

Women's rights: 25-year review of the Beijing Platform for Action

Last year marked the 25th anniversary of the fourth United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing, regarded as a turning point for the global agenda on gender equality. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) adopted at the conference is considered the international 'Bill of Rights' for women, defining women's rights as human rights and setting goals across a range of issues affecting women and girls. Under the BPfA, the EU and its Member States committed to achieving concrete targets in twelve critical areas. The 25-year review was disrupted by the coronavirus pandemic, which is now also having substantive impacts on gender equality per se. The European Commission and Council are expected to report on Europe's progress on the BPfA and future challenges, during the European Parliament's plenary session in February 2021.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action

Twenty-five years ago, at the 1995 fourth United Nations (UN) [World Conference on Women](#) in Beijing, 189 governments across the world, including the EU Member States and the EU itself, committed to working towards gender equality and empowering all women and girls. The [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#) (BPfA) adopted at the conference is considered to be the most comprehensive global policy framework for the rights of women. It explicitly recognises women's rights as human rights, and sets out an ambitious and comprehensive roadmap for achieving equality between women and men. This includes concrete goals and targets in [12 inter-related critical areas](#) in which a need for urgent action was identified, namely: poverty; unequal access to education and training; inequalities in health care; violence against women and girls; effects of armed conflict; economic empowerment; power and decision-making; mechanisms to promote women's advancement; women's human rights; the media; the environment; and persistent discrimination and violation of the rights of the girl child.

Measuring progress and defining future priorities at global level

Since 1995, the UN [Commission on the Status of Women](#) (CSW) has taken stock of progress on the BPfA every five years. The UN Secretary-General's [global assessment report](#) for the [64th session](#) of the CSW in March 2020 found that progress has been uneven, while action, funding and accountability have not matched the commitments made in 1995, and have not addressed the root causes of gender inequality and violations of women's rights in a systematic way. Stakeholders, unable to attend the CSW due to the coronavirus pandemic, held an [online hearing](#) in September 2020, which also flagged the slow and uneven progress and the threat of the pandemic halting or reversing the gains of decades of collective efforts towards gender equality. Looking forward, states reaffirmed their commitment to the BPfA in the [political declaration](#) adopted at the CSW and at the [High-level Meeting](#) of the UN General Assembly held on 1 October 2020 to mark the 25th anniversary. On the ground, [Action Coalitions](#) comprising a broad spectrum of stakeholders including governments, civil society and the private sector, will be [launched](#) in the first half of 2021, with the aim of achieving measurable results within the next five years in six key areas: gender-based violence; economic justice and rights; bodily autonomy and sexual and reproductive health and rights; feminist action for climate justice; technology and innovation for gender equality; and feminist movements and leadership.

Measuring progress in the European Union

Equality between women and men is one of the [core values and objectives](#) of the European Union, which [committed](#) in 1995 to review progress on the BPfA on an annual basis. By 2013, following work by successive presidencies, the Council had agreed its own [quantitative and qualitative indicators](#). The [European Institute for Gender Equality](#) (EIGE) collects [data](#) for the 108 agreed indicators. For the 25-year review of the BPfA, EIGE drew up a comprehensive [report](#) focusing on developments and recommendations for future action

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at EU and Member State levels. Its [key message](#) was that, although efforts to advance the situation of women and girls have had an impact, substantial gender inequalities persist across all twelve areas of concern. Many of the long-standing issues identified in 1995, such as women's higher levels of [poverty](#), lower levels of [employment and pay](#), under-representation in [decision-making](#), and exposure to [gender-based violence](#), remain relevant today, whilst new challenges stemming from digitalisation, [climate change](#), migration and a backlash against gender equality require assessment and action.

The BPfA in the light of the gender impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic

As a result of the pandemic, a number of the EIGE's findings have taken on particular resonance. Its review flagged that, although the EU made progress on closing the gender gap in employment between 2013 and 2017, [care](#) responsibilities were keeping an estimated 7.7 million women out of the labour market compared to 450 000 men. The gender divide in care was one of the reasons why women were more likely than men to be employed in [precarious](#) forms of work, characterised by lower pay and lower social entitlements. In turn, social disadvantage and poor work-life balance were correlated with poor [health](#), including mental health. Access to sexual and reproductive health services varied considerably between EU countries. Provision of support for victims of gender-based violence, including beds in women's shelters, was inadequate or under-funded. Gender-blind policies, including austerity cuts to care and support services following the 2008 economic crisis, less use of [gender-mainstreaming tools](#) and backlashes towards gender equality in some EU Member States, had contributed to many of these outcomes, as had women's under-representation in decision-making. Data and analysis from the [EIGE](#) and [Eurofound](#) show that the gender divide in care has now widened during lockdowns, as women have taken on the bulk of household work, childcare and home schooling. This has already made women more vulnerable to job and income loss. If this pattern persists, it could erode progress on women's employment and pay. The pandemic has also stretched the already patchy access to support for victims of gender-based violence, complicated access to sexual and reproductive health services, and highlighted the gender imbalance in decision-making, including in the health sector, where women make up the majority of front-line workers. It remains to be seen how far a gender dimension will be included in recovery plans.

EU action

The EU was [represented](#) at the UN General Assembly in October 2020, by the European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, who [reaffirmed](#) the EU's commitment to the BPfA. The Commission had already confirmed that the EU's contribution to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is the new [EU Strategy for Gender Equality 2020-2025](#).

European Parliament position

In its [resolution](#) of 13 February 2020 on the EU priorities for the 64th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, the European Parliament urged the EU and national governments to demonstrate a high level of political commitment to gender equality, defend the vision and commitments set out in the BPfA, and deliver an ambitious new agenda for the coming years. The European Parliament was to focus on the BPfA at its [Inter-parliamentary Committee Meeting](#) marking International Women's Day in 2020, but the event was cancelled due to the health emergency. At its January 2021 plenary session, the Parliament held a [debate](#) addressing a number of gender equality issues relevant to the BPfA and adopted three resolutions: on the new [EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025](#), closing the [digital gender gap](#) and addressing the [gender impacts of the pandemic](#) in the immediate and longer term. Further information on Parliament's recommendations for action on the gender dimensions of poverty, employment, decision-making, the environment and gender mainstreaming are set out in the February 2020 EPRS briefing, [Beijing Platform for Action: 25-year review and future priorities](#). The Council and Commission are due to report on the BPfA during Parliament's February plenary session.

