



Equal opportunities and challenges for Europe

Achieving full equality between women and men is an important EU policy in its own right and cuts across numerous other policies. However, major progress in recent years is at risk due to the current recession. In 2010, the European Union stands at a crucial crossroads and is charting a course towards a new decade of greater gender equality.

► Mind the gap

What do a classroom assistant in the UK, two midwives in Sweden, a chef in the UK and a part-time teacher in Germany all have in common? They are among the many European women who are paid less than men doing equivalent work but who took legal action – and won – to rectify the situation.

For example, the female chef claimed that she carried out equivalent work to two better-paid male chefs, although they worked slightly different hours. The industrial tribunal assessing the case agreed and ruled that she should be paid the same.

Facts and figures

Not so long ago, men and women were widely regarded as not being equals. Today, both sexes are generally regarded as equal and enjoy access to all walks of life. In fact, gender equality is enshrined in European national law and is one of the fundamental rights protected by the EU, such as through Article 23 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights¹. But gender equality is not merely a question of principle. It also makes sound economic sense: for instance, simply increasing participation of women in the economy has accounted for a quarter of the economic growth registered by the Union since 1995.

In recent years, many of the remaining gender gaps have either been bridged or have narrowed significantly. In the labour market, the female employment rate has grown significantly and, today, nearly three-fifths of European women are in work. While in university education, women have actually overtaken men, currently representing nearly 60% of all new graduates in the EU.

Nevertheless, there is strong evidence that the current recession, sparked by the global financial and economic crises, may place some recent gains in jeopardy. This is partly because jobs done by women – who are about three times more likely to be on part-time contracts – are more vulnerable, and it is tempting for governments to view gender equality measures as a luxury in hard times and place them first on the block for cuts.

However, despite this very significant progress, certain persistent inequalities still remain, one of the foremost being the gender pay gap. European women earn an estimated 17.6% less than men for every hour worked, which is mainly because there are fewer women in the upper echelons of organisations while the sectors where women are concentrated, such as education and healthcare, often pay less than those sectors dominated by men. In some Member States, the average is even higher, exceeding 25% in Estonia and Austria and 20% in Slovakia, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Cyprus, Germany, the United Kingdom and Greece². While these percentages remain high, the situation has improved significantly from a high of 40% back in the 1960s³.





Policy milestones

- 1996: Commission Communication on gender mainstreaming
- 2001-2005: EU framework strategy on gender equality
- 2001-2006: Fifth Community Action Programme on Equal Opportunities
- 2006-2010: Road map for equality between women and men
- 2006: Directive on the principle of equal opportunities and treatment for women and men in work-related matters

Current and future challenges:

- New post-2010 gender equality strategy
- Integrating a gender dimension into the EU's 2020 Strategy

Politics is another area in which women have made relatively few inroads. Although high by global standards, women remain under-represented in European politics. Europe has three female heads of state, and recent elections in Germany, Portugal, and Greece have not altered existing gender imbalances in their respective parliaments. The lower house of the German parliament is composed of 33% women. In Portugal, the figure drops to 30% and in Greece it is only 17%. However, this gender imbalance in politics is not indicative of all EU Member States – for example, both Slovenia and Bulgaria have slightly more women in politics than men⁴. The European network of women in power seeks to address this discrepancy⁵.

EU policy

The European Union pursues the objective of promoting equality between women and men on three specific tracks:

- Mainstreaming gender into all EU policies
- Implementing specific measures to combat gender inequality
- Promoting gender equality globally

To monitor progress, the European Commission reports on the status of gender equality in Europe each year to EU leaders at the spring European Council⁶, which usually takes place in March.

Gender mainstreaming

Since gender issues touch on almost every conceivable policy sphere, the EU has 'mainstreamed' gender into all its policy areas. This means that policies ranging from trade and enterprise to education and social inclusion all make specific allowances for gender issues.

At the EU level, 'gender mainstreaming' was first recognised in a 1996 Commission Communication⁷. The

mainstreaming of gender into all EU policy domains was further elaborated in a 2000 Communication in which the Commission laid down a framework strategy for gender equality for the period 2001 to 2005⁸.

More broadly, the gender dimension was recognised in the EU's overarching strategy for the first decade of the new millennium, the Lisbon Strategy⁹, which set a target of 60% for the female employment rate in the EU (in 2008, the rate stood at 59.1%).

At the end of 2008, in the wake of the financial and economic crisis, the EU and its Member States launched an ambitious recovery package¹⁰ to set Europe back on track towards sustainable growth.

However, the gender dimension has not been adequately addressed in various national recovery plans, which is an issue of some concern in light of recent analyses which confirm that gender equality policies and measures are at risk of cuts. For this reason, the Commission-appointed Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Men and Women¹¹ has recommended, in a non-binding opinion¹², the integration of the gender perspective into the EU's recovery package.

