Stocktake of Strengths and Weaknesses of the Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025

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SAAGE
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Table of contents

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

LIST OF ACRONYMS

Acronym	Country
AT	Austria
BE	Belgium
BG	Bulgaria
HR	Croatia
CY	Cyprus
CZ	Czechia
DK	Denmark
EE	Estonia
EL	Greece
ES	Spain
EC	European Commission
EP	European Parliament
EU	European Union
FI	Finland
FR	France
DCC	Dutch Civil Code
DE	Germany
HU	Hungary
IE	Ireland
IT	Italy
LV	Latvia
LT	Lithuania
LU	Luxembourg
MS	Member States
MT	Malta
NL	The Netherlands
PL	Poland
PT	Portugal
RO	Romania
SK	Slovakia
SI	Slovenia
SE	Sweden

Executive summary

This report is a stocktake of the strengths and weaknesses of the Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 (the 'Strategy') based on the Strategy's implementation up to January 2025. Its primary aim is to extract lessons and provide recommendations for shaping future gender equality policies in the European Union. The Strategy sets out a framework to tackle key gender inequalities across five priority areas, and this report applies a comprehensive approach to assess five aspects: its *relevance*, *coherence*, *effectiveness*, *added value* and *the role of EU funding in its implementation*.

The methodology consists of a combination of desk research, fieldwork, stakeholder consultations and expert surveys conducted through the experts of the Scientific Analysis and Advice on Gender Equality (SAAGE) network. These sources provide both qualitative and quantitative insights, ensuring a robust evidence base for evaluation. While this report does not include an assessment of financial efficiency or sustainability, as the Strategy does not have a dedicated budget, it focuses on how policy objectives align with gender equality challenges and the extent to which they have been effectively pursued.

Relevance and coherence

The Strategy was designed to address five priority areas: *the elimination of gender-based violence and stereotypes, achieving gender equality in the economy*, *promoting women's leadership*, *integrating gender perspectives across all EU policies*, and *supporting gender equality globally*. All five priority areas and the related objectives and actions were highly relevant at the time of the Strategy's adoption and remain highly relevant today. Quantitative indicators demonstrate that gender inequalities persist across multiple domains, including employment, leadership, economic and unpaid care participation, and protection against gender-based violence (GBV).

Some incoherence was identified in this stocktake, relating to the Strategy's approach to balancing employment objectives with work–life balance policies. While the Strategy aims to close gender employment gaps, it also seeks to promote work–life balance without sufficiently addressing the redistribution of care work between men and women. This results in an internal contradiction: while work–life balance measures can facilitate women's labour market participation, they may also reinforce traditional caregiving roles if not carefully designed to increase men's participation in care work.

Furthermore, although the Strategy acknowledges the impact of gender stereotypes on economic and social inequalities, it does not sufficiently integrate efforts to combat these stereotypes into its employment and education policies. Usually the focus is on women taking up higher paid jobs, but measures to increase men workers in female-dominated sectors are overlooked. Likewise, the Strategy references intersectionality but lacks concrete measures to support women experiencing multiple forms of discrimination, such as migrant women, women with disabilities, racialised women, women from ethnic minorities, single mothers,

older women and those in precarious employment. Moreover, in the field of gender-based and domestic violence, the issues of primary preventative measures and sex work are insufficiently addressed, and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) are not addressed. The scope of the objective of achieving equal participation across sectors (such as in information and communication technology (ICT), science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), and sports), where women are under-represented, could be expanded to other crucial sectors, like health and education, where men are under-represented, and green jobs. At the same time, the Strategy should focus on gender gaps at employment in these sectors and not only on education and training.

Effectiveness across its five priority areas

The effectiveness of the Strategy is measured by the actions implemented and its ability to translate policies into tangible results. The European Commission (the 'Commission') has been very active in the period 2020–2025, bringing forward many actions at the EU level and also promoting and supporting the alignment and contribution of Member States to the objectives of the Strategy. **Almost all actions committed to in the Strategy have been realised, which has resulted in the Strategy achieving notable advancements in all five priority areas**, particularly in strengthening the legal frameworks for addressing gender inequality and addressing gender-based violence, employment and care gaps, and unbalanced representation in politics and the economy.

Progress has been recorded regarding gaps in the labour market: the gender employment rate and part-time gaps have been slightly reduced (by around 1 percentage point (p.p.) in 2020–2023), the motherhood penalty is 0.4 p.p. less in 2023 than in 2020 and the gender pay and pension gaps have reduced (by 0.2 p.p. and 2.2 p.p. respectively). However, gender gaps in self-employment, being at risk of poverty and social exclusion have stagnated and the gaps in temporary employment and foreign-born v nationals employment have even slightly increased. The progress in desegregation has been limited and the gender care gap has worsened. Also, while significant progress in the presence of women on boards of the largest quoted companies has been achieved, reaching 34.7 % in 2024, and with women in management positions within the Commission reaching 48.5 %, progress in women's representation in political decision-making has been slower.

The national experts of the SAAGE network clearly rated two of the five priority areas higher for both the level of advancement and the contribution made to them by the Strategy: 'Thriving in a gender-equal economy' and 'Being free from violence'.

Ending gender-based violence and stereotypes: The EU's ratification of the Istanbul Convention and the adoption of the Directive on combating violence against women represent major advancements. Alongside the Digital Services Act, which addresses online gender-based violence, these measures provide a stronger regulatory framework for victim protection. Member States vary in their transposition of EU directives, leading to inconsistencies in the protection and support available for victims across the EU. While the Strategy has played a crucial role in strengthening legislative frameworks, its impact depends on national implementation and enforcement mechanisms. Prevention measures, including work with men and boys and work with perpetrators, remain underdeveloped. Some progress combating gender stereotypes is reflected in the decreasing share

of persons who believe that the most important role of a woman is to take care of her home and family. However, in 2024, 51 % of the EU population still believes that family life suffers when the mother has a full-time job.

