The Parliament's fight for gender equality in the EU

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Find out how the EU and the European Parliament fight to protect women's rights and to improve gender equality at work, in politics and other areas.

What does the EU do to tackle gender inequalities?

From the beginning the European Union has promoted gender equality and a more social Europe.

The EU has adopted legislation, recommendations, exchanges and good practices and provides funding to support action by member states. The concepts of EU gender equality policy

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were shaped by European Court of Justice rulings. The European Parliament regularly adopts own initiative reports on gender issues, calling for more efforts to improve gender equality.

The European Parliament has always been very active on achieving equality between men and women and has a standing committee dedicated to women's rights and gender equality. Every year, Parliament marks International Women's Day on 8 March and raises awareness by organising events.

In January 2022, MEPs renewed their demand for the establishment of a new Council format where ministers and secretaries of state in charge of gender equality would meet. MEPs hope that such a new Council configuration would help advance important gender equality initiatives, such as the ratification of the Istanbul convention on combating violence against women.

Parliament adopted a resolution to assess the progress made in women's rights over the past 25 years and the many challenges still ahead in February 2021. MEPs expressed concern with the backlash in some EU countries and the risk that gender equality could further slip down their agenda. Parliament also called on the European Commission to ensure that women's rights are taken into account in all its proposals, to develop concrete plans to improve women's poverty rates and to strengthen efforts to close the gender pay gap.

Check out our timeline of the EU's fight for women's rights

Gender equality week at the Parliament

Marking the importance it puts on gender equality, the European Parliament instituted an annual European Gender Equality Week in 2020. It provides an opportunity for Parliament's committees to consider the issues they deal with from the perspective of gender.
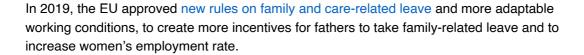
Women's sexual and reproductive rights

In June 2021 Parliament adopted a report urging EU countries to protect and improve women's sexual and reproductive health. MEPs want universal access to safe and legal abortion, high-quality contraception and sex education in primary and secondary schools. They also called for a VAT exemption on menstrual products.

In March 2022, Parliament adopted the EU Gender Action Plan III aimed at promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights outside the EU and ensuring universal access in EU countries.

Gender equality at work

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Maternity, paternity and parental leave

In 2019, the EU approved new rules on family and care-related leave and more adaptable working conditions, to create more incentives for fathers to take family-related leave and to increase women's employment rate.

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EU legislation on gender equality in the work place:

- rules on employment (incl. equal pay, social security, working conditions and harassment)

- rules on self-employment

- rights to maternity, paternity and parental leave

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Gender pay gap

Parliament also called for concrete measures to narrow the gender pay gap - the difference in earnings between men and women - which in the EU was an average of 13% in 2020 and the pension gap - the difference in pension income that men and women get - which stood at 29% in 2019. It also called for measures to tackle female poverty, as women are more likely to live in poverty than men.

In December 2022, negotiators from the Parliament and EU countries agreed that EU companies will be required to disclose information that makes it easier to compare salaries for those working for the same employer, helping to expose gender pay gaps.

In March 2023 Parliament adopted those new rules on binding pay-transparency measures. If pay reporting shows a gender pay gap of at least 5%, employers will have to conduct a joint pay assessment in cooperation with workers' representatives. EU countries will have to impose penalties, such as fines for employers that infringe the rules. Vacancy notices and job titles will have to be gender neutral.

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The Council still has to formally approve the agreement for the rules to come into effect.

Read more on *EU measures to close the gender pay gap*

More women in ICT and sciences

Women are underrepresented in Europe's digital sector, as they are less likely to take up studies or apply for a job in this field. In a resolution adopted in 2018, MEPs called on EU countries to put in place measures to ensure the full integration of women into ICT sectors, as well as foster education and training in ICT, science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

Women on company boards

In November 2022, Parliament approved landmark rules to boost gender equality on corporate boards. The Women on Boards directive aims to introduce transparent recruitment procedures in companies, so that at least 40% of non-executive director posts or 33% of all director posts are occupied by the under-represented sex by the end of June 2026.

Parliament and Council negotiators reached a provisional agreement about gender parity on boards of publicly listed companies in the EU in June 2022. EU countries need to implement the new rules within two years. Small and medium-sized enterprises with fewer than 250 employees are excluded from the rules.

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" "Each member state shall ensure that the principle of equal pay for male and female workers for equal work or work of equal value is applied." "

Article 157, Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)

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Preventing violence against women

The EU is tackling violence against women in various ways.

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Parliament has drawn attention to the need to combat specific forms of violence, including sexual harassment, trafficking, forced prostitution, female genital mutilation, cyberstalking and online violence.

In February 2021, MEPs urged the Commission to come up with a proposal for an EU directive that will prevent and combat all forms of gender-based violence. The Commission presented a proposal to the Parliament in March 2022. Parliament approved its position in July 2023 and is now ready for negotiations with the Council.

Read more on how the EU is fighting gender-based violence

From migration policy to EU trade

Parliament has repeatedly called on the European Commission to increase consistency between gender equality policies and other policies, such as those covering trade, development, agriculture, employment and migration.

In a resolution adopted in 2016, members called for a set of EU-wide gender guidelines as part of wider reforms on migration and asylum policy.

In a report adopted in 2018, MEPs called for climate change measures to take into account the role of women as well as action to empower them and protect the most vulnerable.

All EU trade agreements must include binding and enforceable provisions to ensure respect for human rights, including gender equality, according to a resolution adopted in 2018.

Women in politics

The Parliament has repeatedly highlighted the importance of gender equality in politics, promoting women's equal participation in decision-making processes at all levels.

In a report adopted in January 2019, Parliament called on European political parties to ensure both women and men were put forward for the bodies governing the European Parliament in the ninth parliamentary term. In the Parliament, whose mandate began in July 2019, there are more women than ever, accounting for 39,3% of MEPs, up from 36.5% at the end of the previous term.

Check out our infographics on women in the European Parliament

Gender equality and the Covid-19 pandemic

The Parliament is worried that the Covid-19 crisis has intensified existing gender inequalities.

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The pandemic could push an additional 47 million women and girls below the poverty line worldwide.

In addition, women are at the Covid-19 frontline - out of the 49 million healthcare workers in the EU, 76% are women**.** The pandemic has also affected sectors of the economy where traditionally more women have been employed, such as hospitality, nursery and domestic work.

***Read** facts and figures about Covid-19's impact on women*

The increase in unpaid care work and teleworking during the pandemic has hit women's work-life balance and mental health. Numbers show that women were affected more than men.

***Check out our** infographics on teleworking, unpaid care and mental health for men and women during Covid-19*

Find out more about what the EU does on social policies:

- How the EU improves workers' rights and working conditions
- Reducing unemployment: EU policies explained
- Youth employment: the EU measures to make it work
- Improving public health: EU measures explained

Find out more

European Institute for Gender Equality
2023 report on gender equality in the EU

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