



2021 report on **gender equality** in the EU



Justice
and Consumers

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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.

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 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

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, Jästad 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

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."

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