



EUROPEAN WOMEN'S
LOBBY
EUROPEEN DES FEMMES

EWL's recommendations to Member States on the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025

Introduction

The European Women's Lobby (EWL) welcomes the Strategy on Gender Equality presented by the European Commission as its key political framework for promoting equality between women and men in the EU for the next five years. EWL shares the European Commission's conclusions on the **serious threats to the human rights of women and girls in Europe**: women and girls make up more than half the population of the EU but still face systemic discrimination, stereotyping, and barriers in all spheres of life in Europe and beyond. Women's rights are human rights and therefore need the commitment of all European institutions towards their full realisation.

The ongoing COVID-19 health crisis has highlighted inequalities faced by women in Europe: they are now increasingly at risk of violence, poverty and threats to their economic independence. Especially worrying is the situation of women and girls who are made vulnerable by our system, such as sole carers, those facing male violence, those in precarious work or economic uncertainty, all those who do not have safe accommodation, those requiring care, or who already face social exclusion. This is despite the fact that women are overwhelmingly stepping in to lead in providing care and support for all in this moment, allowing ongoing health care services and society to continue functioning. EU Member States must work together to ensure that the crisis will not have a **significant and long-term impact on women and girls**.

In this difficult time, EWL recalls and supports the **political leadership and commitment of the European Commission in setting out this strategy to put equality between women and men back at the heart of the EU's political priorities**. It is now more than ever crucial to ensure its full implementation and that it is supplemented by urgent measures in favour of equality between women and men. After 5 years without a political framework at EU level and in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, the time for action is now. Indeed, six decades of EU action has most certainly advanced equality between women and men, and this has only been achieved with the commitment of EU Member States in improving the lives of women and girls. However, Europe has stopped progressing for a



decade now: economic austerity measures combined with continued challenges to realising women's rights has stalled progress to equality and threatened the rights of all women and girls.

Only the full implementation of the Strategy and its necessary complementary measures can ensure the EU meets its obligations as per the Treaties to promote equality between women and men as one of its core values and to integrate the dimension of equality between women and men in all policy and financial frameworks. Indeed, in accordance with the Treaties, implementation of the Strategy should **specifically focus on and contribute to putting an end to inequality between women and men**, as EWL would have wished to see reflected in the title of the Strategy. This should send a clear signal to all women and girls that the EU is working for them.

It is essential that the implementation of the Strategy is grounded in existing European and international laws, policies and frameworks on women's human rights, in particular the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention), the 2019 Council of Europe Recommendation on Preventing and Combating Sexism and, existing European law on equality between women and men, such as the employment directives and the Directive 2004/113/EC implementing the principle of equal treatment between men and women in the access to and supply of goods and services.

In these immensely difficult times for all people and societies in Europe and globally, the EU and its Member States must show political leadership and **urgently ensure that gender-sensitive responses are implemented so that the price of these current crises and their future impacts is not paid by women, especially the most marginalised. EWL calls now on all EU Member States to act to make sure the Gender Equality Strategy is turned into actions, to realise the goals of the Treaties and the Charter of Fundamental Rights, and benefits all women and girls in the EU.**

To do so, all EU Member States must endorse the commitments set out in the Strategy and ensure they are backed by adequate funding and the national-level structures required. They must also establish strong institutional mechanisms to ensure cooperation and monitoring of progress on women's rights, and to lift the EU and lead the way on EU policies advancing equality between women and men.

[EU Member States must endorse and ensure financing for commitments from the Strategy](#)

EWL calls on Member States to welcome the emphasis put in the Strategy on tackling male violence against women and girls, advancing women's rights, leading by example on equal representation of women in decision-making positions, closing the gender pay and pension gaps, and integrating a gender perspective into all major policies and funding streams of the EU.

EWL is urging Member States to endorse the European Commission Strategy through **Council Conclusions and to commit to implement it at the national level** through adoption or alignment of domestic strategies and implementation of concrete measures to ensure coherence across the EU for the protection and enforcement of women and girls' rights and their empowerment.



Support to the Strategy should also be realised through the allocation of the funding necessary to its implementation. We would like to strongly emphasise that all the commitments listed in the Strategy would remain simple words if they are not backed by the proper and necessary resources. As European leaders are discussing the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework and funding to respond to the COVID-19 crisis, they should ensure that all EU funds, policies and programmes contribute to realising equality between women and men and that there is increased funding through the European Commission's programmes in support of this objective, including through **gender budgeting**

On that note, we stress the need for **increased resources to women's rights organisations** inside and outside the EU. EWL fully endorses the need for EU institutions and the Member States to deepen their engagement with women's rights organisations, while underlining that, without increasing their resources (financial and human resources as well as infrastructures) to allow for meaningful consultation, such engagement would be compromised. It is especially true now: EU Member States must ensure that women's rights organisations who provide essential services to women and girls at risk are adequately funded during the current health crisis and beyond. The EU and its Member States must further ensure that women's rights organisations do not carry the burden of any economic setbacks resulting from this crisis.