Thriving in a gender-equal economy: The Pay Transparency Directive and the transposition of the Work-Life Balance Directive are relevant legal milestones. However, gender gaps in employment and pay remain, exacerbated by childcare services which are still insufficient, a lack of progress in men taking on more care work and a lack of wider available long-term care provision. The transposition of the Directive on work–life balance over the Strategy's period has been a paradigm change in that it includes men's role in care responsibilities. However, its impact has been limited by uneven national implementation of flexible working arrangements, a lack of targeted incentives for men to take leave, and keeping a gendered design in favour of women´s use. Non-transferable paid paternity and parental leave is recognised as a potential successful tool if used alone by fathers for extended periods of time over the first year. Persistent gender stereotypes about the role of women in caregiving continue to influence workplace policies, affecting women's career progression and financial security. Moreover, while the Strategy promotes women's participation in traditionally male-dominated sectors, such as STEM and digital fields, it does not focus on attracting men to female-dominated sectors and occupations. Overall, progress in desegregating the economy is slow. This highlights the need for more targeted interventions, expanding the efforts to other sectors, such as green and care jobs, while also attracting men to female-dominated sectors, and focusing on employment as well and not only on education and training.

Leading equally through society: The Directive on gender balance on corporate boards has already led to progress in female representation in economic decision-making roles, although with unequal results across Member States. However, women remain under-represented in political leadership, and intersectional barriers are insufficiently addressed. There have been delays in adopting some important pieces of legislation, and while it has not been reached, there has been significant advancement towards the 50 % gender balance target in all levels of management within the European Commission.

Gender mainstreaming and intersectionality: The establishment of the Task Force for Equality has helped integrate gender perspectives into some EU policies. However, gender mainstreaming remains inconsistent across policy areas, and the intersectional approach lacks operationalisation. While progress has been made in embedding gender perspectives in areas like employment, environmental and digital policies, significant gaps remain in other key areas, including healthcare and migration. The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE)'s gender mainstreaming platform has continued supporting EU institutions and EU Member States with relevant information and tools. Advancements in gender mainstreaming in budget have been significant, although improvement is needed to make it part of the budget and programming cycle from planning to evaluation. The new monitoring portal of the Strategy also supports this priority area. However, the lack of systematic monitoring and evaluation mechanisms limits the Strategy's ability to track progress and ensure accountability.

Addressing gender equality and women's empowerment across the world: The Gender Action Plan III (GAP III) has strengthened the EU's commitment to global gender equality. However, implementation mechanisms need to be more robust. Another area to address is strengthening collaboration with women's rights organisations (WROs) and smaller civil society organisations (CSOs), in-

cluding improving their access to funding, the capacity of staff and monitoring efforts.

Added value

The Strategy has provided substantial added value at both the EU and Member State levels, particularly in terms of volume, scope, role and process effects. **Experts have identified the main added value of the Strategy at the Member State level as its binding measures that, through the transposition of directives and implementation of the EU law, have prompted relevant and effective actions at the national level towards common goals**. They have also identified the value of the Strategy as an initiator and supporter of policy changes at the EU and Member State level and its role in agenda setting.

The development of a monitoring system of the Strategy at the EU and Member State level and analyses of the EU budget according to gender impact has added considerable value to the limited information, although further development and refinement is needed.

Role of EU funding for gender equality

Gender has been mainstreamed into the regulation of the current Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2021–2027 to a much greater extent compared to the previous MFF through the Regulation laying down Common Provisions (CPR) and through the regulation of the funds, to a varied extent. The second enabling condition for the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and the Cohesion Fund obliges Member States to have national strategic frameworks for gender equality in place that include evidence-based identification of challenges to gender equality and measures to address them, which helps integrate gender considerations into policies and funding decisions.

The methodology to measure expenditure relating to gender equality, the new tracking system, has significantly improved the monitoring of the gender impact of EU funding in the current MFF. It has shown the importance of some programmes in fighting gender-related inequalities but also that gender funding needs global reinforcement. A share of 11 % of the 2024 EU budget was allocated to interventions with a concrete contribution to the promotion of gender equality.

In the context of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), national recovery and resilience plans (RRPs) were required to detail how the planned measures would contribute to gender equality, and the Commission has adopted several provisions to track the gender impact of the RRF. Notwithstanding, while Member States must dedicate 37 % and 20 % of the expenditures of their RRPs to measures contributing to climate and digital objectives respectively, no share has been designated to address gender equality.

Gender equality has also been reinforced in the regulations of the rest of EU funding programmes. This has been done through inclusion of gender-related considerations, mechanisms that facilitate gendered selection process and award criteria (as in Horizon Europe) or gender-sensitive procurement (as in the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) Programme. The CERV Programme has the largest impact on gender equality among all funding instruments since 72 % of the budgetary commitments in 2021–2023 were allocated to inter-

ventions whose objective is to improve gender equality (Score 2 and 1). Horizon Europe has the second-largest impact on gender equality, with 14.6 % of its commitments in 2021–2023.

Strengths and weaknesses of the Strategy

One of the key strengths of the Strategy lies in its **comprehensive policy framework**, integrating legislative, funding and governance mechanisms. The successful adoption of binding directives on gender equality issues reflects its capacity to drive meaningful change at the EU and Member State level. The Strategy has also strengthened EU-wide cooperation and knowledge-sharing, through the Mutual Learning Programme and the Network on prevention of gender-based and domestic violence, both enabling Member States to exchange best practices. The **gender mainstreaming of EU funding has been strengthened** in the current 2021–2027 Multiannual Financial Framework and the **new tracking system** has improved understanding and monitoring of the gender impact of EU funding, which is a first valuable step towards gender mainstreaming in the budget. **Significant efforts have been devoted to developing and adopting gender mainstreaming tools and governance processes** through the work of the Task Force for Equality, EIGE's mainstreaming platform and the new Portal for Monitoring the Strategy.

However, several **weaknesses** persist. The definition of the specific objectives of the Strategy is, in some cases, too broad and the actions not concrete or clear enough. Also, the responsible units or stakeholders, both within the Commission and the Member States, are not always clearly identified. **Monitoring mechanisms of the Strategy** remain insufficient. What is needed is a system of indicators for monitoring the Strategy based on the intermediate and specific objectives and the measures, clearly measuring the outputs, results and impacts, and adequate statistical information to monitor results and impacts. The relationship of the Strategy with the European Semester is also weak.

