood countries benefiting from this project are Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia and Palestine. This designation of the later shall not be construed as recognition of a State of Palestine and is without prejudice to the individual positions of Council of Europe and European Union member States on this issue.

and Turkey²⁶⁷ continues to work on creating a favourable social, political and legal environment in line with international standards on eliminating violence against women and all forms of discrimination.

EU'S GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS AND ACTION ON GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

At the Leader Summit in November 2020 in Riyadh, the EU and other G20 leaders agreed to increase efforts on women's empowerment to help reduce the gender employment gap by 25% by 2025. The Summit G20 adopted policy guidelines on digital financial inclusion for youth, women and SMEs²⁶⁸ and policy options to enhance opportunities for all²⁶⁹. The EU renewed its G20 commitment to women's empowerment, notably by promoting women in leadership through the Private Sector Alliance for the Empowerment and Progression of Women's Economic Representation (G20 EMPOWER Alliance).

Key partnerships of the EU with the UN on Women's economic empowerment strengthened multilateralism and contributed to important policy development and business model changes in Asia, in the Americas and in the G7 and G20 fora. The Partnership Instrument 'WeEmpower' programme (EUR 22.5 million) contributed to increase the public and private sectors' commitment to gender equality and to women's empowerment in the world of work at all levels. In particular, the programme enabled the EU to engage with Asian and Latin American networks of women entrepreneurs, public institutions, and the private sector to ensure the full implementation of the Women's Empowerment Principles²⁷⁰.

As part of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), the Commission supported participating Member States in mainstreaming gender into employment and labour policy. In November 2020, the 'Women4Mediterranean' conference served as a milestone to appraise and take stock of what has been achieved over the past 25 years, as it coincided with the 25th Anniversary of the Barcelona Process²⁷¹. The Conference launched the first region-wide monitoring mechanism built on a set of 20 indicators²⁷² to measure progress made in gender equality, as a follow-up on the 2017 Ministerial Declaration on Strengthening the Role of Women in Society. This mechanism will help with data gathering, address existing gender gaps and support policy- and decision-making in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

²⁶⁷ Available at:

<https://www.implementingnormschangingminds.com/#:~:text='Implementing%20Norms%2C%20Changing%20Minds'%20is%20an%20EU%2FUN,the%20most%20disadvantaged%20groups%20of>

²⁶⁸ G20, *G20 High-Level Policy Guidelines on Digital Financial Inclusion for Youth, Women and SMEs*, 2020, available at https://www.gpfi.org/sites/gpfi/files/saudiG20_youth_women_SME.pdf.

²⁶⁹ OECD, *Enhancing Equal Access to Opportunities for All*, OECD Publishing, Paris, 2020, available at <http://www.oecd.org/economy/Enhancing-equal-access-to-opportunities-OECD-background-note-for-G20-Framework-Working-Group-july-2020.pdf>.

²⁷⁰ UN WOMEN, *The Power of Working Together: Emerging practices that advance women's economics empowerment*, 2020. Available at https://www.weps.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/THE_POWER_OF_WORKING_TOGETHER_FINAL_0.pdf

²⁷¹ <https://ufmsecretariat.org/25bcnprocess/>

²⁷² These indicators are organised into four priority areas: women's access to leadership and decision-making, women's economic participation, combating violence against women and girls, and combating gender-based stereotypes.

In the past year, the EU's external investment programme (EIP)²⁷³ has been instrumental in mobilising investment in Africa and the European neighbourhood to help create jobs, paying particular attention to gender equality and women's empowerment. Through the EIP's Women's Financial Inclusion Facility, the EU invested an initial EUR 10 million to leverage an additional EUR 65 million in investment to supporting women's financial inclusion and women entrepreneurs across the world. The Financial Inclusion programme (InclusiFi)²⁷⁴ that increases the financing available for local entrepreneurs in Sub-Saharan and Northern Africa, also targets women. With an initial EU investment of EUR 60 million, the InclusiFi programme facilitates access to loans for up to 10 000 local entrepreneurs, especially women, young people and migrants, and is expected to create up to 26 000 jobs. The Small Loan Guarantee programme²⁷⁵ invested a further EUR 58 million to provide loans for up to 50 000 micro businesses and enterprises led by women.

