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Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee

EESC contribution to the EU's priorities at the UNCSW69

(own-initiative opinion)

(C/2025/2007)

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1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. The EESC acknowledges the positive developments in gender equality in Europe in recent decades and urges the EU and the Member States to increase the pace of progress, be more ambitious, be vocal about the shrinking space for civil society and block any backlash against women's rights, which are under attack, in particular by extreme-right political parties.

1.2. The EESC suggests that the EU, Member States and political parties commit to attracting women to politics by combating stereotypes, offering training and creating safe spaces online and offline, and consider measures to encourage the election and appointment of women to key positions, such as quotas, zipped lists ⁽¹⁾, co-chairing, split terms of office and proposing male and female candidates.

1.3. The EESC urges all Member States to allocate sufficient resources to their national action plans to end violence against women and design them in consultation with civil society organisations. Preventing femicide and violence against women requires proper legislation, awareness-raising campaigns, training in schools and financial independence for women. Special training is required for all personnel in contact with survivors (police, healthcare services, social workers, lawyers and judges), and care facilities and shelters should be set up in all regions.

1.4. The EESC believes that an EU just transition framework should include a skills strategy to address pre-existing gender inequalities. It must map skills needs, develop appropriate training programmes, boost women's entrepreneurship in green sectors and close the gender gap in the workforce. Specific attention should be paid to women and girls in the Global South and in rural areas, who are disproportionately affected by the triple planetary crisis.

1.5. To bridge the digital gender gap, the EESC suggests investing in digital literacy training, affordable access to the internet, digital devices and women-led technology projects and promoting STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) education and careers for women and girls. Women's perspectives must be included in the design, development and deployment of artificial intelligence (AI) and algorithms, to make AI socially sensitive and inclusive.

⁽¹⁾ Electoral list on which male and female candidates appear alternately.

1.6. To close the gender gap in unpaid care responsibilities and help women stay in the labour market, the EESC reiterates its call for a European Care Guarantee, including childcare, to provide affordable, accessible and quality healthcare and care services for people in the EU. As a last resort, carers who leave the labour market should have access to safety nets such as longer paid family leave, basic income schemes and 'care credits' for pension plans, according to national rules.

1.7. The EESC calls for the original vision of the Beijing declaration for non-violent conflict resolution and local peacebuilding to be reinforced and for a strong and ambitious long-term EU strategy on inclusive foreign policy that puts gender equality, human rights, feminist diplomacy and social justice at its core.

1.8. The EESC stresses the need for more gender-disaggregated intersectional data to shape and follow up on strategies, for the use of gender budgeting tools and for a gender lens in fiscal policy.

1.9. The EESC wants to see more action to combat violence against women online (especially in view of the growing amount of sexual digital forgery in pornography), to care for women's physical and mental health, to implement measures to address economic violence and to ensure that women's sexual and reproductive health and rights are respected.

2. General comments

2.1. With its expertise, diversity and strong commitment to accelerating the changes required to achieve a peaceful and just world in which everyone is treated with dignity and respect, the EESC wishes to contribute to the UNCSW69's priorities from a European perspective, with action to be taken at EU and Member State level.

2.2. The UNCSW69 will focus on the review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) of 1995 ⁽²⁾ and the outcomes of the 23rd special session of the General Assembly ⁽³⁾.

2.3. UN Women has identified six priority areas of action; in no particular order ⁽⁴⁾:

- Accelerate gender parity in national and local government
- Adopt and fund national action plans to end violence against women
- Centre women and girls in a global just transition to green economies
- Bridge the digital gender gap
- Transform the care economy to support women's economic empowerment
- Drive accountability for the women, peace and security agenda

3. State of play in the EU

3.1. In recent decades, thanks to the active work of organised civil society and the EU's commitment to equality between women and men, progress has been made on gender mainstreaming at societal and legislative level, especially compared to other regions in the world. We have improved in the domains of work, income, education, political representation and positions of power, although progress has been slow, according to the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) ⁽⁵⁾.

⁽²⁾ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2015/01/beijing-declaration>.

⁽³⁾ <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/followup/beijing+5.htm>.

⁽⁴⁾ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2024/09/brochure-equal-is-greater-time-to-act-for-gender-equality-and-womens-empowerment-and-rights>.

⁽⁵⁾ <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2024>.

