

**Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions – A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy  
2020-2025**

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#### **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

##### THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. emphasises that the right to equal treatment and opportunities between genders, as enshrined in Article 8 TFEU and in the European Pillar of Social Rights, must be ensured and promoted in all areas;
2. welcomes the Communication *A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025* and the views, political objectives and measures it sets out, believing it to be a very valuable basis for making tangible progress on equality in the European Union;
3. applauds the timing of its publication, since it coincides with the 25th anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action — the first global action plan for advancing equality between women and men, the recommendations of which are still valid today — and contributes to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, as gender equality is a key part of all aspects of inclusive and sustainable development;
4. stresses the importance of joint governance, in which the European Union and the Member States are key players, but also emphasises the importance of including and drawing attention to local and regional authorities and the third sector as the main players managing policies that directly affect the public. In turn, the strategy underlines the value of the joint work of the European Union's public and private players with regard to this governance framework;
5. requests that local and regional governments be recognised as strategic partners in the design, implementation and monitoring of the strategy because of their responsibilities and the work they do in carrying out those responsibilities. The necessary resources must be secured in order to implement the strategy;
6. stresses the importance of working with civil society organisations, women's organisations, and younger generations, as they play a key role in managing equality policies;
7. therefore, and with a view to taking a gender-sensitive approach to policies, programmes and projects, asks the Commission to set up an interinstitutional working group to ensure this multilevel governance so as to effectively take into account the work required to achieve genuine gender equality;
8. calls for formal meetings of ministers for equality at the EU Council, and for the title of the EPSCO Council to include the word 'equality', as reflected in the seventh proposal of the Trio Presidency Declaration on Gender Equality, signed by Germany, Portugal and Slovenia;

9. emphasises the importance of implementing an intersectional perspective, which is necessary for involving in the implementation of the strategy vulnerable individuals who may face multiple forms of discrimination on the basis of disability, age, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, religion, belief or gender identity, with special reference to vulnerable groups such as, inter alia, migrant women or LGBTI people. Therefore, the CoR asks the European Commission to develop this intersectional approach to a greater extent and draw up guidelines to facilitate the implementation of this approach in the planning, management and evaluation of public policies;

10. stresses the need to combine intersectional measures with positive measures in sectoral areas because this is the only way to take a more comprehensive and effective gender-sensitive approach to managing public policies. To that end, the CoR emphasises the key importance of having staff who have qualifications and/or are experts in gender issues and of promoting specific and lifelong training on gender in all areas in which decisions are made or public policies are managed;

11. agrees that inclusive and diverse strategies are important in both the public and private sectors in order to better address the complex challenges and life situations encountered by women in all their diversity. Moreover, there must be more female leadership and involvement in all decision-making processes;

12. points out that the strategy was drawn up and published before the COVID-19 public health crisis emerged, the recovery from which will shape the future of the EU's policies. The CoR therefore calls for equality to remain a priority and for a gender perspective to be integrated into decision-making, into the measures taken in response to the pandemic, and into the initiatives that will be undertaken as part of the economic and social recovery. The Committee points out the reassessment — triggered by the crisis — of the social and health sector as a strategic and systemically relevant sector for our societies, as well as the need to highlight the significant gender and age imbalances that exist in this sector. The CoR also notes that the COVID-19 crisis has only served to deepen the existing inequalities between genders even more and asks for an equal and inclusive recovery;

### **Being free from violence and stereotypes**

13. welcomes the European Commission's recognition that ending gender-based violence is one of the main challenges facing our societies and urges all EU Member States to ratify the Istanbul Convention as a key commitment to combating, preventing and prosecuting violence against women;

14. along with the Commission, urges the Member States to ratify International Labour Organisation Convention 190 on eliminating violence and harassment in the world of work;

15. urges the European Commission to include all forms of violence against women and girls in the 'Eurocrimes' set out in Article 83 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, and address the issue of gender-based violence in more detail in the Victims' Rights Strategy that it will present in 2020, taking into account women in vulnerable situations. To that end, the CoR proposes approving protocols for police and judicial cooperation within the EU;

