



CEMR Analysis | The European Commission's Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025

Opportunities and concerns for Local and Regional Governments

In a momentous and symbolic year for gender equality and women's empowerment, the European Commission has released the highest-level EU policy communication for gender equality in years with its 2020-2025 Gender Equality Strategy.

With a focus on specific actions, systematic mainstreaming of gender and, for the first time, an intersectional approach, the proposed strategy sets out ambitious goals and places equality squarely at the centre of the EU's political priorities for the next five years.

The proposed initiatives offer a number of networking and funding opportunities for local and regional governments. However, their recognition as key strategic partners is lacking and promising local initiatives for promoting gender equality, such as the European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life, are not yet referenced.

Context

With the renewal of the EU institutions following the European elections in 2019, the issue of gender equality made it back on to the political agenda with strong support from the first-ever female Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, and the creation of a dedicated Commissioner for Equality, Helena Dalli. In her [political guidelines](#) for the European Union, Von der Leyen indicated that "equality for all and equality in all its senses" was one of the major priorities of her Commission.

Commissioner Dalli was adamant during her hearing with the European Parliament that she had been tasked with pursuing a Europe free from discrimination and that a new **EU Gender Equality Strategy** would be proposed during the first 100 days of the Von der Leyen Commission.

Commissioner Jutta Urpilainen, responsible for International Partnerships, has also been outspoken on the importance of promoting gender equality in the EU's external action. In her hearing before the European Parliament's Committee on Development (DEVE), she said that it is her "*conviction that educating and empowering women and girls is the precondition for creating truly inclusive societies... let me assure you today of my deep commitment to prioritising gender equality and mainstreaming it in all our policies and programmes.*"

An action plan on gender equality and women's empowerment in external relations (GAP III) will be launched by the end of 2020, integrating all relevant elements of the EU strategy into the EU's External Action. Together, they will form the EU's contribution to the realisation of SDG 5, achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all girls and women.

On 5 March 2020, the European Commission published "[A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025](#)", as one of a series of EU initiatives and strategies concerning equality, diversity and inclusion that the Commission will adopt and enact as part of delivering on its headline ambitions "A stronger Europe in the world" and "A new push for European democracy".¹

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/cwp_2020_new_policy_objectives_factsheet_en.pdf



The European Commission’s proposed 2020-2025 Gender Equality Strategy aims at “achieving a gender equal Europe where gender-based violence, sex discrimination and structural inequality between women and men are a thing of the past. A Europe where women and men, girls and boys, in all their diversity, are equal.” It is structured around six themes:

1. Being free from violence and stereotypes
2. Thriving in a gender-equal economy
3. Leading equally throughout society
4. Gender mainstreaming and an intersectional perspective in EU policies
5. Funding actions to make progress in gender equality in the EU
6. Addressing gender equality and women’s empowerment across the world

A dual approach will be taken in implementing the Strategy that combines gender mainstreaming with specific targeted actions to achieve gender equality. It is also the first time that an EU Strategy aims to integrate an intersectional perspective² in its implementation.

² According to the 5 March Communication, the Commission understands this as “the combination of gender with other personal characteristics or identities, and how these intersections contribute to unique experiences of discrimination”. The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) defines ‘intersectionality’ as an “analytical tool for studying, understanding and responding to the ways in which sex and gender intersect with other personal characteristics/identities, and how these intersections contribute to unique experiences of discrimination” (see: <https://eige.europa.eu/thesaurus/terms/1263>)

General positive points

1. The strategy has been adopted by the Commission as a communication, a formal document outlining the EU executive's position and policy initiatives, which represents an upgrade in status in comparison to the EU Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality for the 2016-2020 period. It places gender equality firmly on the EU's political agenda, both in its internal affairs and in its external action.
2. A Task Force for Equality has been established to oversee integration of the gender perspective at an operational and technical level in all major Commission initiatives, such as the European Green Deal, the digital transition and addressing demographic change. Led by the Commissioner for Equality and DG Justice, it is composed of representatives of all Commission services and the European External Action Service.
3. There is a strong focus on tackling gender-based violence, including online. Online harassment is considered to be a barrier to women's full participation in public life and the Commission will seek to address it in the proposal for a [Digital Services Act](#). There is also strong emphasis on improving the collection of disaggregated data that is "comprehensive, updated and comparable" on gender-based violence which also takes into account the urban-rural divide.

Opportunities for Local and Regional Governments and their Associations

1. Challenging gender stereotypes is a recurring priority throughout the strategy. As far as it is linked with combatting gender-based violence and domestic violence, the Commission wishes to emphasise the involvement of boys and men. Local and Regional Governments (LRGs) will be among those able to benefit from an **EU network on the prevention of gender-based violence and domestic violence**, providing opportunities to exchange good practices, access training and build up capacity.

CEMR and its members could capitalise on the work and achievements of the first seminar on men and masculinities organised in 2019 by participating in this network. Additionally, an EU-wide communication campaign will be launched on combatting gender stereotypes in all spheres of life, with a focus on youth engagement.

2. The issue of care (for children, the elderly, long-term, etc.) is addressed via several thematic chapters in the Strategy, particularly as it relates to gender gaps in labour market participation, pay and pensions. One focal point is the transposition into national law and implementation of the [Work-Life Balance Directive](#), which must ensure "quality solutions", such as providing childcare in less-populated areas in Europe.

The Commission also seeks to revise the [Barcelona Targets](#) on the development of childcare facilities to ensure further upward convergence of early childhood education and care among Member States. **Several funding instruments will be mobilised to ensure accessible, affordable and quality care**, including the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), InvestEU and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EARFD). Finally, a Green Paper on Ageing will be published with a focus on long-term care, pensions and active ageing.

