

Advancing Gender Equality in the European Union

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Introduction

Achieving gender equality is central to the values and aims of the European Union (EU). Advancing human rights and preserving democracy and the rule of law is embedded in the EU's foundational treaties and in subsequent conventions, strategies, and action plans. In 2019, the EU witnessed the election of its first female president, Ursula von der Leyen, who has made gender equality and gender mainstreaming a top priority. In 2020, the EU extended its institutional commitment to gender equality, via its first *Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025* and its external relations, through the EU's third *Gender Action Plan (GAP III)*, which embodies UNSCR 1325 and the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda to reduce violence against women and ensure women's participation in peacebuilding and conflict prevention efforts. Institutionally, the EU's work on gender equality and women's empowerment falls under the European Commission's remit, while the European External Action Service (EEAS), the EU's diplomatic service, is tasked with implementing GAP III.

This policy brief examines these EU moves to carry out its *Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025* and GAP III. It focuses on gender equality and gender mainstreaming in EU institutions and in the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). While the EU has made significant strides, its achievements have been unevenly distributed and implemented, both in terms of geographic distribution and in issue domains, particularly in the foreign and security policy arenas. The practical question is therefore what can be done to create greater momentum towards achieving greater gains in gender equality? The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic hardships have been devastating, especially for

women, children, and other vulnerable populations. Leaders in all countries face difficult policy choices, and some countries have used the pandemic to reverse gains in human rights and gender equality. The EU is recognized and respected for its leadership and commitment to human rights and democracy, and so it is particularly important for the EU to continue its gender equality agenda both within and beyond its borders.

Gender Equality in the EU: Representation and Participation

Gender equality is enshrined in the EU's foundational documents, whereby "In all its activities, the Union shall aim to eliminate inequalities, and to promote equality between men and women."¹ Early efforts at gender equality targeted socio-economic inequalities such as "equal pay for equal work" and labor market access.² It was a gradual and functionalist progression, from wages and employment to areas of social and economic policy and other areas of gender inequality.³ In the 1990s, the EU's commitment to gender mainstreaming provided the drive to integrate gender into the development field and then into the EU's external actions and its peacebuilding and conflict prevention efforts.

Although the EU has shown strong commitment to gender equality, developments have been uneven across member states and issue domains. The EU's European Institute for Gender Equality's annual *Gender Equality Index* catalogues gender gaps over time using a scale of 1 (total inequality) to 100 (full equality) measured in six domains: work, money, knowledge, time, (political) power, and health.⁴ Accordingly, gender equality in the EU has reached 67.9 points, but progress

across the EU has varied considerably, from Sweden (83.6) and Denmark (77.5) to Hungary (51.9) and Greece (51.2). Although the political power measurement has seen the most improvement since 2005, moving 11.6 points since 2020, its score remains the lowest overall (53.5 points) of the six domains.⁵ It is thus in the realm of representation and access to political power where gender inequalities are especially pronounced.⁶ More discouraging is the report's observation that the level of power improvement drove the overall increase in the Index score—obscuring the absence of real gains in the other domains.

The World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report 2021* only reinforces the need to address the problem of representation. Of the four subindices the report uses to measure performance—health and survival, education, economic participation and opportunity, and political empowerment—the political empowerment subindex lags by an astonishing margin. The gender gap has nearly closed in health and survival (96%) and education (95%), while economic participation stands at 58%. However, political empowerment only reaches 22%—a drop of 2.4% from 2020. These sobering numbers show why efforts to increase women's participation in the political field must be intensified.

The record isn't much better in terms of women's representation and participation in EU agencies. The numbers of women presidents and prime ministers among European countries remain disappointing. Though more women were elected heads of state between 2003 and 2018, the number never rose above 14%.⁷ Today, only four of the 27 heads of state or government are women, from Germany, Estonia, Denmark, and Finland—and soon to be three, since German Chancellor Angela Merkel will soon be replaced by the Social Democrat Olaf Scholz. Five EU member states have women defense ministers (Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, and Spain), and in the 47 states represented in the Council of Europe, only nine women serve as foreign minister (Albania, Andorra, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Estonia, Lichtenstein, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom).