In spite of progress, **coordination, cooperation and communication** among policy areas is weak within the European Commission relating to gender mainstreaming and the adoption of targeted gender measures in other policy areas. This limits the Strategy's effectiveness. The Strategy's approach to **intersectionality lacks operational clarity**, limiting its effectiveness in addressing the needs of diverse groups of women. Incentives to increase men's participation in care work are weak, perpetuating gendered divisions of labour. Advances in tackling gender segregation in employment have been weak and the focus of measures is mostly on specific male-dominated sectors – STEM and ICT sectors – and could be broadened.

Moreover, there is some progress on prevention of gender-based violence, through the inclusion in the Strategy of a specific objective devoted partially to prevention of violence against women, an entire chapter in the Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence, and the EU network on the prevention of gender-based violence and domestic violence, which are assessed positively. Yet, prevention measures (before violence has occurred) for gender-based violence, including work with men and boys, remain underdeveloped, with a need for more comprehensive and proactive strategies. Furthermore, work with perpetrators to prevent recurrence of gender-based violence is still weak and specific and concrete measures addressing boys, men and masculinities are also insufficient.

Recommendations

To strengthen future EU gender equality policies, the following is recommended:

On the design and governance of a new Strategy

- Keep and reinforce the political will and commitment of the Commission to gender equality.
- Consider setting more specific objectives, targets and measures in the next Strategy and also consider establishing adequate monitoring mechanisms with suitable sex-disaggregated and gender-sensitive indicators, for instance, in the fields of agriculture, energy policy and the green transition, to regularly assess the effectiveness of interventions and progress towards objectives.
- Reinforce coordination, cooperation and communication relating to gender mainstreaming and the adoption of targeted gender measures across policy areas in the European Commission and reinforce the linkages of the next Strategy with the European Semester and the Country Specific Recommendations, adding gender equality as a priority area (similar to early childhood education and care (ECEC) and long-term care (LTC)) and with the Multiannual Financial Framework (adding a minimum funding target with the objective of gender equality, similar to those set in the RRF for the green and digital transitions).
- Provide continuity from the current priority areas, addressing gender stereotypes in a more transversal manner, and maintain the period of six years for the next Strategy 2026–2031 with monitoring through the annual reports on gender equality, which should add the previously described system of indicators for proper assessment of the measures, thereby making use of the Monitoring Portal of the EU Gender Equality Strategy.

On the actions and activities in the future Strategy

- Focus on the transposition of the Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence, reinforce prevention of gender-based violence including work with boys and adolescents, and work with perpetrators, protect and promote sexual and reproductive health and rights, and implement more regular awareness-raising and information campaigns on gender-based and domestic violence.
- Better align work–life balance policies with the gender employment gap objectives and targets, strengthen efforts to mainstream gender across all sectors (both female and male dominated) and establish specific targets. Evaluate the transposition of the Directive on work–life balance and improve as needed the design of leave so as to encourage male take up and a more equal distribution of unpaid work between women and men. Monitor the European Care Strategy with a gender lens. Assist Member States in transposing the Directive on pay transparency and the Directive on minimum wages. Strengthen the gender perspective in ongoing pension reforms and improve measurement of the risk of poverty and social exclusion with a gender perspective.
- Monitor the transposition of the Directive on improving gender balance on corporate boards and assess its impact. Keep on working to adopt the Regulation on the statute and funding of European political parties and of the

Council Regulation on the election of the members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage.

- Reinforce the role of the Task Force for Equality in supporting the alignment of all policy areas within the Commission with the Strategy objectives and also reinforce the role of the Equality Coordinators so that they are better able to ensure gender mainstreaming of relevant documents of each policy area, and improve and update the equality mainstreaming work plans.
- Reinforce the role of EIGE in the support it has developed to EU institutions and EU Member States with relevant analyses, information and tools.
- Continue developing an operational definition of intersectionality, such as that included in the Directive on pay transparency and the Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence, so it is adequately understood by all stakeholders. Systematically focus on groups of women with intersectional vulnerabilities across all priority areas, to increase the effectiveness of actions by targeting intersectional and specific needs.
- Keep the Monitoring Portal of the EU Gender Equality Strategy updated and expand it to cover additional indicators, thereby considering intersectional variables. Reinforce the work of Eurostat so all relevant statistics include samples which allow systematic intersectional analysis.
- Strengthen gender mainstreaming in the budget across all EU funding instruments through methodological refinements and improved data and systematic integration into the full budget cycle, from planning and implementation to monitoring and evaluation. Strive to increase the currently small share of funding with a direct gender equality objective and set minimum thresholds for gender-related expenditures and investments, ensuring that gender equality is a core funding criterion.

1. Introduction and objectives

The purpose of the *Stocktake of Strengths and Weaknesses of the Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025* is to draw lessons and make recommendations for the next period and future strategies, based on the implementation of the Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 (the 'Strategy') up to January 2025.

The stocktake covers the five priority areas addressed in the Strategy and focuses on:

- Assessing the relevance, coherence, effectiveness and EU added value of the Strategy.
    - » The **relevance and coherence** of the Strategy refers to how the planned objectives and actions correspond to the needs, concerns and problems at the time when the Strategy was adopted and to the current needs.
    - » The **effectiveness** of the Strategy refers to the degree to which the specific objectives of the Strategy are achieved and the drivers and hindering factors behind this.
- Evaluating the perceived **added value** of action at the EU and Member State level (volume, scope, agenda-setting role effects, exchange of practice and policy coordination).
- Assessing the **role of EU funding for gender equality** through dedicated budget support in the relevant period (2021–2027), such as the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) and Justice programmes, Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), Creative Europe, the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) and Horizon Europe.
- Making recommendations for the next period, after the expiration date of the Strategy.

The stocktake identifies and analyses the most relevant actions implemented in the 2020–2024 period, but does not aim to provide a comprehensive and detailed description of each of the actions carried out under the Strategy. It furthermore does not include an assessment of some of the classic evaluation questions, such as its sustainability, efficiency or financial performance, given that the Strategy does not count on its own financial allocation.