EU Member States must strengthen their institutional mechanisms on women's rights and for the advancement of women, and lead the way on equality between women and men

Strong institutional mechanisms

Strong institutional mechanisms are necessary to ensure that the Strategy succeeds and materialises into concrete improvements for women and girls across Europe. Implementation, monitoring and accountability mechanisms should be created to ensure the commitments are met with actions. In the current context and future impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the implementation of the Strategy resonates even more strongly and this can only be done with solid institutional mechanisms.

A strong first step would be the long-awaited **creation of the formal meeting of Ministers in charge of equality between women and men**, be it as an inclusion to the current Employment, Social Affairs, Health and Consumer Policy Council (EPSCO) or as a stand-alone formation. Indeed, whereas EU Ministers of sport meet up to 8 times a year, there remains no formal Council meeting to discuss and improve implementation of the rights of half of the European population. This is a very serious gap that we call on you to correct.

Lead the way

EU Member States now have the opportunity to advance the most comprehensive European Strategy on equality between women and men into real change for women and girls. By leading the way, Member States and EU institutions hold the potential to set and define the global standard on equality for all women and girls. This would show strong leadership at a time when we are painfully reminded that **care work is the backbone of our society** and that we need to refocus on recognising **the value of the care and solidarity that is at the core of the European project**.

When endorsing the Strategy, EU Member States must recognise and directly address the fact that women are made vulnerable to such crisis because of the discrimination they continue to face.



Discrimination on the basis of sex is often combined with other factors such as race or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age, sexual orientation, class, and/or migration status. These other factors may affect women and girls to a different degree or in different ways to men and boys and further their negative impact. EWL calls on EU Member States to take further commitments to tailor EU responses to the needs of all women and girls and counter the **serious risk that without comprehensive implementation of the Strategy through an intersectional framework, the benefits of the Strategy may only be felt by the most privileged groups of women and will fail to meet the needs of the most marginalised and excluded.** To ensure the needed response, such a framework cannot simply reference various forms of discrimination but requires a deeper cross-analysis of the multiplying factors of impact where overlapping forms of oppression have exponential impacts on many women and girls, and affect investment accordingly. This is a must when we know the current health crisis is having a particularly deep impact on the most marginalised women in our societies.

EU Member States must also take steps to ratify and fully implement the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, the **Istanbul Convention, both at the national and EU level.** To date, the Convention is the most comprehensive international instrument preventing violence against women and protecting them from this widespread breach of their fundamental rights. We also call on EU Member States to take steps towards the inclusion of **all forms of violence against women and girls into the list of EU crimes.** Both steps are fundamental to ensure a comprehensive legislative approach at EU level to address all forms of violence against women and girls, including sexual exploitation and online violence. The Covid-19 crisis has resulted in a significant increase of male violence against women and girls, re-stressing the urgent need for concerted action of EU Member States. Now is time for the EU to collectively raise to the challenge and act together to put an end to this widespread breach of women's rights, with a specific recognition of the vulnerability faced by all those enduring additional social marginalisation, for example all those affected by prostitution or sexual exploitation who may need additional supports as set out under the Equality Model.

Recognising within the Strategy the potential of sexuality education and educating boys and girls about equality between women and men opens significant opportunities for a deeper and more systemic challenge to patriarchal oppression of women and girls, and hence prevention of all forms of violence and discrimination against them. So too does the recognition of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) as a matter of women's health. The EWL calls on EU Member States to **ensure education about equality (including feminist sexuality education) is resourced and consistently implemented across Europe** and that effective measures are adopted to ensure **all women and girls have access to their full SRHR** through State health services.