The most important change, however, has occurred within the EU at the highest level of leadership, where for the first time in its history a woman now serves as President of the European Commission. Having assumed her duties on December 1, 2019, Ursula von der Leyen leads the institutional body that exercises executive power in the EU and that represents the interests of the EU on the international stage. Von der Leyen announced that gender equality would be one of her top priorities, enshrined within the new *EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025*.⁸ She declared her intention to implement new anti-discrimination legislation, introduce pay transparency measures, establish quotas for gender balance on company boards, and achieve gender parity in EU institutions, starting with her own College of Commissioners.⁹ Von der

EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025

- End gender-based violence
- Challenge gender stereotypes
- Close inequalities in labor markets
- Achieve equal participation across economic sectors
- Address the gender pay and pension gaps
- Close the gender care gap
- Achieve gender balance in decision-making and in politics

Leyen succeeded in her goal of a gender-balanced College of Commissioners, which is now made up of 13 women and 14 men, though many of the portfolios women hold are more traditionally "female."¹⁰ In the *Gender Equality Strategy*, von der Leyen is committed to achieving more women in decision-making roles and to 50%-50% gender balance at all levels of EU management by 2024. The challenge is especially vital in the field of foreign and security policy: in an October 2020 statement, the European Parliament noted that women hold 40% of the positions in the Commission but only 31.3% of middle-management positions and 26% of senior management positions in the European External Action Service (EEAS), the diplomatic arm of the EU.¹¹

One of the EU's most powerful commissioners is Margrethe Vestager. As the EU's commissioner for competition, she has taken on Silicon Valley's biggest tech companies, such as Google, Apple, and Facebook. In September 2019, Vestager was elected to an unprecedented second term as the EU's competition commissioner and, in President von der Leyen's newly reorganized Commission, acquired a second portfolio as "Executive Vice President of the European Commission for a Europe Fit for the Digital Age."¹² Thus, not only will Vestager continue to oversee the EU's competition rules, she will supervise the EU's overarching cybersecurity, industrial, and big data policies, coordinate the EU's position on the taxation of digital companies, and have a hand in shaping a White Paper on artificial intelligence, a data strategy, and a common position of the risks linked to 5G networks. This is a powerful platform for decisions that will have a significant impact in shaping regulatory, technological, and trade and market rules and regulations in Europe and across the globe.

In the European Parliament, the record on gender equality is encouraging but, as in so many other issues, the devil is in the details. EU statistics show the number of women members of the European Parliament has risen from a low of 16.6% in 1979 to the current 38.9%—about the world average but still far from full equality. Once again, the differences are highly variable, by member state and party affiliation. The number of female members in the European Parliament by member state

range from a high of 57.1% in Finland to 18.2% in Romania and no women at all for Cyprus.¹³ In terms of its parliamentary parties, gender equality is highest in the European center-left, led by the Greens with 48.3% women, followed by other center-left political parties. Parties of the far-right lag far behind, ranging between 32.3 to 39.7%.¹⁴

The rise of right-wing populist parties that have weakened democratic institutions and governments across Europe has seen gender and women's rights come under sustained attack, notably in Poland and Hungary.¹⁵ In November 2020, both states strongly objected to the GAP III draft promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in EU foreign and security policy and to protecting LGBTQ+ rights, despite gender equality and human rights protections being enshrined in EU treaty and basic EU law. These two governments also targeted gender equality. In July 2021, they lobbied to remove the term "gender equality" from a draft declaration to improve social cohesion.¹⁶ That same month, the European Commission took legal action against Hungary and Poland for what it deemed were violations of EU laws regarding non-discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation—against Hungary for passing an anti-LGBTQ+ law and against some communities in Poland that declared themselves "LGTBQ-free" zones.¹⁷

Finally, women are underrepresented in EU parliamentary committees and in ministerial portfolios. Only 35.2% of women lead EU parliamentary committees, and the gap is particularly evident in committees responsible for external affairs. Revealingly, women tended not to receive the high-profile portfolios but the "softer issue" socio-cultural portfolios of education, family and children, and health. In parliamentary committees focused on external affairs, representation ranges from 46% in the areas of international trade and development to 31% in foreign affairs and only 20% in the security and defense field.¹⁸

Studies of the EU's track record on gender equality point to longstanding institutional and socio-cultural obstacles that continue to impede advancement toward full gender equality: the ongoing struggle for gender equality in middle and senior management in EU institutions ("think leader, think male"); work-life balance; a closed system of advancement; lack of political leadership and political will; poor implementation and weak enforcement mechanisms on legislation; insufficient resources and staffing; and little support for gender mainstreaming across EU institutions and issue areas.¹⁹ More difficult to address are the differences among member states in social and cultural norms and attitudes about gender that contribute to an "adoption-implementation gap" on gender equality issues within the EU.²⁰

European Court of Auditors: Gender Mainstreaming Recommendations

- Strengthen EU institutional framework
- Conduct gender analysis
- Collect and analyze sex-aggregated data
- Use gender-related objectives/indicators
- Improve reporting on gender equality
- Assess and report on whether resilience and recovery plans contribute to gender equality.