The remainder of the report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2: Methodology
- Chapter 3: Framework
- Chapter 4: Findings
- Chapter 5: The role of EU funding
- Chapter 6: Conclusions
- Chapter 7: Strengths and weaknesses
- Chapter 8: Recommendations for a future strategy

2. Methodology

This **stocktake combines desk research with fieldwork**, thereby relying on a review of existing qualitative and quantitative data and documentation, as well as producing new qualitative data to answer the evaluation questions. The fieldwork involved stakeholder interviews and a survey among country experts of the Scientific Analysis and Advice on Gender Equality (SAAGE) network.

It should also be noted that this stocktake systematically analyses the actions, outputs and results of the Strategy to the extent to which planned actions at the EU level have been put in place. Member States are often expected, required or encouraged to use or implement actions (e.g. use of funding, transposition of directives, development of knowledge) at the national, regional or local level as they fall within the competences of Member States. Thus, the way these measures are put into practice by Member States has important implications for the results and impacts of gender equality objectives.

As an example, a directive foreseen in the Strategy as an action that was eventually adopted by the co-legislators (e.g. the Directive on combating gender-based violence and domestic violence) is considered as an output of the Strategy, the transposition by the Member States as a result, and the reduction, for instance, in the number of victims as an impact of the action. However, this evaluation does not systematically review the implementation of EU acquis and is limited to presenting some examples that show how the Strategy prompts changes at this level, accompanied by an analysis of the factors that have either facilitated or hindered progress toward the Strategy's objectives and the adoption of related measures, as reported by SAAGE country experts.

It is also recognised that the realisation of intermediate objectives may take more time to manifest, potentially extending beyond the timespan (2020–2025) covered by the Strategy. **In particular, the transposition deadline of the directives is long and may not expire within this timespan; for example, the Violence against Women Directive deadline is June 2027.** Furthermore, external factors can interfere with putting these measures into practice and with the implementation process, which in turn may affect the effectiveness of the Strategy.

2.1. Desk research and analysis of indicators

The desk research combined a review of existing reports, **including the annual reports on gender equality in the EU,** evaluations and statistics produced by the European Commission and relevant stakeholders at the EU level, such as the European Parliament and European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), among many others. The main information source for policy developments at the Member State–level were the annual reports produced in 2022, 2023 and 2024 by national SAAGE experts on the developments related to the Strategy in the 2020–2024 period. The statistics analysed include the information available at the EU level provided by Eurostat, EIGE and other European organisations and available at the Gender Equality Strategy Monitoring Portal that enables moni-

toring the evolution of the situation for gender equality in the Strategy period of 2020–2025 to some extent. Data from around 2019 or from before the Strategy is compared with later data to analyse the relevance and effectiveness of the Strategy's objectives and measures.

2.2. Field work: Interviews with key stakeholders

A total of 16 online interviews were conducted with key stakeholders with a participation of more than 20 persons. The duration of the interviews was typically between 60 and 80 minutes. These interviews provided the evaluators with the perceptions and views of key stakeholders regarding the evaluation questions addressed. The interviewees also provided valuable input for the recommendations. The interview guidelines as well as the list of interviewees are detailed in Annex I.

2.3. Field work: Consultation with SAAGE country experts

Consultation with the network of SAAGE country experts was organised through a survey by email. The questionnaire focused on the main advancements in the 2020–2024 period, the external factors that furthered or hampered the achievements observed, and the contribution of the Strategy to the achievement of the objectives. Experts provided accurate information and feedback on their respective country situations and rated the level of advancement in the five priority areas and of the contribution of the Strategy to the achievement of the objectives in their respective countries with a 1 to 5 scale with ascending levels of positive achievement. The list of the questions are provided in Annex II of this report.

3. Framework

The Strategy identifies five priority areas, with intermediate objectives, as well as the actions to be undertaken to achieve them. For this stocktake, this logical framework has been developed further, notably indicating clear specific objectives with corresponding actions.

This chapter firstly analyses how the Strategy intends to achieve its objectives. Secondly, based on their characteristics, the actions foreseen in the Strategy are grouped into six types of actions, to facilitate the description and analysis of the direct and indirect results. Section 3.3 then presents a full version of the Strategy's intervention logic. The final section of this chapter examines the implications of this logic for the evaluation and the evaluation questions.

3.1. The Strategy's framework for achieving its objectives

Published as a communication from the European Commission, the Strategy 2020–2025 sets out objectives and actions announced by the European Commission regarding gender equality, thereby providing a framework that guides gender equality policies and actions to be launched and implemented in the EU during this period. These objectives and actions are organised around five priority areas.

The **five priority areas** of the Strategy are:

1. Being free from violence and stereotypes ('Free')
    a. Ending gender-based violence, including cyber violence, sex-based harassment at work and human trafficking
    b. Challenging gender stereotypes
2. Thriving in a gender-equal economy, with four subsets of objectives ('Thrive')
    a. Closing gender gaps in the labour market
    b. Achieving equal participation across different sectors of the economy
    c. Addressing the gender pay and pension gap
    d. Closing the gender care gap
3. Leading equally throughout society, which is focused on achieving gender balance in political and economic decision-making ('Lead')
4. Gender mainstreaming and an intersectional perspective in EU policies (gender mainstreaming (GM) and intersectionality) ('Intersect')
5. Addressing gender equality and women's empowerment across the world ('World')

Funding actions to make progress in gender equality in the EU are to be undertaken across relevant EU programmes operating in the 2021–2027 period. This is part of the wider objective of gender mainstreaming and is critical in the absence of financial allocation dedicated exclusively to the Strategy. As stated in the Strategy, 'the Commission's proposals for the Multi-Annual Financial Frame-

work (MFF) [should] ensure the integration of a gender dimension throughout the financial framework.'

The Strategy explicitly mentions the following EU funding programmes in the light of their potential contribution to the promotion of gender equality in the 2020–2025 period:

- European Structural and Investment Funds (ERDF, ESF+, CF, EAFRD and EMFAF)
- Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)
- Horizon Europe
- Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) and Justice programmes
- Asylum and Migration and Integration Fund
- Creative Europe
- InvestEU programme
- Erasmus+.