Moreover, while we are happy to see the important issue of care given attention in the EC Strategy and praise the European Commission's intention to improve women's inclusion in the labour market and to tackle the gender pay and pension gaps, we urge Member States to uphold these commitments, recognising the implications the COVID-19 pandemic will have on women working in care roles and in precarious work. Member States must ensure these commitments by investing in a **"Care Deal for Europe"**. This comprehensive framework would recognise the undervalued, unpaid and invisible contribution of women to society and shift towards an economy that puts care for people and the planet and shared care responsibilities between women and men at its centre. The current crisis



reminds us more than ever that women are the backbone of society, as they are leading in the provision of frontline and essential services. It also shows how urgent it is to change our paradigm and invest in care. This includes shifting away from the current breadwinner model and move to one that emphasises the need for women to take on uninterrupted, full-time working patterns. This should start with the full implementation of the **Work-Life-Balance Directive** that ensures flexible employment and care options for women and men and must be followed with a political commitment and actions to protect women and girls at risk of **social exclusion, poverty and homelessness**.

The implementation plan must also recognise the different experiences and circumstances of women and girls depending on where they live in Europe, including deep income and employment inequalities between countries in the EU, and between rural and urban areas for example. We must recognise the role severe austerity measures have had in driving migration within Europe. As women seek employment opportunities in other Member States, often working in low paid, precarious positions, they are less likely to receive the same social protections as those afforded to citizens of those countries. This is for example being further exacerbated in the current health crisis, in which many women from Central Eastern Europe, the Balkan and the Baltic States, as well as from Southern Europe are travelling to other EU countries to work in frontline health, care and agriculture sectors. These inequalities lead to compound the already structural inequalities between women and men in the labour market and in care work.

In addition, EWL calls on EU Member States to support the adoption of the **Directive on improving the gender balance on corporate boards** and to go beyond by **pushing for more women on the boards and in the management of all their public institutions**. EWL also urges EU Member States to lead with the Commission in ensuring parity in the next European Parliament elections and to **adopt binding legislation to ensure equal representation of all women in all decision-making spheres, at national and local level**. The current context of the COVID-19 crisis is the moment to set the path for all decision-making processes to include women and a woman's perspective.

Last, but certainly not least, EWL would like to underline the very important commitment set out in the EC strategy to integrate a **gender perspective into all EU policies and major initiatives**, such as those on the COVID-19 crisis, climate change, health, digitalisation and the EU budget. This includes the full implementation of gender mainstreaming across all policy areas, including through gender budgeting and gender impact assessments, and across all stages of developing monitoring and evaluation frameworks in cooperation with women's civil society in order to ensure they will contribute to building *de facto* equality between women and men. **We call on EU Member States to champion equality between women and men in all EU and national policies by systematically adopting a women's perspective and pushing others to do so.**

In that regard, EWL invites Member States to adopt this Strategy's aim to engage women in "all of our talent and diversity". This aim must however come with comprehensive commitments to support migrant women and girls in all contexts and in all their diversity. We call on EU Member States to seek further action towards **mainstreaming gendered needs in the Common European Asylum System and Migration and Asylum Pact, building anti-racism action plans and strategies with a gender assessment**, while also ensuring we remain active in delivering across all Member States on our international commitments to **supporting and protecting all asylum seeking and migrant women and**



girls from male and State violence. This resonates particularly when we know that these women and girls are particularly put at risk in the current health crisis.

Recommendations

- EU Member States must endorse the EC Strategy through Council Conclusions.
- EU Member States must ensure that the Strategy is matched with the necessary funding through increased resources in the next MFF to EU programmes dedicated to equality between women and men and to women's rights organisations and, through implementation of gender budgeting at the EU and national level. Any new funding deployed to respond to the COVID-19 crisis must also include a woman's perspective and contribute to equality between women and men.
- EU Member States must ensure that a formal Council meeting of Ministers of equality between women and men is set up.
- In this particularly difficult times, EU Member States must show strong leadership on equality between and men and champion:
 - An intersectional feminist approach backed by concrete commitments to tailor policies around the experiences and needs of the most marginalised and excluded women, therefore rendered more vulnerable as the current health crisis highlights;
 - The fight against violence against women through EU and national ratification and full implementation of the Istanbul Convention and the inclusion of all forms of violence against women and girls into the list of EU crimes in the perspective of creating a comprehensive EU legislative framework to prevent and combat all forms of male violence against women and girls, including sexual exploitation and online violence;
 - Comprehensive, feminist education for equality between women and men and sexuality education curricula across the national education systems and provision of full SRHR through national healthcare systems;
 - The urgent adoption of a "Care Deal for Europe" which places care for people and the planet at the centre of economic and social decisions;
 - The adoption of the Directive on improving the gender balance on corporate boards and of national and European binding measures to ensure equal representation of women in all spheres of decision-making;
 - Gender mainstreaming in all EU and national policies and political priorities, including priority areas like COVID-19 responses, digitalisation, health, climate justice and migration.