Multiple studies have concluded that implementation of existing gender equality and gender mainstreaming legislation remains a core problem, and hence many recommendations have an institutional focus. To address gaps in representation, for example, observers call for the EU to ensure gender-neutral job descriptions and revise family and leave policy to address work-life balance. Other recommendations point to the need for better monitoring and evaluation and assessment systems, gender-disaggregated data, and better training at managerial levels to accelerate shifts in institutionalized structures of implicit bias and bureaucratic cultures. Deficits in the EU budget process are problematic, too. A 2021 EU auditing report concluded the EU failed to incorporate gender mainstreaming into the EU budget across the seven budget headings and thus failed to "live up to its commitment."²¹ It calls for the Commission itself to comply with directives to integrate gender mainstreaming into the budget process and commit funding for gender-based initiatives.

Gender Equality in CSDP: Representation and Participation

The commitment to gender mainstreaming in EU institutions in the 1990s also expanded into the EU's external relations, first to development aid and then to foreign and security policy, with UNSCR 1325 and the international WPS agenda providing important points of reference. But efforts to formalize gender mainstreaming in the EU Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) were not immediately successful. The "watershed" moment for the integration of the WPS agenda into EU foreign and security policy occurred in 2008 with the adoption of the "Comprehensive Approach on Women, Peace and Security" for EU implementation of UNSCR 1325 and 1820.²² Starting in 2010, the EU introduced three successive gender action plans (GAP) that provide a framework for the European Commission and the EEAS to advance gender equality and empowerment in its external policies.²³

Value of Gender Equality Measurers in Missions**Effectiveness at the Tactical, Operational, and Strategic Levels**

- Secures access to groups and areas where male counterparts cannot
- Enhances situational awareness
- Collects intelligence that helps challenge existing assumptions
- Helps gain local trust in mission
- Demonstrates diversity benefits decision-making processes
- Contributes to better work environment, more collaborative work dynamics
- Strengthens credibility with host nation
- Demonstrated commitment strengthens EU legitimacy
- Helps overcome gender stereotypes within mission and outside mission.

Documents such as the *2015 Council Conclusion on CSDP* and the *EEAS EU Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) 2019-2024* continue to support the promotion of gender mainstreaming and a stronger role for women in peacebuilding and conflict resolution efforts as well as all EU military and civilian missions.²⁴ As of late 2021, the EU deployed seven military missions and 11 civilian missions in Europe, Africa, and Asia, with a combined strength of 5,000 personnel.²⁵ Their stated objectives include conflict prevention, peacekeeping, strengthening international security and rule of law, and the prevention of human trafficking and piracy.²⁶ Of the seven current military missions, four are training missions (Mali, Somalia, Central African Republic, and Mozambique) and three are military operations with an executive mandate (Bosnia-Herzegovina and two naval force operations off the Somali coast and in the Mediterranean).

Several studies on gender representation in EU *military* missions show there is a steep hill to climb. A 2018 SIPRI study of EU missions conducted between 2008 and 2017 noted that female personnel numbers varied considerably both in numbers and in missions, ranging between 5.3 to 8.4% for 2013-2017.²⁷ Explaining such variation is difficult; some surmise it is related to the conflict intensity of the mission,²⁸ but the lack of gender-disaggregated data seriously limits the conclusions that can be drawn with any degree of certainty.²⁹ The proportion of female personnel did increase from 3.6% to 7.8%, but the available data lack sufficient detail to draw specific conclusions about gender and the impact of women on mission effectiveness.³⁰

In response to the growing demand for more *civilian* mission capabilities, in November 2018 EU member states established the Civilian Common Security and Defense Policy Compact to strengthen civilian missions.³¹ Given this demand for civilian personnel, one might be tempted to assume that EU efforts at gender mainstreaming in civilian missions have advanced faster, but the EU's record is mixed at best. The number of civilian women personnel (which includes uniformed police and non-uniformed civilian personnel) rose from 11.3% to 22.8% between 2008 and 2017. Within that number, researchers estimated that women police averaged around 10%.³² The numbers fluctuated significantly but they did increase in relative terms, though not in absolute terms, from 46 in 2008 to over 400 by mid-2010, before declining from 423 to 260 between 2013-2017. Although the data show the gender balance improving, they also show the number of male personnel falling sharply between 2011-2017, due mostly to scaling down of mission size. Thus, no actual increase in female personnel in civilian missions was observable.

