

## Towards a new EU gender equality strategy

Full gender equality is far from being achieved, and this has implications for the lives and life chances of individual women, girls, boys and men, the communities they live in and the EU as a whole. The European Commission has included a proposal for a new EU Strategy on Gender Equality in its work programme for 2020. It is due to give a statement on the proposal during Parliament's plenary session in February.

### Context

Under the Treaties, the EU is committed to upholding the principle of [gender equality](#) in all its activities (Articles 2 and 3(3) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and Article 8 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)), and can enact legislation to combat gender-based discrimination (Article 19 TFEU). [Annual monitoring](#) of EU action and [research](#) by the EU's Gender Equality Institute (EIGE) show that the measures taken so far have led to advances, but further action is still needed. The evidence from EIGE's [gender equality index](#) is that progress has been slow and [uneven](#), with significant divergences between [countries](#). Research demonstrates the [negative impacts](#) of these gender gaps and the potential benefits of gender equality for individuals, society and the [economy](#). To design fair and effective policy, the gender dimensions of [new challenges](#) such as [demographic trends](#), [digitalisation](#), [artificial intelligence](#) and [climate change](#) will also need careful consideration. Despite the rise of '[anti-gender movements](#)' in the EU, [public opinion surveys](#) show that a large majority of Europeans agree that promoting gender equality is important for a fair and democratic society, the economy and for them personally and that a growing share of citizens would like the EU to do more in this area.

### European Commission proposal

The Commission sets out proposals for legislation and non-legislative measures for advancing equality between women and men in comprehensive multiannual policy programmes. The programme that has just ended, the [Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality 2016-2019](#), had the same priorities as the previous [2010-2015 strategy](#), namely: **closing the gaps in employment, pay, pensions, and decision-making; eradicating gender-based violence and supporting victims; and promoting gender equality and women's rights across the world**. However, when it was adopted, there was [widespread unease](#) that it had been [downgraded](#) to the status of a Commission staff working document.

The new Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, has identified gender equality as a major theme and objective of her Commission (2019-2024). In her [political guidelines](#), she promised a new EU gender equality strategy to underpin this political commitment and support long-term work inside and outside the EU. Responsibility for the strategy lies with the [Commissioner for Equality](#), Helena Dalli. The Commission's [2020 work programme](#) includes the gender equality strategy (2020-2024) under [Headline Ambition 6: A new push for European democracy](#). It is expected to be adopted as a communication in the first quarter of 2020, around [International Women's Day](#). The Commission has already issued a [roadmap](#) outlining the priorities. The new strategy will maintain the focus on the gender pay gap, equality in decision-making and combating gender-based violence, and introduce new priorities such as artificial intelligence and climate change. It will set out new legislative proposals (for example, on pay transparency) and support effective implementation of existing EU legislation (in particular the [work-life balance directive](#)). The current dual emphasis on [gender mainstreaming](#) across EU policies and targeted measures to tackle persistent or emerging gender inequalities will be maintained. New cross-cutting priorities will include gender stereotypes, the role of men and boys and the cumulative impacts of gender inequalities through the life cycle. The strategy will also address '[intersectionality](#)' to take account of the interplay between gender and characteristics such as age, ethnicity, sexual identity and orientation, and disability. In respect of external relations, the strategy will be complemented by a new [gender action plan](#) (referred to as GAP III).

## European Parliament position

During its 2014-2019 term, Parliament adopted [clear positions](#) on individual issues covered in the strategic engagement, and called on [many occasions](#) for a stronger EU framework for promoting women's rights and gender equality. It regretted that the programme for 2016-2019 was issued as a staff working document rather than a full communication, seeing this as a [downgrading](#) of this policy area. Parliament also made concrete recommendations on the substance of a new gender equality strategy. These included calls for: concrete benchmarks and a dedicated budget for measuring and achieving progress; a combination of targeted action and gender mainstreaming; measures to address multiple discrimination and the needs of different groups of women; and better coordination with international and EU strategies, including the United Nation's [Agenda 2030](#), Europe 2020, the European Semester and the Multiannual Financial Framework. The current Parliament renewed the call for a robust EU gender equality strategy in its [resolution](#) of 15 January 2020 on human rights and democracy in the world, asking for a comprehensive, binding strategy with the status of a Commission communication.

Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM) has held informal exchanges of views with the Commission during the preparation of the Commission proposal. In December 2019, the Committee held its own [hearing](#) to obtain input from civil society and academia. The FEMM committee is now working on an own-initiative report on the gender equality strategy ([2019/2169\(INI\)](#)), to be put before the Committee in June 2020. At the hearing in December, the rapporteur Maria Noichl (S&D, Germany) stressed that the top priority is to have an effective strategy that improves people's lives, and that it must be judged by the benefits it brings for all women.

## Council position

Like the European Parliament, the Council has called on [multiple occasions](#) for a high-level strategy for equality between women and men, to follow the Commission's strategic engagement. In 2018, EU gender equality ministers from all EU Member States (except Hungary) signed a joint declaration entitled '[Gender Equality as a Priority of the European Union today and in the future](#)', reaffirming gender equality as a priority of the European Union and calling for a stand-alone EU gender equality strategy. The [European Council strategic agenda](#) adopted in June 2019 stresses that it is a societal and economic imperative for the EU and its Member States to do more to ensure rights and equal opportunities for all, and equality between women and men. The current [Presidency trio programme](#) (January 2019 to June 2020) also stresses the importance of equality as a common value and the need to promote equal opportunities and gender equality across all EU policies and to introduce a gender equality strategy combining specific actions and mainstreaming. On 22 December 2019, the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs (EPSCO) Council held a [debate](#) on future gender equality policies for the next five years.

## Stakeholder views

To identify which issues, groups and types of action should be prioritised, and which EU policy areas require better integration of a gender perspective, the Commission held an [online public consultation](#) and discussions with civil society and advisory bodies. The [Advisory Committee on equal opportunities between women and men](#) and the [European Economic and Social Committee](#) have each made recommendations for the new strategy, calling amongst other things for better gender mainstreaming and budgeting in all policy areas, an intersectional approach to tackle the combination of different grounds of discrimination, and support for civil society organisations working for greater gender equality. In its detailed [recommendations](#) for the new strategy, the European Women's Lobby has raised similar issues. It has stressed the need for the strategy to address the needs and experiences of women from different backgrounds and for better resourcing for women's organisations. It has also called for gender mainstreaming to be introduced in all EU policies, in particular those such as the new Green Deal and the digital single market, where the gender dimension may not be obvious, and for gender budgeting to be used in all programmes to assess any negative impacts on gender equality and women. [Plan International](#) has called for a greater focus on addressing the specific needs of girls, whilst [AGE Platform Europe](#) has suggested how EU action could address the challenges facing older women, particularly in the fields of economic independence, health and violence against women. The [European Disability Forum](#) has called for issues facing women and girls with disabilities to be addressed in the new strategy.