A strong feature of the Strategy is that its articulating objectives and actions across the five priority areas—collectively advancing the overarching aim of enhancing gender equality within the EU and beyond. It would still benefit from a clearer delineation between specific and intermediate objectives. Furthermore, the inclusion of well-defined targets and corresponding monitoring and evaluation indicators would greatly aid in assessing progress.

3.2. A typology of the Strategy's actions

The actions included in Strategy are similar to those enacted in the previous policy framework.[1] They can effectively be grouped into the following six types:

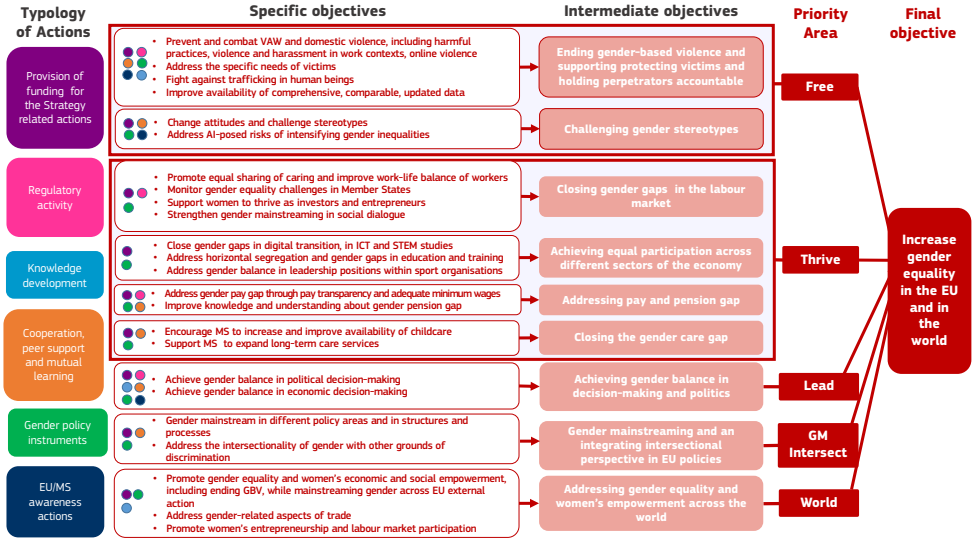
- Funding of actions and programmes at the EU and Member State level aimed at advancing towards the specific and intermediate objectives
- Regulatory activity prompted by the Commission and adopted eventually by the Council and/or the Parliament, such as new Directives or updates of existing ones, as well as Recommendations and Communications, which are often accompanied by support to enhance their enforcement.
- Development of knowledge and better understanding of gender equality root causes and ways to advance towards the objectives, including research and development of statistics that contribute to improving the design and implementation of policies.
- Creation of cooperation spaces to discuss, exchange knowledge, engage in practice and mutual learning and support among Member States policymakers and stakeholders.
- Use of gender policy instruments, such as gender mainstreaming, gender mainstreaming in the budget, gender impact assessment and gender equality action plans, that aim to influence policy processes.
- Awareness raising at the EU and Member State level aiming at changing attitudes towards gender equality, which should contribute to progress in the achievement of the objectives.

1 European Commission (2016). Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality 2016–2019. https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/24968221-eb81-11e5-8a81-01aa75ed71a1.

3.3. The Strategy's intervention logic

Combining the logical framework and typology of actions, the Strategy's intervention logic can be constructed in full. On the right side of Figure 1, it shows the nine intermediate objectives that are contained in the Strategy's priority. The nine intermediate objectives have been taken from the five priority areas and are disaggregated into specific objectives. To the left, the figure shows how the Strategy deploys the six types of actions in different combinations to achieve the specific objectives that can be distinguished under each priority of the Strategy. These specific objectives were extracted from the description of the priority areas in the Strategy.

Figure 1. Strategy Objective Tree



3.4 Implications for the stocktake of the Strategy

The intervention logic of the Strategy constitutes a strong framework with high potential for transformation that derives from powerful actions, such as impactful binding regulatory activity and from relevant budgets, even if not specifically allocated to the Strategy. The framework also provides a good basis for its evaluation.

The **relevance and coherence** of the Strategy can be judged by reviewing the following questions:

- Are the priority areas and intermediate objectives relevant in relation to gender equality or the lack of it in the EU? In 2019 and in 2024?
- Are the specific objectives relevant and complete in the light of their intermediate objective?
- Are the actions foreseen in the Strategy the relevant ones for achieving the specific objectives?

The Strategy's relevance and coherence has, to a large extent, been assessed using stakeholders' and experts' opinions, studies and, in the case of the specific objectives, statistical evidence.

For the current stocktake, the Strategy Objective Tree, as reconstructed above, enables a systematic evaluation of the **effectiveness** of the Strategy. The evaluation questions for this assessment are:

- What have been the **outputs** of the envisaged actions? What are the differences in outputs between different types of actions? And different specific objectives?
- To what degree have the **results**, i.e. the envisaged specific objectives, been achieved?
- To what degree have the intermediate objectives been achieved and what does this mean for the advancement of the five priority areas?

However, from the previous sections, it also becomes clear that the wording of the objectives and actions is often too general and there are no targets set nor indicators formulated. Therefore, while a description of progress and achievements can be made in some cases using indicators formulated for this purpose, an evaluation in terms of 'the degree of realisation of objectives' can only be made in general terms. A further complication is that the attribution of responsibility within EU institutions (who does what) is not always clear.

The **added value** of the Strategy is assessed in this stocktake by comparing actions and objectives with measures and policies existing at the EU and Member State level at the time the Strategy was adopted. An assessment has also been made of the Strategy's ability to adjust to new challenges arising in the course of its implementation, in particular the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian war against Ukraine.

