

The EU and Gender Equality

Advancing Women's Full Potential



The EU is committed to equality for all its citizens, regardless of ethnicity, creed, or gender. More than 50 years ago, the Treaty of Rome, which established the European Community, included a provision on equal pay for equal work—a progressive principle that has become the basis for the EU's law and policy on gender equality.

Today, the meaning of gender equality in the EU has evolved well beyond the pay gap to encompass work-life balance, the eradication of violence against women and girls, the suppression of human trafficking, and support to help women crack career glass ceilings in government, politics, IT, and business. The EU promotes equality between men and women in all its activities through “gender mainstreaming.”

However, inequalities still exist. The EU's *Roadmap for Equality* (2006–2010) identifies key priorities for gender policy, including equal economic independence for women and

men; reconciliation of private and professional life; equal representation in decision-making; eradication of gender-based violence and trafficking; elimination of gender stereotypes; and promotion of gender equality in external and development cooperation policies.

Eliminating gender discrimination is a key element in the EU's “Lisbon Strategy” for generating economic growth and creating jobs. The €75 billion (2007-2013) European Social Fund promotes employment and helps Member States equip Europe's workforce and companies with the skills to face new, global challenges. Concurrently, the €743 million PROGRESS Program supports Member State efforts to create more and better jobs, guarantee equal opportunities, and implement EU laws uniformly.

Women in High Places—Cracking the Glass Ceiling

Although the percentage of women holding senior economic and political positions in the EU has increased over the last decade, women continue to be underrepresented. Only one-third of managers are women. Only 10 percent of board members in leading companies in the EU are female, and the proportion drops even further—to three percent—for CEOs. There is not one woman heading a central bank in any of the 27 EU Member States.

The average proportion of women in national parliaments throughout the EU has increased from 16 percent in 1997 to 24 percent in 2008, with national figures ranging from nine percent in Malta to 46 percent in Sweden. Male ministers outnumber women by three to one in national governments, and modern female heads of state and government in the EU have been few and far between, although prominent leaders such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher have led the way.

European Commission Vice-President Margot Wallström, the European Commission's most senior woman, insists that the “male cartel” persists. “It is not about a shortage of capable women, but rather a question of men choosing men,” she says.

Improved gender balance in decision-making is accomplished primarily at the national level, but the EU supports these efforts by collecting, analyzing, disseminating, and publicizing information on persistent gender gaps. The EU has also launched a network of women in decision-making to accelerate women's access to power, and is establishing an Institute for Gender Equality, based in Vilnius, Lithuania.

At EU level, 2009 is critical for women and electoral politics. In June, EU citizens will elect 785 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), an institution whose membership is just one-third female, although more than half of the EU electorate are women. The current European Commission, the EU's executive arm, is the most balanced to date in terms of gender (17 men and 10 women). Members of a new Commission will be appointed later in 2009, offering another opportunity to better reflect the population's actual gender makeup.

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“More equality between women and men benefits individuals, the economy, and society. We have made real progress under our Roadmap since 2006, but the current economic slowdown creates new challenges for the EU. Gender equality policies are part of the answer. Now more than ever, we need to make the best use of all our human resources, both women and men.”

—European Commission President
José Manuel Barroso

Gender Equality and Work

EU legislation expands the scope of gender equality to cover not only equal pay, but equal treatment of men and women in employment, vocational training, promotions, pensions, and working conditions.

Pay Gap. The gender pay gap—the average difference between women's and men's hourly earnings within the economy as a whole—amounts to women earning an average of 17.4 percent less than men for equal work. In the United States, women earn approximately 22 percent less than men on average.

The gender pay gap has a significant impact on women's lifetime earnings, and lower salaries translate into lower pensions. Twenty-one percent of women 65 and older are at risk of poverty, versus 16 percent of men.

To tackle the continuing pay disparity, in March 2009 the EU launched a campaign to raise awareness of the gender pay gap among citizens, employers, and workers, and to promote best practices from around Europe.

Labor Segregation. The gender pay gap can be traced to a number of interrelated causes: the undervaluing of women's work, segregation in the labor market, traditions and stereotypes, and the struggle to balance work and private life. Women have entered the workforce in large numbers in recent years, but substantial labor segregation and inequality continue to exist between the sexes:

- Twice as many women (40 percent) as men work in sectors—health, education, and public administration—that typically command lower wages.
- Women represent 59 percent of all new university graduates.
- Fewer than one in five computer scientists in the EU are women.

Making High-Tech Jobs Cool for Girls. With EU encouragement, five major information and communication technology (ICT) companies recently signed a Code of Best Practices for Women and ICT to attract young women to the high-tech sector, and to retain and promote those already employed in ICT by:

- Establishing computer labs and clubs for girls to help them develop self-confidence.
- Developing mentoring programs during maternity leave to help keep skills up-to-date.
- Offering practical help in balancing work and family life, including flexible hours and telecommuting.
- Creating women's ICT forums and networks for job searches, advice, and guidance.
- Setting and monitoring targets for the recruitment and promotion of female ICT professionals at all levels.

Women-Owned Businesses. Entrepreneurs constitute only eight percent of the female workforce, versus 16 percent for men. The EU values women's entrepreneurial talents and through the European Social Fund provides female entrepreneurs with specialized training and support. The EU's Women's

Entrepreneurship Portal encourages Europe-wide networking among female entrepreneurs.

Work-Life Balance. The employment rate for women falls by an average of 12 percent when they have children, and the gap between employment rates of men and women with children is as high as 26 points. Women are more likely to work part-time (31.2 percent versus 7.7 percent of men); men are more prone to work long hours. However, the division of family responsibilities between women and men remains unequal; research shows that when women's unpaid domestic work is taken into account, a woman who is employed part-time spends more hours working than a man who is employed full time.

Adequate childcare facilities, entitlement to paid time off, and flexible working arrangements are core components of the EU's strategy to support work-life balance. In October 2008, the EU proposed a package of legislative measures to address these needs:

- Minimum maternity leave will increase from 14 to 18 weeks, with a recommendation for 100 percent salary reimbursement; protection against dismissal is strengthened, as is the right to return to the same or equivalent work.
- Affordable, quality childcare is crucial for work-life balance. Since 2002, at the EU's urging, Member States have been striving to provide childcare by 2010 for at least 90 percent of children between three and the mandatory school age and for at least 33 percent of children under three.



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Protecting Vulnerable Women—At Home and Abroad

Women are the main victims of gender-based violence, and women and girls are more vulnerable to human trafficking. The EU combats trafficking at its roots, cooperating with international police, judicial, and intelligence authorities to track down and stop criminal gangs that prey on women.

The European Union is committed to discussing gender equality issues with its partner countries and to mainstreaming gender issues in all its external actions. Annually, almost 35 percent of EU devel-

opment aid supports projects that include a specific gender dimension.

The EU's Daphne III program finances non-governmental organizations' and local authorities' work in protecting the victims of violence, and has funded more than 500 projects since its establishment in 1997. In 2007, the EU spent €14 million on projects including women's refuges and health facilities, as well as efforts to change attitudes and protect women within migrant or minority ethnic groups.

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