16. asks the Commission to adopt legislative measures aimed at preventing and combating violence against women, young people and girls that are consistent with and complement EU and international legislation and address all forms of violence, including online violence, which could become normalised among younger people, and honour-related violence;

17. supports the European Commission with regard to the need to issue a recommendation on the prevention of harmful practices, such as female genital mutilation and forced marriage, that highlights the need for effective pre-emptive and educational measures for all ages and sectors in society, and addresses the strengthening of public services, capacity-building of professionals and victim-centred access to justice;

18. requests that local and regional authorities be involved in a structured way in the European Union network on the prevention of gender-based violence and domestic violence that will be launched as part of the strategy so as to exchange best practices, and provide funding for training, capacity-building and support services. Violence prevention work focusing on men, boys and masculinities will be of key importance;

19. points out that the lockdowns resulting from the COVID-19 crisis have increased the number of known cases of gender-based violence. In this regard, the CoR stresses the urgent need to improve relevant measures for effectively assisting with and responding to cases of gender-based violence, giving local and regional authorities resources as they are in the front line in the fight against the pandemic;

20. welcomes the recognition of gender stereotypes as one of the root causes of gender inequality. The CoR also emphasises the need to include more information on measures and best practices aimed at eliminating these stereotypes in areas such as formal and informal education, the world of work, and communication and publicity. Likewise, it stresses the need to examine in more detail the different impacts that the various reasons for discrimination have within these gender stereotypes. In particular, it highlights the role of the education system and consequently of gender training for teachers as key agents for change in overhauling the values that underpin patriarchy and moving towards a society with real gender equality;

21. highlights the key role that all individuals of all ages, especially young people, play as agents of responsible and active change in terms of respect for gender equality in their professional, family and private lives. In this regard, local and regional authorities have a vital role to play in raising awareness, and promoting training and education;

22. requests that local and regional authorities be involved in designing and implementing the EU-level awareness-raising and communication campaign needed to combat gender stereotypes, and stresses the need to pay particular attention to youth, as this is one of the groups that is key to change;

23. points out that, in the field of health and sexual and reproductive rights, not only do gender-sensitive studies need to be conducted, but it is important to exchange best practices, ensure universal access to family-planning, and sexual and reproductive-health services, and develop information and educational measures on the matter without value judgements and with a positive and inclusive approach;

### **Thriving in a gender-equal economy**

24. stresses the need to combat the vertical and horizontal segregation between women and men, given that the most precarious and lowest paid jobs are very female-dominated, which particularly affects the clear pay and pension gap. In addition, steps must be taken to ensure that the working lives of gender minorities also develop in a positive way;

25. looks forward to the forthcoming Commission proposal on wage transparency, which should help to detect and subsequently eliminate the gender pay gap and, ultimately, the pension gap. Although wage-setting is a national competence, the principle of equal pay for equal work must be fully applied by means of measures addressing pay secrecy clauses, annual pay audits and workers' right to ask their employers for gender-specific information on pay;

26. supports the Commission's request to the Member States to transpose the Work-Life Balance Directive as soon as possible to enable men and women to equally thrive both personally and professionally and for the Directive to ensure an equal balance of shared responsibility;

27. agrees with the need expressed in the strategy to promote an equal sharing of caring responsibilities, both paid and unpaid, to ensure women's economic independence. The CoR urges the European Union to revise and develop the Barcelona targets, making them compulsory, and to introduce care objectives that go beyond these (Barcelona+) to take account of care needs in ageing societies and recognise that the care sector is largely dominated by women but is not paid in accordance with its social value;

28. asks the European Commission to consider a care agreement for Europe, similar to the Youth Guarantee, to satisfy care needs as part of a rights-based approach that puts care at the heart of economic activity, increasing investment in health and care, in line with the wellbeing economy strategy. The CoR also asks the Commission and urges the Member States to include the demands made by domestic workers regarding working conditions in ILO Convention No 189;

29. considers it important that the strategy makes a special reference to the regional aspect and, in particular, to rural and depopulated areas because of their specific features. The CoR also emphasises the key role that women play in rural areas, being crucial to their territorial, economic and social structure. It deems it essential to increase women's involvement and leadership in local action groups and rural development networks. It also points out that care and support services for children and dependent relatives should be expanded, especially in rural areas;