3. Regarding women's labour market participation and the issues of vertical and horizontal occupational segregation, targeted measures for women in innovation are to be developed under the Horizon Europe research programme's [European Innovation Council](#), including a pilot programme to "promote women-led start-ups in 2020".

The updated Skills Agenda for Europe will also provide opportunities to address occupational segregation, stereotyping and gender gaps in education and training. Furthermore, there will be **funding opportunities under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)** to increase women's entrepreneurship and participation in decision-making, as well as for investment in

developing basic services in rural areas. The [Structural Reform Support Programme](#) (SRSP) has been flagged as a possible way to support Member States in mainstreaming gender in public administration, closing the gender gap in employment and tackling women's poverty (especially in old age).

4. There is specific mention of female genital mutilation (FGM) as part of efforts to eliminate gender-based violence. The Commission will table a Recommendation on the prevention of harmful practices such as FGM which will address strengthening public services, prevention and support measures, and capacity-building for professionals.
5. The Commission will prepare **updated guidance on [Socially Responsible Public Procurement](#)** to fight discrimination and promote gender equality in public tenders.³
6. In terms of funding, the Strategy highlights that **funding will be available in the Citizenship, Equality, Rights and Values programme (2021-2027)** to support civil society and public services in "*preventing and combatting gender-based violence and gender stereotyping*".

Additionally, the [Common Provision Regulation \(CPR\), laying down the rules for using many EU funds, will](#) include "*enabling conditions*" that require Member States to have a national gender equality strategic framework as a precondition to "*make use of the funds when investing in improving gender balance in the labour market, work-life balance or childcare infrastructure*" as well as a horizontal "*enabling condition*" on effective implementation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, which "*includes gender equality as one of its key principles and applies to all the investments under this regulation.*" Finally, funding will be made available through [Horizon Europe](#) for "gender and intersectional research".

Points of concern

1. There are some areas and initiatives that need to be carefully considered. CEMR and its expert groups, specifically the Standing Committee for Equality and expert group and the LRGs as employers group, must find a balanced approach and consensus on these issues.
 - a. There is currently an open consultation on the upcoming 2020 legislative proposal on binding measures on pay transparency. The Commission is clear in its commitment to consulting social partners. There may be diverging opinions on this. While binding measures on pay transparency would almost certainly add administrative burden to employers these would provide more information to help identify and remedy gender pay gaps and present evidence for women who are being underpaid.
 - b. The two groups may also need to coordinate a response to the Commission's intention to push for Member State ratification of the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) [Violence and Harassment Convention \(No. 190\)](#) and [Recommendation \(No. 206\)](#), as the Convention "applies to all sectors, whether private or public, both in the formal and informal economy, and whether in urban or rural areas".
2. While the issue of gender balance in decision-making is included in the Strategy in the chapter "*Leading equally throughout society*", the focus is mainly on the private sector and within the Commission itself. This is logical given the EU's competences, however, there is room to develop the issue of women's political representation further in the Strategy, especially concerning the local and regional level. For example, the figures on the current proportion of local elected women in Europe is missing whereas the other levels are mentioned (national, EU).

³ CEMR and EPSU issued a joint statement on defining principles, requirements and standards of Socially Responsible Public Procurement (SRPP) for local and regional government:
https://www.epsu.org/sites/default/files/article/files/SRPP_Joint_Statement_Final_Annex.pdf

There is also no mention of the issue in the EU's advisory bodies, the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committees—bodies which could both benefit from a push to have equal representation of women and men among their members, while respecting the principle of subsidiarity.

Finally, and regrettably, there is no mention of violence against elected women, an important matter in terms of combatting violence and harassment, but also a factor that impacts and influences women's ability to participate equally in politics and public life—which is at the heart of democracy and the functioning of democratic institutions.

3. The [EU Platform of Diversity Charters](#), created in 2010, is highlighted as a way for the Commission to facilitate the exchange of good practices of national or regional projects run by governments, civil society or the private sector. However, the Diversity Charters are strongly focused on the private sector and the involvement of LRGs needs to be strengthened. Why is the European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life not included in this Platform?

CEMR key messages

For the effective achievement of the goals outlined in the Strategy, it must:

1. Recognise local and regional governments as strategic partners in the design, implementation and monitoring of the Strategy. This includes looking to the local and regional levels for good practices and implementation of the Strategy, to be featured in yearly reports. Furthermore, LRGs should be invited to participate in the [Mutual Learning Programme in gender equality](#).
2. Include the European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life in the EU Platform for Diversity Charters. It serves similar purposes and is already well-established with nearly 1,800 signatories in 36 European countries.
3. Call upon all the European institutions and consultative bodies to adopt and implement policies, programmes, projects and financing conducive to making the equal participation of women and men in decision-making a reality. The Commission should also call upon Member States to organise and support initiatives to empower women ahead of local elections through practical training on how to overcome the discrimination and obstacles they encounter while pursuing their aspirations to become leaders.
4. Address violence against women public figures in the Strategy, especially women politicians.
5. Strengthen EIGE's capacity to improve and standardise the collection and analysis of data, disaggregated by age and sex, on the representation of women and men in decision-making in view of monitoring candidacies and elections at the local, regional, national and European levels.
6. Provide funding for conducting new in-depth qualitative and quantitative studies in the area of women in politics in all European countries in the next EU multiannual financial framework (2021–2027). Ideally, further studies could help identify topical trends and any promising developments that offer women and men the means to experience the positive effects of shared power.
7. Earmark resources to support the development and implementation of local gender equality initiatives in the Citizenship, Equality, Rights and Values programme (2021-2027), including the European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life.
8. Recognise the important work already being done by municipalities and civil society in the area of men, masculinities and gender equality by ensuring continued political and material support for their actions.
9. Consider involving the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee in the Task Force for Gender Equality.