3.2. Furthermore ⁽⁶⁾, although efforts to advance the situation of women and girls have had a positive impact, substantial gender inequalities persist, and Member States' progress is uneven. Although women hold more tertiary degrees than men in some countries ⁽⁷⁾, many of the long-standing issues remain relevant today, such as women's higher levels of poverty, lower levels of employment and pay, lack of access to resources and capital, under-representation in decision-making, insufficient STEM education, all of which prevents equal opportunities in the labour market, and exposure to gender-based violence. Moreover, there are new challenges to tackle stemming from digitalisation, climate change, migration, and the backlash against gender equality and women's rights.

4. UN Women priority areas for action in the EU

4.1. *Gender parity in governance*

4.1.1. Women constitute approximately 51 % of the EU's population. Following the 2024 EU elections they account for 39 % of the members of the European Parliament ⁽⁸⁾, and several top leadership positions in the EU institutions are held by women. The percentage of women is lower in national and local EU Member State governments ⁽⁹⁾. A balanced percentage of women in decision-making bodies is a fair approach in terms of representation and the best way of ensuring that all policies consider women's and girls' perspectives.

4.1.2. The EESC urges the Member States, political parties and the EU to commit to achieving parity in governing bodies as soon as possible by adopting the measures they consider most appropriate. The prerequisites for attracting more women to politics are to combat stereotypes, showcase existing role models, train and mentor women on policymaking and political representation, provide a work-life balance and create fully democratic spaces (online and offline) where women and men can talk and make decisions with zero tolerance for disrespect or misbehaviour. Measures could include setting quotas for electoral lists, making zipped lists, introducing co-chairing for key positions, splitting terms of office and proposing a male and a female candidate during selection processes for key positions.

4.2. *National action plans to end violence against women*

4.2.1. Physical and psychological online and offline violence against women and girls is a violation of human rights and drives women away from certain workplaces, public spaces and politics, restricting them, preventing them from reaching their full potential and ultimately putting our democracies at risk. Women's economic empowerment ⁽¹⁰⁾ is crucial to reduce economic violence, such as economic control, exploitation and sabotage ⁽¹¹⁾.

4.2.2. The EESC applauds the regulatory innovation of a directive on combating violence against women from an intersectional perspective ⁽¹²⁾. The proper transposition and implementation of the directive will provide Member States with the legislative tools to protect women.

4.2.3. The EESC urges all EU Member States to ratify and implement the ILO's Violence and Harassment Convention 190 ⁽¹³⁾ and the Istanbul Convention ⁽¹⁴⁾ and calls for their ratification to be promoted among countries acceding to the EU in the future.

⁽⁶⁾ <https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/beijing-25-fifth-review-implementation-beijing-platform-action-eu-member-states>.

⁽⁷⁾ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20230530-3>.

⁽⁸⁾ <https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/mep-gender-balance/2024-2029>.

⁽⁹⁾ <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2023/domain/power>.

⁽¹⁰⁾ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/economic-empowerment/facts-and-figures#87144>.

⁽¹¹⁾ https://eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/EIGE_Factsheet_EconomicViolence.pdf.

⁽¹²⁾ OJ C 443, 22.11.2022, p. 93.

⁽¹³⁾ https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C190.

⁽¹⁴⁾ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention>.

4.2.4. Social partners can play a key role in addressing violence and harassment at work. In the light of adopted Directive (EU) 2024/1385 ⁽¹⁵⁾ and ILO Convention 190, EU social partners could discuss the possibility of updating the European autonomous framework agreement of 2007 on harassment and violence at work, to be implemented in all Member States.

4.2.5. National and regional plans must be adequately funded, have clear objectives, indicators and monitoring mechanisms, and be developed with the involvement of civil society, ensuring that a comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach is taken.

4.2.6. To combat femicide, violence against women and harmful gender stereotypes in daily life as well as in the media and social media, there should be awareness-raising campaigns and training for parents, carers and teachers, while sexual education should be promoted at school. Training on trauma and how to deal with survivors should be mandatory for the police, healthcare staff, social workers, lawyers and judges.

4.2.7. It is necessary to provide funding for quality local services for survivors in all regions and shelters with enough spaces, have diverse, specialised teams and pay particular attention to children. It is of utmost importance to create safe spaces to encourage survivors to report abuse, and to develop an antipoverty strategy that will help them access the labour market and gain financial independence.

4.2.8. Measures are needed to protect and separate children from their abusers, grant asylum to abused migrant women so they can avoid deportation, acknowledge all types of violence, including that perpetrated by an intimate partner, and develop a consent-based definition of rape.

4.3. **Just transition**

4.3.1. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss, as these exacerbate and perpetuate pre-existing inequalities, especially in rural areas and in the Global South ⁽¹⁶⁾. At the same time, most of the industries that are affected by the green transition, such as transport, energy, urban management, housing and agriculture, are male dominated.