30. welcomes the fact that the strategy emphasises the need to close gender gaps in relation to the digital transition and innovation, promoting greater female participation in science, technology, engineering, arts and maths (STEAM) and ICT study programmes and jobs, and calls for new forms of sexism online and at work to be addressed, such as those appearing in some biased artificial intelligence systems. To this effect, it highlights the importance of gender-sensitive coding and calls for the equal participation of all genders in the design, implementation, evaluation and debate on ethics and norms of AI-related technologies. The CoR agrees with the importance of increasing the number of women in the digital and innovative sectors, as these are key to change in our societies. In this regard, the Committee stresses the need to ensure equality in training and lifelong learning on how to use new technologies and social media appropriately and safely;

31. requests that, within the scope of the Work-Life Balance Directive, a gender-focused analysis be carried out on the difficulties experienced by many families across the EU in balancing teleworking with the burden of care during the COVID-19 crisis. Vigilance needs to be maintained with regard to potential regulations governing teleworking and working remotely to ensure that these do not become a way of returning women to family and private settings. The CoR points out the particular need to pay attention to family situations that entail greater difficulties in terms of balancing, such as single-parent families, which mainly comprise women;

32. draws attention to the fact that, throughout the European Union, it has been women who have worked on the front line during the COVID-19 pandemic (health, care, childcare, domestic and retail workers, etc.), in turn making them more vulnerable to infection. Moreover, some of these professions are among the least valued and lowest paid in the EU. The CoR therefore requests that the imbalance in the representation of women and men in these jobs that have proven to be key during the pandemic, especially in relation to care, be taken into account in the measures to combat unemployment and precariousness. It should also not be forgotten that many professions involving care and domestic work are carried out by migrant women, who are affected by a double bias; the gender dimension needs to be included in recovery plans and support given to women business-owners and their business projects, as well as to women managers, highlighting the additional efforts involved in teleworking;

33. calls on the European Commission to analyse and address the short- and long-term impact that COVID-19 will have on equality between genders. Women and men have different experiences of the pandemic, and it is very important to have sex-disaggregated data in order to fully understand how women and men are affected by the virus — not only its impact on those directly affected by the disease or on the front line of the health crisis, but also its effects on the economy, education, the distribution of care work and the scale of domestic violence;

### **Equality in decision-making**

34. stresses that fewer women hold decision-making positions and points out that women only account for 15 % of mayors, 21 % of regional presidents, 35 % of members of regional parliaments and 23 %<sup>(1)</sup> of members of the Committee of the Regions. The CoR regrets that the strategy does not mention these data because they show the gap at regional and local level;

35. requests that the European Commission ask the Member States to organise and support initiatives to empower women with regard to local and regional elections, so as to overcome discrimination and the obstacles that women face in these processes, including stereotypes and social norms that lead to female leadership being valued less than male leadership. It is also vital to support women to stand as candidates in municipal and regional elections;

36. emphasises the need to specifically address the problem of violence against elected female politicians and women in public life, including online intimidation on social media, which impacts and influences women's ability to take part in politics and public life on an equal footing;

37. asks the EU institutions, including the Committee of the Regions, to adopt codes of conduct favouring the participation of women and men on equal terms with regard to composition and leadership positions, with the ultimate aim being gender parity between CoR members;

38. acknowledges the need to include the adoption and implementation of the Code of Conduct in its priorities in the coming years and insists on the necessity of conducting annual reviews of the application of the principle of gender parity by means of annual reports that analyse the measures taken (ensuring an equal share in various acts and reports). The results should be revealed at the plenary session closest to International Women's Day;

39. requests that local and regional authorities take part in the Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality to promote exchanges of best practices, and calls for specific gender training to be promoted at all levels and for the professional figure of equality officer to be introduced;

40. points out that the EU Platform on Diversity Charters is strongly focused on the private sector and could therefore be opened up to involve local and regional authorities in order to have representative examples and best practices from the EU's various levels and regions. The CoR proposes including the European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life in the Diversity Charters;