In addition, the European Commission, in co-operation with Member States, is forging a new policy framework to succeed the Lisbon Strategy. Known as EU 2020¹³, it aims not only to spearhead full economic recovery, but to create a European economy that is smarter and greener, preserving and building upon the European social model.

The Commission has proposed that the gender dimension should be fully integrated into the EU 2020 Strategy. More specifically, it recommends that the synergy between gender and employment needs to be strengthened, more should be done to empower both women and men to strike a balance between their private and family lives, such as through adequate care services for children and parental-leave provisions, as well as the further promotion of social inclusion and gender equality.

Specific measures

The EU implements a wide range of policies, legislation, measures and programmes directly related to promoting gender equality.

Examples of specific programmes include the 2001-2006 Fifth Community Action Programme on Equal Opportunities which was established to help coordinate, fund and implement projects to assist the Community framework programme¹⁴. This was followed by the 2006-2010 'Road map for equality between women and men', which identified six priority areas¹⁵:

- Equal economic independence for women and men
- Reconciliation of private and professional life
- Equal representation in decision-making
- Eradication of all forms of gender-based violence



- Elimination of gender stereotypes
- Promotion of gender equality in external and development policies.

In terms of legislation, one major milestone was the 2006 Directive on the principle of equal opportunities and treatment for women and men in work-related matters¹⁶. The objective of the Directive was to simplify and clarify legislation by placing all relevant legal texts in a single legislation.

At the cusp of a new decade, 2010 looks set to be a pivotal year for gender issues in Europe – which is particularly appropriate considering that it is also the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion¹⁷. This year, the Commission will adopt a new gender equality strategy to succeed the current ‘Road map for equality between women and men’ (2006-2010)¹⁸.

In addition, Commission President José Manuel Barroso released the Women’s Charter which presents a series of commitments to promote equality in the labour market, equal pay for equal work, equality in decision-making, an end to gender-based violence, and gender equality beyond the EU¹⁹. “I would like to say that the Charter will be this Commission’s calling card on gender equality for the next five years,” he said²⁰.

Gender equality around the world

The European Union’s concern for gender equality does not end at Europe’s borders, and the Union strives to deliver on its commitment to the principle that women and men are equal around the world. This is reflected in the EU’s external relations and development policies.

EU Member States are signatories of and committed to the principles enshrined in the UN’s Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women²¹. In order to promote the equal treatment of women and men in developing countries, the European Commission has outlined an EU Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment in Development for the period 2010-2015. The plan aims to encourage greater civil society involvement, organise political meetings, and set up a gender database for analysis. Launched

on 8 March, it is intended to help commemorate the 15th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration – which seeks to remove the obstacles women face so that they may participate freely in all aspects of public and private life – and to mark International Women’s Day.

The trafficking of women for sexual and other forms of exploitation is another challenge of global proportions which the EU is tackling. Among other things, the Council passed a Framework Decision in 2002 on combating human trafficking²³. In this context, the Daphne programme – currently into its third phase covering 2007-2013²⁴ – aims to prevent and combat all forms of violence, especially of a physical, sexual or psychological nature, against women, as well as children and young people.

➤ Did you know that ...

- Women made up **59% of all university graduates** in the EU in 2006, yet, on average, they earn **17.6% less** than men.
- The rising female employment rate has accounted for a **quarter of the EU’s annual economic growth** since 1995.
- The **female employment rate** rose by more than 7.1% to reach 59.1% in 2008.
- Women represent more than **two-thirds of the 63 million people aged between 25-64 who are inactive in the EU**, and the at-risk-of-poverty rate is higher for women (17%) than for men (15%).
- In 2008, **31.1% of women worked part-time**, compared with only 7.9% of men.
- At the 2009 European Parliament elections, **35% of elected MEPs were women**.
- In the business world, women make up only a **tenth of board members** in European blue chip companies.
- **62% of Europeans** believe that gender inequality is widespread.

➤ Europe’s female business ambassadors

Despite recent advances, not enough European women are going into business for themselves. This is reflected in the statistics: women currently make up a third of the EU’s entrepreneurial community, and only about 8% of the female workforce is self-employed, compared with 16% of men.

The recently launched European Network of Female Entrepreneurship Ambassadors²² aims to be instrumental in changing this by providing budding young business women with entrepreneurial role models.

One such ambassador is Svana Helen Björnsdóttir, who set up her own successful information technology company in Iceland 17 years ago. “When I was young I didn’t know any other women who studied electrical engineering,” she told the European Commission’s *Enterprise and Industry online magazine*. “With a role model, it would have been easier to start my company and convince customers that I was reliable. It’s also a question of acceptance by society.”