The assessment of the **role of EU funding for gender equality,** through dedicated budget support in the relevant period (2021–2027), is to a large extent based on how gender equality has been embedded in the design of EU programmes as a horizontal principle. The assessment covers the following questions:

- To what extent has gender mainstreaming of the 2021–2027 MFF and EU funding programmes occurred and progressed?
- To what extent has monitoring of the gender impact of EU funding progressed?
- What is the relative importance of funds with regards to furthering gender equality, and what does this signify in light of their relative financial endowment?
- Have adjustment to changes in the environment, notably the Covid-19 pandemic, the war on Ukraine and the subsequent economic and energy crisis, taken into account gender differences?

In as much as the dedicated pilot methodology developed by the Commission to track gender equality was put in place, the relevance and effectiveness of this support was also reviewed.

4. Findings

This chapter discusses the findings for the three key evaluation criteria:

- Relevance and coherence
- Effectiveness
- Added value of the Strategy to gender equality in the EU

... in relation to the Strategy's five priority areas:

- ✓ The elimination of gender-based violence and stereotypes
- ✓ Achieving gender equality in the economy
- ✓ Promoting women's leadership
- ✓ Integrating gender perspectives across all EU policies
- ✓ Supporting gender equality globally

The analysis is carried out for each priority area, at the level of intermediate and specific objectives.

4.1 Relevance and coherence

The relevance and coherence of the Strategy and Strategy's priority areas is assessed by comparing how the planned objectives and actions correspond to the needs, concerns and problems at the time when the Strategy was adopted, as well as to current needs and problems.

4.1.1 Being free from violence and stereotypes

4.1.1.1 Ending gender-based violence

The first intermediate objective of the priority area, 'being free from violence and stereotypes', is **Ending gender-based violence and supporting protecting victims and holding perpetrators accountable**. Different aspects of this intermediate objective are addressed through four specific objectives (Figure 1), that are, according to experts interviewed and data available, highly relevant.

Prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence, including harmful practices, violence and harassment in work contexts, and online violence

The first specific objective is preventing and combating gender-based violence and domestic violence, including harmful practices, violence and harassment in work contexts and online violence. Its relevance is underpinned by key indicators that highlight the prevalence of this issue (data for 2012):

- 33 % of women in the EU had experienced physical and/or sexual violence since the age of 15.[2]
- 22 % of women in the EU had experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a partner.[3]
- 55 % of women aged 18 to 74 years in the EU had experienced sexual harassment since the age of 15.[4] The prevalence rate of cyber harassment was 11 %, whereas this rate was 20 % for women in the age group 18 to 29.

More recent (2024) survey data suggests that the concerns and problems are indeed persistent, underlining the ongoing relevance of this specific objective:

- In the EU-27, 30.7 % of women have experienced **physical violence or threats and/or sexual violence by any perpetrator** over their lifetime; 13.5 % have experienced physical violence and/or have been threatened with physical violence (but not sexual); and 17.2 % have experienced sexual violence (including rape and other unwanted sexual acts).[5]
- With regard to **violence by an intimate partner**, 17.5 % of women reported experience of physical violence or threats and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime.[6] When also considering psychological violence, the prevalence rate of intimate partner violence increases to 31.8 %. Stalking by an intimate partner is reported by 5.1 % of women in the EU.[7]
- The experience of lifetime **domestic violence** (violence by a domestic perpetrator, such as an intimate partner or a relative, or another person living in the same household as the respondent) is reported by 19.3 % of women in the EU-27.[8]
- 30.8 % of women in the EU-27 have experienced **sexual harassment at work** in their lifetime.[9]

The Eurobarometer in 2016 revealed a high **perceived prevalence of domestic violence** in the EU: 74 % of respondents believe that domestic violence is common (25 % of respondents believe it is very common). A share of 24 % of respondents reported that they knew of a friend of a family member who had been a victim of domestic violence.[10] The Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns

2 FRA – European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2014). Violence against women: an EU-wide survey: Main results.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., based on the full set of 11 items measuring sexual harassment.

5 FRA (2024). EU gender-based violence survey. Data collection took place between in September 2020 and March 2024.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 European Commission (2016). Special Eurobarometer 449: Gender-based Violence. https://europa.eu/

added to this problem, with 77 % of women in the EU thinking that the Covid-19 pandemic brought an increase in physical and emotional violence against women in their country, while 14 % of women reported that they know of women in their circle of friends or family who have experienced domestic violence or abuse since the beginning of the pandemic.[11]

Furthermore, the relevance of preventing violence, in particular among young people, is underpinned by recent (2024) Eurobarometer survey findings among people aged 18 to 24. There are larger gender differences among younger age groups in their levels of disagreement with stereotypical statements regarding, for example, consent, rape, cyberviolence and control. The Eurobarometer found that 74 % of young men aged 18 to 24 disagreed that 'faced with a sexual proposal, if a woman says "no", she often means "yes" but she is playing "hard to get"' compared with 89 % of women disagreeing.[12] Similarly, among this age group, larger gender differences were observed in the level of disagreement with statements such as 'if women share their opinion on social media, they should accept that they elicit sexist, demeaning and/or abusive replies' (the disagreement level was 83 % for women and 66 % for men); 'it is unacceptable for a man to control his wife's/partner's finances' (the disagreement level was 64 % for women and 42 % for men); or 'it is unacceptable for a man to control his wife's/partner's activities or relationships' (the disagreement level was 80 % for women and 61 % for men). In some cases, such as control over finances or relationships, the level of disagreement increases with age, pointing to a prevalence of gender stereotypes among younger men. These findings suggest that there are still concerns about the attitudes of young men toward gender equality and violence against women. Considering that the respondents in this age group were in middle or late adolescence at the time when the Strategy was adopted, the findings underpin the relevance of this specific objective, which aims for an attitude change at an early age.