### **A gender perspective in politics and the budget**

41. agrees that the core challenges affecting the EU today have a gender dimension. However, the CoR does not believe that the gender perspective is clearly and sufficiently considered in either the EU's politics or its budget;

42. calls for a clearer link between the strategy and the EU's main political priorities and strategies, in particular, the transitions towards a climate-neutral economy, the digital transformation and the demographic challenge. The CoR points out that these strategic priorities of the EU's include significant gender biases, the elimination of which is crucial to our societies' success in terms of decarbonisation, digitalisation and the incorporation of the territorial dimension;

43. supports the implementation of methodologies for drawing up budgets with a gender perspective for the next multiannual financial framework (2021-2027). Financing arrangements at EU level should be revised so as to achieve the strategy's targets and objectives and incorporate a specific gender equality objective into all financial programmes, as well as a conditionality mechanism ensuring equality through the establishment of gender objectives and strategies for access to finance. In this regard, the CoR emphasises that the European Semester and the Rule of Law Report have the potential to monitor gender equality challenges through the country-specific recommendations and by integrating specific measures into the National Reform Programmes and national rebuilding and resilience programmes;

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<sup>(1)</sup> As of 5 June 2020.

44. stresses the need to strengthen the framework for monitoring the strategy's implementation by means of effective indicators for measuring and assessing the gender impact, and to establish timetables and accountability measures. The CoR underlines the importance of producing annual reports that include the progress made by the Member States in terms of equality, as well as best practices from local and regional authorities. The Committee also emphasises the need to incorporate indicators broken down by gender and gender indicators into all community public policies and to include internationality so as to address issues such as age, sexual identity, type of disability, migration status and the urban-rural dimension;

45. asks to be involved in the Task Force for Equality recently set up by the European Commission to ensure effective gender mainstreaming in all policies and programmes;

46. calls for the Committee of the Regions to have an official role supporting the increase in capacity of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) with a view to improving and standardising the collection and analysis of data broken down by gender and gender indicators, particularly regarding aspects such as the representation of women and men in decision-making at local and regional level;

47. calls for the Member States and their local and regional authorities to give greater prominence to the gender dimension in national and regional statistical systems, in order to provide reliable and regular data in agreement not only with the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) but also with Eurostat;

48. points out that the COVID-19 crisis has a clear gender dimension. It will therefore be vital to incorporate a gender perspective into the Recovery Fund by conducting impact assessments and applying gender responsive budgeting principles to all funds;

#### **Addressing gender equality and women's empowerment across the world**

49. points out that gender inequality needs to end before poverty can be eradicated. Economic and gender inequality are linked and we cannot leave anyone behind. Gender equality is not only one of the Sustainable Development Goals, it is also a running theme throughout the Sustainable Development Agenda;

50. stresses that the EU's external action should comply with its legal commitments to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women in its international partnerships and its trade, neighbourhood and enlargement policies, in particular in relation to accession negotiations, the association process, and asylum and migration policies. This is laid down in Article 208 TFEU, which enshrines the principle of coherence of development policy, which requires the SDGs and the EU Plan of Action on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Development to be taken into account;

51. calls the European Commission to assess how to utilise the EU's trade policy to advance women's rights and women's participation in the economy beyond its borders;

52. calls on the EU institutions to step up cooperation with non-EU countries in order to encourage them to adopt national laws banning female genital mutilation<sup>(?)</sup>;

53. highlights the potential of decentralised cooperation in promoting democratic and fair development worldwide, as well as the need to close the gender equality funding gap in terms of official development aid;

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<sup>(?)</sup> European Parliament resolution of 12 February 2020 on an EU strategy to put an end to female genital mutilation around the world (2019/2988(RSP)).

54. brings to light how COVID-19 has increased in a very direct way all the existing inequalities affecting girls, young people and women in developing countries, who have been immediately and directly affected through the loss of their jobs, which reduces their involvement in public and political spheres, sees them assuming the responsibility of caring for family members and leaves them trapped in situations of gender-based violence. The strategy seems to be a key tool for reversing these processes.

Brussels, 14 October 2020.

*The President*  
*of the European Committee of the Regions*  
Apostolos TZITZIKOSTAS

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