More flexible and equal workplaces

Women who have families and are job-seekers face the added difficulty of balancing professional and private life. In Carmausin, in the south-west of France, a European Social Fund supported social partnership encouraged companies to introduce more flexible work practices. "When a person is trying to find work and look after a family at the same time, it can be stressful," admits project coordinator Christian Bruhat. The project benefited 300 people.

Further information

- Equality between men and women²⁵
- Eurobarometer Gender Equality in EU 2009 report²⁶
- European Institute for Gender Equality²⁷
- European Social Fund helps improve the situation of women in the labour market²⁸
- Gender pay gap campaign²⁹
- Information on the gender pay gap campaign in your country³⁰
- PROGRESS, an EU-funded programme that supports 25 EU networks and NGOs active in promoting gender equality and other social initiatives³¹
- Statistical annex to the annual report on equality between women and men 2010³²
- Statistical perspective on women and men in the EU-27³³
- Mind the gap: more cases are available³⁴

Communicator's tool kit

- Report on equality between men and women 2010 (24/02/2010)³⁵
- Gender equality law in the EU (23/01/2008)³⁶
- Women in European politics – time for action (10/03/2009)³⁷
- Gender segregation in the labour market: root causes, implications and policy responses in the EU (15/10/2009)³⁸
- EU rules on gender equality: how are they transposed into national law (29/09/2009); in EN, FR, DE³⁹
- Gender pay gap campaign material⁴⁰
- Gender equality videos⁴¹
- Gender equality news⁴²

¹ http://www.europarl.europa.eu/comparl/libe/elsj/charter/art23/default_en.htm

² <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:52009SC1706:EN:NOT>

³ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=370&langId=en&featuresId=105&furtherFeatures=yes>

⁴ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=762&newsId=661&furtherNews=yes>

⁵ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=418&newsId=133&furtherNews=yes>

⁶ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:52009DC0694:EN:NOT>

⁷ http://eur-lex.europa.eu/smartapi/cgi/sga_doc?smartapi!celexplus!prod!DocNumber&lg=en&type_doc=COMfinal&an_doc=1996&nu_doc=67

⁸ http://eur-lex.europa.eu/smartapi/cgi/sga_doc?smartapi!celexplus!prod!DocNumber&lg=en&type_doc=COMfinal&an_doc=2000&nu_doc=335

⁹ http://ec.europa.eu/growthandjobs/index_en.htm

¹⁰ http://ec.europa.eu/financial-crisis/index_en.htm

¹¹ http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/employment_and_social_policy/equality_between_men_and_women/c10919_en.htm

¹² <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=2878&langId=en>

¹³ <http://ec.europa.eu/eu2020/>

¹⁴ http://eur-lex.europa.eu/smartapi/cgi/sga_doc?smartapi!celexplus!prod!DocNumber&lg=en&type_doc=COMfinal&an_doc=2000&nu_doc=335

¹⁵ http://eur-lex.europa.eu/smartapi/cgi/sga_doc?smartapi!celexplus!prod!DocNumber&lg=en&type_doc=COMfinal&an_doc=2006&nu_doc=92

¹⁶ http://eur-lex.europa.eu/smartapi/cgi/sga_doc?smartapi!celexplus!prod!DocNumber&lg=en&type_doc=Directive&an_doc=2006&nu_doc=54

¹⁷ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=637>

¹⁸ http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/employment_and_social_policy/equality_between_men_and_women/c10404_en.htm

¹⁹ <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/10/237&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

²⁰ <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=SPEECH/10/71&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

²¹ <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>

²² http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/policies/sme/promoting-entrepreneurship/women/ambassadors/index_en.htm

²³ http://eur-lex.europa.eu/smartapi/cgi/sga_doc?smartapi!celexplus!prod!CELEXnumdoc&lg=EN&numdoc=32002F0629&model=guichett

²⁴ http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/employment_and_social_policy/equality_between_men_and_women/133600_en.htm

²⁵ http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/employment_and_social_policy/equality_between_men_and_women/index_en.htm

²⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_326_en.pdf

²⁷ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=732&langId=en>

²⁸ http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/esf/fields/woman_en.htm

²⁹ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=681&langId=en>

³⁰ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=844&langId=en>

³¹ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=327&langId=en>

³² <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=SEC:2009:1706:FIN:EN:PDF>

³³ http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_PUBLIC/1-05032010-AP/EN/1-05032010-AP-EN.PDF

³⁴ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=687&langId=en&intPagelD=785>

³⁵ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=418&langId=en&pubId=447&type=2&furtherPubs=yes>

³⁶ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=81&type=2&furtherPubs=yes>

³⁷ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=77&furtherPubs=yes>

³⁸ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=364&furtherPubs=yes>

³⁹ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=353&furtherPubs=yes>

⁴⁰ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=689&langId=en>

⁴¹ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=418&langId=en&furtherVideos=yes>

⁴² <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=418&langId=en&furtherNews=yes>