Address the specific needs of victims

Addressing the specific needs of victims and strengthening victim-centred access to justice is the second specific objective of this priority area. This objective is highly relevant considering that survey data from 2012 revealed that 66 % of victims of physical and/or sexual violence by partners did not contact the police or any other organisation or service following the most serious incident.[13] According to more recent data, seeking professional support is still not the most commonly taken action when faced with gender-based violence: only 20.5 % of women contacted a healthcare service or social service provider, 13.9 % reported it to the police, and 6.4 % contacted a helpline or victim support service.[14] What is of particular relevance to this specific objective is that 15 % of women who did not contact organisations or services other than the police did not believe that anyone could help following the incidence of sexual violence and 9 % did not know where to turn.[15] A share of 13 % of women did not report the incidence

eurobarometer/api/deliverable/download/file?deliverableId=58853

11 European Commission (2022). Flash Eurobarometer 2022: Women in times of Covid-19.

12 European Commission (2024). Flash Eurobarometer 544: Gender stereotypes – violence against women.

13 FRA (2014). Violence against women: an EU-wide survey https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2014-vaw-survey-main-results-apr14_en.pdf

14 FRA (2024). EU gender-based violence survey.

15 Ibid.

of sexual violence to the police, thinking that they would not do anything (12 % thought that the police **could** not do anything). On the other hand, satisfaction with the assistance received from the police was 60 % in the case of physical violence by any partner and 49 % in the case of sexual violence by any partner. In the light of this data, the specific objective of improving support services to address the needs of victims is relevant.

Fight against trafficking in human beings

Another specific objective is **combating trafficking in human beings**. In 2020, 4 206 of the 6 534 victims of trafficking in human beings in the EU were women or girls. Sexual exploitation was still the predominant form of exploitation.[16] The most recent data from 2023 points to an increase in the number of victims of trafficking in human beings in the EU (10 793), which was the highest since 2008. While the share of women and girls (6 159, corresponding to 57 % of victims) was the lowest since 2008, the number of female victims increased in absolute terms in comparison to 2020, making this specific objective still very relevant.

Improve availability of comprehensive, updated and comparable data on GBV and domestic violence

Another specific objective, **collecting and reporting comprehensive, updated and comparable data, disaggregated by relevant intersectional aspects,** is relevant given the limitations in existing data in capturing different aspects of gender-based violence. For example, a 2021 study suggested that administrative data collection (for example, reported cases by the police or justice system) and data comparability is still an issue and there have been ongoing efforts to address these limitations.[17] Institutional barriers, such as a lack of standard definitions and lack of standardised methods of data collection across the EU, as well as societal barriers, such as under-reporting of intimate partner violence (IPV), due to lack of awareness of 'what constitutes IPV', or due to fear, shame or avoidance of social stigma, need to be addressed in order to improve data collection, which in turn will serve the processes of policymaking for combating gender-based violence.[18] Thus, this specific objective is also relevant to work towards ending gender-based violence.

Types of actions and other remarks

The Strategy foresaw four types of actions to achieve the specific objectives of the intermediate objective "ending gender-based violence". Some of these actions **address the regulatory framework,** such as the EU ratification of the Istanbul Convention, a new Digital Services Act, and the encouragement to the Member States to ratify the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention on combating violence and harassment in the world of work, among others. A framework for cooperation between online platforms to protect women's safety online was also announced. These actions concentrate mainly on the specific objective of preventing and combating gender-based violence, includ-

16 Eurostat [crim_thb_sex].

17 EIGE (2021). EIGE's indicators on intimate partner violence, rape and femicide: EU state of play.

18 EIGE (2023). Understanding intimate partner violence in the European Union: The essential need for administrative data collection.

ing cyberviolence, and violence and harassment in work contexts. Other planned actions include the preparation and implementation of strategies, such as the Victims' Rights Strategy and a new EU strategy on the combating of trafficking in human beings, **that include funding**.

In general, it is also worth noting that in this priority area (being free from violence and stereotypes), **EU funding available under the 'Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values'** programme was intended to be used by Member States to support civil society and public services in preventing and combating gender-based violence and gender stereotyping. With regard to **cooperation, peer support and mutual learning** actions, an EU network on the prevention of gender-based violence and domestic violence was planned to exchange good practices and also to provide funding for training, capacity-building and support services. For **knowledge development**, an EU-wide survey was foreseen to measure the prevalence and dynamics of gender-based violence.

While this subset of specific objectives and planned actions is relevant for the intermediate objective, it is worth noting that the prevention actions are not very concrete, as highlighted by some interviewees. The focus was placed on criminalisation, which can be expected to deter potential aggressors from resorting to violence and it is also in line with the objective of holding perpetrators accountable. However, underpinning it with further preventive measures is important, including, for instance, educating boys and girls about gender equality and non-violent relationships, and hence work towards an attitude change that may yield more stable results as highlighted by the experts.

Although the Strategy made reference to the importance of measures addressing boys, men and masculinities, specific and concrete measures were also missing. Furthermore, the importance of a multidisciplinary approach in combating violence could have been made more explicit, as information sharing, coordination and collaboration between professionals can contribute to preventing further escalation of gender-based violence or the recurrence of violence. Similarly, the importance of perpetrator programmes was mentioned in the Strategy, but no specific actions were included in the text.

4.1.1.2 Challenging gender stereotypes

The second intermediate objective of the priority area 'being free from violence and stereotypes' is challenging gender stereotypes. In this context, the Strategy aims to dismantle gender stereotypes in order to put an end to limitations regarding the aspirations and choices of women and men, girls and boys. Two specific objectives were identified to address this intermediate objective: change attitudes and challenge gender stereotypes on the one hand and address risks posed by artificial intelligence (AI) of intensifying gender inequalities on the other.