Several factors influence the rate of female civilian personnel in EU missions. One is the CSDP recruitment system. Uniformed personnel, both military and civilian police, are deployed or seconded by member state governments, and governments also nominate the "seconded" civilian personnel. Not all governments are committed to full gender equality, and these attitudes impact on the number of qualified women who make it through the selection process. The remaining personnel are "international contracted" personnel recruited by the EEAS, an organization that itself has been criticized for its "add women and stir" approach to gender mainstreaming and poor hiring record, particularly in middle and top management positions.³³ The SIPRI study also highlights one of the most consistent criticisms of military and civilian CSDP missions: the significant lack of EU gender-disaggregated data. For example, the authors reported that for the period 2006-2017, they were unable to find statistics on the representation of women in military operations.³⁴

Despite some progress, the general conclusions of the 2017 parliamentary evaluation of women in CSDP missions remain valid today: "measuring the impact of women's participation in CSDP missions and operations is challenging because of the relatively small number of women in CSDP and the overall lack of statistical data on their positions within the organizations."³⁵

As with gender equality generally, the reasons why so few women are deployed are familiar: attitudes and prejudices (soldiering is not a woman's job, not physically capable), work-life balance, recruitment and retention policies, institutionalized constraints (gendered job descriptions), funding problems, under-representation, and lack of top leadership support.³⁶ CSDP missions must also compete for personnel and funds against demands from other organizations, both internally

(FRONTEX, the EU's border control agency) and externally (UN, OSCE, NATO). For military missions, inadequate training in gender mainstreaming can have deleterious effects: with training devoid of evidence of tangible strategic, tactical, and operational advantages of including women, planners may miss the relevance of gender mainstreaming and thus fail to utilize female personnel in ways that advance mission objectives. Especially relevant for CSDP missions and operations are calls for changes in the recruitment system, more deployed gender advisors, and the need for gender-disaggregated data collection.

Calls for institutional reform within the EEAS are also strong, including changing recruitment policies to address personnel deficits and promoting more women in middle and top management.³⁷ The European Parliament's report on gender equality in the EU's foreign and defense policy was critical of the ongoing underperformance of the EEAS in meeting gender equality targets and, in particular, its inability to produce specific and measurable objectives to meet those targets, the lack of diversity, the lack of gender-responsive recruitment procedures, and absence of genuine gender-responsive leadership.³⁸

Conclusion

The EU's priorities in advancing gender equality have focused on helping close the gender pay gap and gaps in employment and pensions; expanding women's representation and participation in decision-making; addressing gender-based violence; and promoting gender equality and women's rights both within and outside of the EU. The EU's *Gender Equality Strategy*, the *Common Approach to WPS*, and the new GAP III all demonstrate a strong institutional commitment to gender equality and gender mainstreaming.

The greatest obstacle, however, lies in the implementation of existing frameworks to realize their aims. A persistent gap exists between institutional statements and actual implementation of the EU's framework for advancing gender equality and gender mainstreaming, which is still often seen as an "add-on" rather than a framework and guide for transformational change. Such change is required in the EU's internal activities as well as its external foreign and security policies. Importantly, EU officials must also clearly convey to member states that gender equality and gender mainstreaming are core EU strategic aims. It is unclear where the EU's recent legal actions against Poland and Hungary will lead, but such challenges to liberal democracy and the rule of law are also existential challenges for the EU and must be resolved in ways that uphold EU values, norms, laws, and way of life.

Fortunately, recommendations for implementing constructive reforms exist, which focus on concrete and binding objectives. Internally, the EU can:

- Change institutional processes and policies such as promotion policies, job descriptions and requirements, and advancement opportunities;
- Adjust training and curricula programs to maximize mainstreaming gender throughout the cycle of respective areas of competence;
- Address work-life balance policies, taking onboard lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- Implement the recommendations made by the European Court of Auditors to incorporate gender mainstreaming into the EU budget—and evaluate and monitor the progress.

Externally, the EU can address shortfalls in its gender equality strategy by acting to:

- Improve the EEAS' poor record on gender recruitment by altering job descriptions and promoting gender equality in institutions that serve as pool for candidates, e.g., border police, law enforcement, and ministries of justice, defense, and interior;
- Increase retention by establishing gender-responsive recruitment procedures, making family policies gender sensitive, altering promotion procedures, eliminating the pay gap, and improving work-life balance;
- Reinforce leadership's commitment to gender equality by eliminating toxic masculine environments;
- Mandate gender equality training for all middle and senior EEAS management, head of mission and commanders of CSDP missions and operations, and including female trainers in mixed training teams, as well as role modeling in training;
- Collect comprehensive gender-aggregated data on CSDP missions to enable evidence-based assessments of the impact of gender inclusion for mission success;
- Ensure all military CSDP missions include a gender advisor, as already occurs in civilian missions.

Effective implementation of these recommendations requires the EU to "lead by example." Strong leadership, in turn, depends on finding the political will to transform the EU's culture and institutional structures that impede gender mainstreaming. One of the many challenges EU President von der Leyen faces is obtaining broader support among EU member states to prioritize policies that encourage gender mainstreaming in EU institutions and policies. This is a difficult task, especially in the security and defense arena, and while the current COVID-19 crisis and economic recession have put considerable pressure on EU resources. But these constraints do not justify rejecting these recommendations for gender equality, most of which can be enacted without significant expenditure. Indeed, times of crisis are the best time to lead by example.

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