The Commission continued its work with the EEAS for the implementation of the 2019-2024 EU strategic approach and action plan on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), recently incorporated into the Gender Action Plan III for 2021-2025. Through its Action Plan, the EU aims at increasing women's inclusion and integration in security and military sectors and in peace and transition processes, where women are currently significantly underrepresented²⁷⁶. The Commission's Women as Actors in Peace Processes initiative was launched to increase the participation and leadership of women in peace and transition processes. This initiative provides mentorship, capacity building and resources for women leaders and mediators in the Middle East and North Africa, where it can build on previous EU action. Moreover, the Commission teamed up with UN Women to prevent global violent extremism, and specifically in Jordan and Pakistan, focusing on the gender aspects of this threat. The EU funding helps strengthen the capacity and resilience to address this form of violence and integrate a gender perspective in its response. During 2020 the EU continued to work within its formalised partnerships on WPS with the UN, NATO and G7. In this framework, for example, the joint trilateral UN- African Union-EU peace process analysis with an integrated gender perspective for the Central African Republic was finalised. The EU has also committed to building capacity and capability, including on gender-responsive leadership, through training, information and peer-to-peer support to these processes in the EEAS headquarters, EU Delegations and Common Security and Defence Policy missions and operations.

The EU-funded project EU for Gender Equality (EU4GE)²⁷⁷ implemented by UN Women and UNFPA aims to strengthen equal rights and opportunities for women and men, through shifting social perceptions, gender stereotypes and men's participation in caretaking. EU4GE combines bilateral and regional activities to shift societal perceptions around gender stereotypes and patriarchal norms limiting women's rights across Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

²⁷³ Available at https://ec.europa.eu/eu-external-investment-plan/home_en.

²⁷⁴ Available at https://ec.europa.eu/eu-external-investment-plan/projects/financial-inclusion-programme-inclusifi_en.

²⁷⁵ Available at https://ec.europa.eu/eu-external-investment-plan/projects/small-loan-guarantee-programme_en.

²⁷⁶ Neumann, H., Hopgood, L., *The #SHECURITY Index, 2020*, available at <http://shsecurity.info/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/SHEcurity-Index-final.pdf>.

²⁷⁷ Available at: https://eeca.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/eu4ge_programme_brief_final_0.pdf

GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN EU'S EXTERNAL ACTION

As reaffirmed in the Gender action plan for 2021-2025, gender mainstreaming is an integral part of EU action beyond its borders, and is included its efforts to safeguard human rights, to ensure peace, and to build strong regional and trade partnerships.

In March 2020, the Commission presented the EU action plan for 2020-2024 on human rights and democracy²⁷⁸, which was approved by the Council in November 2020. The action plan stresses that a gender responsive approach must remain at the heart of the EU's response, amidst a growing opposition to women's rights and gender equality. Among the outlined measures, the EU commits to act on women's empowerment, preventing and combatting sexual and gender based violence, addressing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, promoting rights-based and gender responsive justice, and improving access to justice and legal assistance. This is achieved through systematic and coordinated use of the full range of instruments at the EU's disposal, including political and human rights dialogues with third countries and regional organisations; human rights and democracy country strategies and actions in multilateral and regional human rights fora.

The EU further integrated gender mainstreaming into its interregional strategic partnerships to strengthening democracy, human rights and progress on the sustainable development goals with Africa and Central Asia. As part of the EU's new comprehensive strategy with Africa, adopted in March 2020²⁷⁹, the EU and Africa committed to work together to promote gender equality within good governance, democracy, human rights, and rule of law through a rights-based approach in all areas of the strategy. At the November EU Central Asia Ministerial Meeting the EU and its partners agreed to step up action on gender equality through quality education, decent work and opportunities for women in leadership and decision-making.

The gender dimension is also a key consideration in the EU's support for refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced people, with funding being directed to the most vulnerable, including women and children. For example, one of the two regional programmes of the EU Regional Trust Fund, provides EUR 25 million in funding in response to the Syrian crisis it address specific needs of women affected by the Syria crisis in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. Implemented by the EuroMed Feminist Initiative and UN Women, the programmes are improving the livelihood, agency, legal, and social protection of Syrian women refugees, internally displaced people, and women in the host communities. Moreover, the Commission's reservation of to €8 million in emergency support for migrants and refugees stranded in the Western Balkans is contingent on specific attention being paid to non-accompanied children and to girls and women who are at risk or victims of sexual and gender-based violence.