4.3.2. An EU policy package on just transition should include a skills strategy to address pre-existing gender inequalities and ensure that policies for the just transition actively improve gender equality. It is necessary to map skills needs, develop appropriate training programmes and establish meaningful and enforceable access to fully compensated training hours ⁽¹⁷⁾.

4.3.3. Boosting women's entrepreneurship in general, and in green sectors in particular, as well as closing the gender gap in the workforce will make the EU more competitive. Access to land and financing would accelerate the transition for women in rural areas. Women must have the same opportunities, assets, skills and expertise as men to design, contribute to and fully benefit from the green transition.

4.4. **Digital gender gap**

4.4.1. The digital divide in household access to the internet in the Member States has narrowed but remains more acute in rural areas. However, only 19 % of information and communication technology specialists and one in three STEM graduates are women ⁽¹⁸⁾.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Directive (EU) 2024/1385 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on combating violence against women and domestic violence (OJ L, 2024/1385, 24.5.2024, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2024/1385/oj>).

⁽¹⁶⁾ <https://www.fao.org/socioeconomic-research-analysis/resources/unjust-climate/the-unjust-climate/en>.

⁽¹⁷⁾ Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee – Towards a just transition legislative proposal and EU policy tools that enable a more social European Green Deal (own-initiative opinion) (OJ C, C/2025/772, 11.2.2025, ELI: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/C/2025/772/oj>).

⁽¹⁸⁾ Digital Economy and Society Index 2022: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/desi>.

4.4.2. The causes of the digital gender gap are multiple and measures to address them must target different fields: the education system from childhood to adulthood, the labour market, work-life balance, public services, and the digital divide in general. The EESC recommends adopting a multidisciplinary approach that brings together different aspects of innovation (technological, social, cultural, etc.) ⁽¹⁹⁾. Funding, including through the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), and collaboration with companies are needed to implement programmes for internet access and digital literacy, create common connectivity spots, provide digital devices and invest in women-led technology projects.

4.4.3. As digitalisation is transforming current jobs and creating new ones, it is vital to promote STEM education and careers among women and girls to increase the number of women in these areas, as this will improve their position, the economy and our society.

4.4.4. The EESC encourages the Commission to strengthen the 'Women in Digital' task force, the Women4Cyber Council and the 'Digital4Her' initiative. It is important to further develop and support European networks of women in the digital field.

4.4.5. Special focus needs to be put on the design, development and deployment of AI and algorithms, as this risk replicating and amplify existing gender biases and stereotypes in the data that they use, for instance in recruitment, media communication, advertising, entertainment, etc. Women account for 30 % of workers in the AI sector ⁽²⁰⁾. This lack of diversity leads to these tools reflecting existing bias, and they may overlook or misunderstand the perspective of women and other marginalised groups. It will be a missed opportunity not to develop a socially sensitive and inclusive AI that would change our world.

4.5. **Gender care gap**

4.5.1. Although there are still more working men than women and the percentages vary among Member State, women are increasingly entering the labour market. Our current time distribution that divides the day into hours of sleep, work and leisure ignores the time we must spend on care-related responsibilities. Along with gender stereotypes, this puts an excess burden on women who either work part-time to be able to care for their family or spend less time on sleep or leisure. The excess of unpaid care responsibilities negatively affects women, as it either undermines their professional careers and economic situation, contributing to the pay and pension gaps, or leads to physical and mental exhaustion and time poverty.

4.5.2. Taking care of people sustains our economies, as it ensures the wellbeing of working adults and the development of future generations. Therefore, the care economy, which also comprises unpaid work, should be viewed as a collective responsibility, to better address individual and societal needs as well as systemic inequalities. Considering that more women are employed in the care sector, with lower wages, it is important to value their work, by improving wages and working conditions, and attract more men.

4.5.3. The EESC renews its proposal for a European Care Guarantee, to support affordable, accessible and quality healthcare and care services for people in the EU. This would contribute to addressing care deficits and to promoting decent working conditions for carers, including informal carers. Ageing populations and the further need for specialised care services will affect the labour market and social protection systems. The EESC calls for a European Strategy for Older Persons and a gender-balanced High-Level Expert Group on Long-Term Care to co-create the care services of tomorrow ⁽²¹⁾.

4.5.4. Young parents have a pressing need for affordable, accessible and high-quality childcare to enable them to stay in the labour market. When they get back to work, they need to be able to keep pursuing their careers.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Digital gender gap' (Exploratory opinion requested by the European Parliament) (OJ C 440, 6.12.2018, p. 37).

