

The gender dimension in cohesion policy

The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened existing inequalities between women and men. Data reveal significant gaps among EU regions in terms of access to the labour market, pay and working conditions, and leadership in decision-making. The European Parliament sees cohesion policy as key to achieving gender equality, but calls to go beyond the policy domains of the European Social Fund.

Regions show large differences between women and men

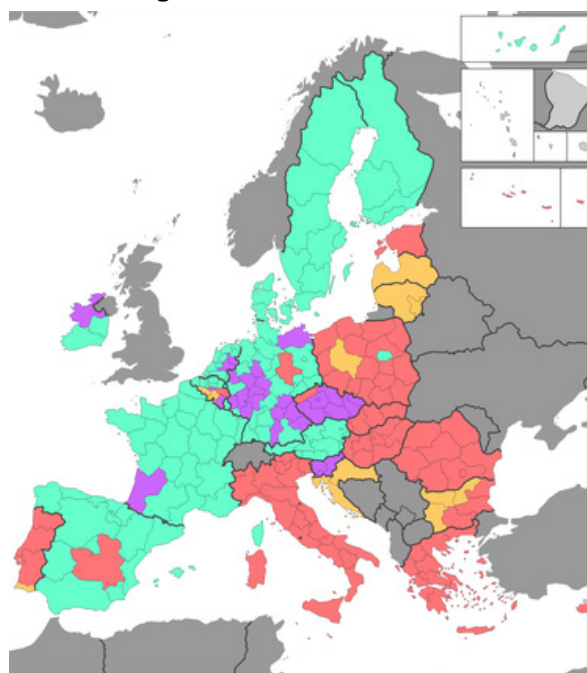
As the EU's [8th Cohesion Report](#) underlines, significant differences between women and men persist in various aspects of life, including access to the labour market, pay and working conditions, and leadership in decision-making. For instance, regarding employment, in 2020 the employment rate of men aged 20–64 was around 11 percentage points higher than for women: 78 % against 67 %. The gap was even wider (more than 20 percentage points) in Malta, Corsica, several regions of Greece and Romania, and southern Italy.

To [monitor](#) EU regional gender equality, in October 2021 the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC), in collaboration with the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO), released two complementary [indices](#): the female achievement index (FemAI) and the female disadvantage index (FemDI). The data reveal in which EU regions women are achieving more, and in which they are at a disadvantage compared with men. Both indices, which are based on 33 indicators grouped into seven domains, are calculated for all EU regions at the [NUTS 2](#) level, except for the French outermost regions. The main findings include:

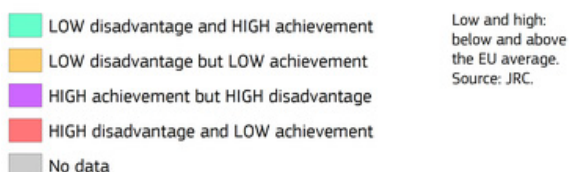
- Women in more developed regions are able to achieve more and are at less of a disadvantage, while most women in less developed regions face big challenges;
- Women in capital regions tend to achieve more and are at less of a disadvantage;
- Regions with a lower female achievement index have lower GDP (gross domestic product) per capita, while regions with a higher level of female achievement have a higher level of human development;
- The quality of governance is higher in regions where women achieve more.

Women achieve most in Nordic Member States and most Austrian regions, and achieve least in regions in the southern and eastern EU. They face the least disadvantage in the majority of regions in the Nordic Member States and in France and Spain, and are disadvantaged most in regions of Greece and Romania. Regions where women achieve least and are disadvantaged most are largely located in the southern and eastern EU.

Map of EU NUTS 2 regions: Female disadvantage versus female achievement



Female disadvantage versus female achievement



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Source: [European Commission](#), 2021.



The gender dimension in 2021-2027 cohesion policy

Several EU funding and budgetary instruments under the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework ([MFF](#)) include a gender dimension – in particular the European Social Fund Plus ([ESF+](#)), the European Regional Development Fund ([ERDF](#)) and Cohesion Fund, Creative Europe, and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund ([EMFAF](#)). Funding is meant to support women's labour market participation and work-life balance; strengthen care facilities and female entrepreneurship; combat gender segregation in certain professions; and address gender imbalance in parts of education and training. To monitor investments in gender equality more effectively, a [tracking system](#) for gender equality-related expenditure was included in the ESF+ and the ERDF/Cohesion Fund.

European Parliament position

The European Parliament's [resolution](#) on 'the gender dimension in cohesion policy', adopted in June 2021, stresses the importance of cohesion policy in promoting equality between people and between regions, including gender equality, and in implementing the 2020-2025 EU gender equality [strategy](#). MEPs strongly believe that gender equality is still mainly addressed in a general manner, limited to the ESF's policy domains, and to the analysis and programming phase, and that more attention is needed in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation phases. Parliament calls for the connection with the national recovery and resilience [plans](#) to be taken into account when designing the economic and social development objectives of these programmes. Moreover, it underlines the potential of the ERDF/Cohesion Fund to bridge the gap women still face, particularly in female entrepreneurship and the [digital sector](#).

In its September 2022 [resolution](#) on the [8th Cohesion Report](#), Parliament recalls the importance of gender mainstreaming in cohesion policy. It highlights the specific role of women, in particular those living in remote rural areas, who play a major part in civil society and sustainable economic growth, but face difficulties in accessing the labour market, equal pay and public services.

Back during the height of the pandemic, in its [resolution](#) on 'the gender perspective in the COVID-19 crisis and post-crisis period', adopted in January 2021, Parliament welcomed the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative ([CRII](#)) and [CRII Plus](#) package, which mobilised cohesion policy to support the most exposed sectors, and called for targeted measures to address sectors predominantly employing women.

European Committee of the Regions and European Court of Auditors

In its December 2021 [opinion](#) on the gender dimension of 2021-2027 structural and cohesion funds, the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) urged the Commission to propose a methodology for assessing the EU programme's gender impact, making available gender-specific data and indicators. The CoR pointed out that gender equality, being a powerful driver for social and economic development, benefits not only women but society as a whole. The CoR regretted that the 2020-2025 EU gender equality strategy does not include specific measures for mainstreaming gender equality into all EU policy areas. Moreover, it called for the contribution to gender equality not to be considered as having to come from the ESF+ alone, but as coming from all the funds. The European Court of Auditors' May 2021 [report](#) on gender mainstreaming in the EU budget noted that, although the new gender equality strategy stepped up the Commission's commitment to gender mainstreaming, fundamental prerequisites and specific actions were still missing.

Stakeholder views

As a 2018 [report](#) from the European Institute for Gender Equality ([EIGE](#)) argued, references on gender mainstreaming in the 2014-2020 European structural and investment funds ([ESIF](#)) programmes were often included in the chapter on horizontal themes, but had little impact on the content of specific programmes. This translated into a lack of gender-sensitive targets and gender indicators, only compulsory for the ESF. EIGE proposed [practical tools](#) for integrating a gender perspective into the EU funds, using detailed descriptions, checklists and examples from different Member States. The [GENDERACTION](#) consortium regrets that, compared with the previous period, in 2021 to 2027, gender equality has been merged with other grounds of discrimination as part of the [horizontal principles](#), thereby losing the prominence it had as a single article. Moreover, it has not been transferred to any of the five [policy objectives](#). The consortium remarks that inclusiveness of labour markets and equal access to education and training (policy objective 4) appear to be the only ERDF-specific objectives where gender equality measures could be relevant.