The Commission continues to work on providing sex-disaggregated data to ensure that trade-related aspects of gender equality are adequately addressed in trade initiatives. In January 2020, the Commission and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development initiated a project to improve statistics for gender-responsive trade policies. After developing a large inventory of EU trade and gender statistics, the Commission is now focusing on specific areas to develop further relevant gender indicators. It is conducting a study and survey on women's participation in trade and the services sector, together with the International Trade Centre, and will

²⁷⁸ JOIN(2020) 5 final, available at https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:e9112a36-6e95-11ea-b735-01aa75ed71a1.0002.02/DOC_3&format=PDF.

²⁷⁹ JOIN(2020) 4 final, available at https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/communication-eu-africa-strategy-join-2020-4-final_en.pdf.

present the findings in March 2021. Over 900 companies in 12 Member States have been interviewed, and results are currently being analysed.

As access to gender statistics and data disaggregated by sex in trade increases, the Commission will be able to strengthen the gender dimension in trade agreements. This dimension is already systematically included when the EU assesses the effectiveness of its trade agreements using tools and guidance provided as part of the Sustainability Impact Assessment to integrate such gender considerations. In June 2020, the Commission presented its position on the EU-Indonesia free trade agreement negotiations, considering the potential positive impact on women's rights and access to the labour market²⁸⁰. The Commission is currently performing similar assessments for the modernised EU-Chile Association Agreement with its comprehensive free trade agreement, as well as for those that are currently being negotiated with Australia and New Zealand.

²⁸⁰ European Commission Services, *Position Paper on the Sustainability Impact Assessment in support of Negotiations on a Trade Agreement between the European Union and Indonesia*, 2020, available at https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2020/july/tradoc_158899.pdf.

CONCLUSION

While gender equality and women's empowerment have never been so high up on the EU's political agenda, the past year has been particularly challenging for gender equality. Next to growing opposition, the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected women's lives. More robust EU-wide data are gradually becoming available, but there is already ample evidence that the hard-won achievements of past years have been 'rolled back' by the pandemic. Many stakeholders are concerned that it will take years, or even decades, to overcome the setbacks to gender equality caused by the pandemic. Gender equality has also increasingly come under attack in certain Member States and abroad, with a tendency in some countries to restrict and backslide on women's rights.

This shows that progress on women's rights is hard won but easily lost. Even beyond the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis, much remains to be done to progress and accelerate efforts to achieve gender equality. As this report shows, most indicators on gender equality have levelled out for several years and where progress is made, it has been quite slow. Gender gaps in employment, in unpaid care work and in remuneration stubbornly persist. In addition, progress on gender equality in decision-making has stalled. Regrettably, there is still a long way to go to end gender-based violence.

The COVID-19 crisis presents an opportunity to change the status quo. It is now more important than ever to intensify our efforts to overcome the dramatic impact of the crisis on gender equality. The Commission is committed to keeping gender equality high up on its political agenda and to deliver on the actions set out in the 2020-2025 Gender Equality Strategy. The Action Plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights is a further milestone to advance gender equality. The Commission will continue close cooperation with the European Institute of Gender Equality whose research and activities are the basis for and complement the Commission's policy work. The Commission will ensure that a gender equality is mainstreamed into all EU policies, with the notable support of the Task Force on Equality and its secretariat. In particular, the Commission will carefully assess whether Member States implement the requirement that the measures in national plans under the Recovery and Resilience Fund take the gender dimension of the COVID-19 crisis into account and contribute to gender equality. Gender equality is a necessity for development in the EU and beyond, for an inclusive post-pandemic recovery, and for prosperous, resilient and fair societies. As President von der Leyen put it in her political guidelines: "In business, politics and society as a whole, we can only reach our full potential if we use all of our talent and diversity. Using only half of the population, half of the ideas or half of the energy is not good enough."