⁽²⁰⁾ <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2023/>.

⁽²¹⁾ Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the European care strategy' (COM(2022) 440 final) (OJ C 140, 21.4.2023, p. 39).

4.5.5. As a last resort, women and men who leave the labour market to care for family members should be supported by safety nets, such as longer paid family leave, basic income schemes and ‘care credits’ for pension plans according to national rules.

4.6. ***Women, peace and security agenda***

4.6.1. The EESC welcomes the work of the European External Action Service and the Commission on gender mainstreaming. We need to align our core values in all our action, internal and external, across policies such as foreign policy, security, defence, trade, development, and climate action and reinforce the original vision of the Beijing declaration for non-violent conflict resolution and local peacebuilding.

4.6.2. Women’s social movements have been very vocal in combating war, conflict and injustice, ensuring equal and fair representation in decision-making bodies and raising awareness of the abuse of women in conflict zones. As such, women’s perspectives in conflict resolution will benefit de-escalation and peace processes. Peace negotiations led by women have proven more likely to result in long-lasting peace ⁽²²⁾.

4.6.3. The EESC recommends rapidly implementing a strong and ambitious long-term EU strategy on inclusive foreign policy that would put gender equality, feminist diplomacy and social justice at its core. This could treat gender equality as a human rights issue, considering its intersectionality with other forms of discrimination. It could also help shift the focus from militarised security to the security of people and nature, investing more in protection, conflict prevention, and the empowerment of civilians.

4.6.4. The EESC calls on the EU to strongly support the fight against gender apartheid in conflict zones such as Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Sudan and Yemen.

4.7. ***Focus on the future***

4.7.1. To advance further towards an effective gender equality we must address the intersection with other forms of discrimination (e.g. sexual orientation, race, origin, disability, socioeconomic background, age). More gender-disaggregated intersectional data are needed to shape and follow up on strategies and hold governments and institutions to account.

4.7.2. Our health systems and pharmaceutical and medical treatments should pay more attention to the biological specificities of males and females. Further research and data are necessary to improve women’s physical and mental health. Sexual and reproductive health and rights still need to be reinforced across all Member States so that all women who need attention preventively or as a treatment can access it.

4.7.3. The EESC takes note of the European Citizens’ Initiative ‘My Voice, My Choice’ ⁽²³⁾, which proposes alternatives in case Member States do not ensure safe and legal access to abortion.

4.7.4. We must explore further how to use national and EU budgets to improve gender equality. The EESC recommends that the EU and Member States use gender budgeting tools at all levels of the budgetary process and a gender lens in fiscal policy. The participation of civil society and social dialogue are also crucial to identify the areas to be addressed ⁽²⁴⁾.

4.7.5. The EESC commends the EU for the structural engagement of youth delegates in the preparation of the CSW and invites all Member States to do the same and ensure an active role for youth.

4.7.6. It is important that the EU show political will, ambition, be vocal about the shrinking space for civil society and block the roll-back of women’s rights, including their sexual and reproductive rights, which are under attack, in particular by extreme-right political parties.

⁽²²⁾ <https://wps.unwomen.org/participation>.

⁽²³⁾ <https://eci.ec.europa.eu/044/public/#/screen/home>.

⁽²⁴⁾ Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on ‘Gender lens investing as a way to improve gender equality in the European Union’ (Own initiative opinion) (OJ C 100, 16.3.2023, p. 16).

4.7.7. Since the adoption of the UN's 2030 Agenda, the EESC has been calling for an overarching EU Sustainable Development Strategy and a long-term commitment even beyond 2030 ⁽²⁵⁾. The Sustainable Development Goals need to be tackled as a whole, not on a one-by-one basis, to allow gender mainstreaming across all policies.

4.7.8. Online violence against women is a new phenomenon, to tackle through preventive and awareness-raising measures and a strong legal framework to deal with perpetrators and hold online platforms to account. Special attention must be paid to sexual digital forgeries where women's images are used in pornography.

4.7.9. Gender equality cannot be achieved without the active work of civil society organisations, especially women's rights organisations, including those providing legal services. Youth organisations play a key role in promoting engagement through community mobilisation and volunteer work and facilitate intergenerational dialogue. To this end, they need to be properly engaged in the discussions and legislative processes and supported financially so that they can continue their work.

Brussels, 26 February 2025.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Oliver RÖPKE

⁽²⁵⁾ OJ C 440, 6.12.2018, p. 14.