Change attitudes and challenge stereotypes

The relevance of this specific objective in relation to the intermediate objective is grounded in the significant share of people in the EU that maintain stereotypical views about women's socially desired behaviours, gender roles in the family, and women's attitudes and abilities in working life, politics and leadership. The 2017 Eurobarometer showed, for example, that 7 in 10 respondents thought that women were more likely than men to make decisions based on their emotions (69 %), that more than 4 in 10 (44 %) believed that the most important role of

a woman was to take care of her home and family, and 43 % believed that the most important role of a man is to earn money.[19] Seven years later, the relevance of this specific objective is underpinned by the following indicators, based on the Eurobarometer 2024:[20]

- In 2024, for 23 % of the respondents in the EU-27, it is unattractive for women to express strong opinions in public.
- In 2024, 42 % of the respondents in the EU agreed with the statement that the most important role of a man is to earn money (1 p.p. less since 2017). For 38 % of the respondents, the most important role of a woman is to take care of her home and family (6 p.p. less since 2017).[21]
- In 2024, 51 % agreed with the statement that all in all, family life suffers when the mother has a full-time job (9 p.p. lower compared to 2014).[22]
- While 56 % of the respondents disagree that men often earn more than women because their jobs are more demanding, there is still a significant share of society that agrees with the statement.[23]

To advance towards this specific objective, the Strategy mainly foresaw the launch of **an EU-wide awareness-raising and communication campaign** combating gender stereotypes in all spheres of life with an intersectional approach and a focus on youth engagement, in collaboration with Member States.

Address AI-posed risks of intensifying gender inequalities

The risks posed by AI underpin the relevance of this specific objective for the intermediate objective of the Strategy. Indeed, it has been identified that AI models tend to support regressive gender stereotypes. As an example, the study, *Bias Against Women and Girls in Large Language Models,* examines stereotyping in Large Language Models (LLMs) and shows unequivocal evidence of bias against women in content generated by each of these LLMs.[24]

To address this second specific objective, the Strategy planned to integrate a **gender perspective into the Commission White Paper on AI and Horizon Europe** in order to offer insights on how to address potential gender biases in AI.

These planned actions are well aligned with the specific objectives in this area and the two specific objectives and the planned actions are relevant for the intermediate objective. Yet, as mentioned in the previous section, a specific emphasis on work with boys, men and masculinities was missing. Their involvement is key to promote a change of mindset and to address the root causes of gender inequality. Although the focus on youth and intersectionality was very important, the planned actions were not concrete enough and the need remains for a more inclusive approach and a diverse campaign on stereotypes. An inclusive human rights approach could have been also included to counteract the currently observed gender backlash.

19 European Commission (2017). Special Eurobarometer 465: Gender Equality.

20 European Commission (2024). Special Eurobarometer 545 – Gender Stereotypes.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 UNESCO and IRCAI (2024). Challenging systematic prejudices: an investigation into bias against women and girls in large language models.

4.1.2 Thriving in a gender equal economy

This priority area, summarised as 'Thrive', includes the following four intermediate objectives: closing the gender gaps in the labour market, achieving equal participation across different sectors of the economy, addressing the gender pay gap and pension gap, and closing the gender care gap. According to statistics, literature and experts' and stakeholders' views, this is a very relevant area and has very relevant objectives for gender equality.

4.1.2.1 Closing the gender gaps in the labour market

The first intermediate objective of the priority area 'thriving in a gender equal economy' is **closing the gender gaps in the labour market**. To advance towards this intermediate objective, four specific objectives are proposed: promote equal sharing of caring responsibilities and improve work–life balance of working parents and carers; monitor gender equality challenges in Member States; support women to thrive as investors and entrepreneurs, and strengthen gender mainstreaming in social dialogue (Figure 1). The relevance of this intermediate objective is supported by key indicators that show women's worse conditions at the time of adoption of the Strategy and currently, in participating and remaining in the labour market on equal terms as men. Labour market indicators refer to men and women aged 20 to 64 unless otherwise indicated.

- Defined as the difference between the women's and men's employment rate, **the gender employment gap** in the EU-27 was 11.5 p.p. in 2020 (the employment rate was 78 % for men in the age group of 20 to 64 years and 66.5 % for women in the same age group). This gap was 11.6 p.p. in 2016, showing its structural dimension. In 2023, the last year currently available,[25] the gender employment gap decreased to 10.2 p.p. (80.4 % of men were employed and 70.2 % of women).[26]
- In 2020, the share of **part-time work** within total employment was 29.2 % for women and 7.9 % for men, indicating **a gender gap of 21.3 p.p**. It was 22 p.p. in 2016 and 21.6 p.p. in 2019, thus showing a slowly declining trend. In 2023, the gender gap was 20.2 p.p., as 27.9 % of women worked part-time while 7.7 % of men did so.[27]
- The **gender gap in temporary employment** was 1.6 p.p. in 2020 among workers in the age group from 20 to 64 years (13.4 % temporary employment for female workers and 11.8 % for male workers). It shows a slightly increasing trend, especially since the pandemic: the gender gap was 1.1 p.p. in 2016, increased to 1.3 p.p. in 2019, and reached 2 p.p. in 2023.[28]
- In 2020, **the gender employment gap among the foreign-born population,** as an intersecting group, aged 20 to 64 was 20.1 p.p. (73.3. % for men and 53.2 % for women).[29] This is more than 8.6 p.p. higher than among the total population aged 20 to 64 years. In 2023, this gap was 20.2 p.p. (78.3 % of men and 58.1 % of women were employed). If this indicator is limited to those born outside of EU countries, the gap is even higher: both in 2020 (24.1 p.p.) and 2023 (23.5 p.p.). In 2023, 75.1 % of men and 51.6 % of women born

25 February 2025, as provided by Eurostat LFS in online data browser.

26 Eurostat LFS [lfsa_ergan__custom_14792498].

27 Eurostat LFS [lfsa_eppga__custom_14792536].

28 Eurostat LFS [lfsa_etpgan__custom_14792662].

29 Eurostat LFS [lfsa_ergan__custom_14792498].

outside of the EU were employed.

These indicators, together with those presented for the four specific objectives of this intermediate objective, as well as those related to the gender pay gap, show that this intermediate objective is highly relevant to the priority area as there are gender gaps in almost all labour market indicators.

Promote equal sharing of caring and improve the work–life balance of workers

The first specific objective is **promoting equal sharing of caring and improving the work–life balance of workers.** Its relevance is well-known in the literature and supported by experts and stakeholders. It is also underpinned by key indicators that highlight the prevalence of this issue (data for 2020 and 2023):

- There were significant **gender gaps in the effects of parenthood on employment in 2020**. The employment rate for women aged 25 to 54 without children was 76.6 % (in comparison to 71.4 % for women with children).[30] By contrast, parenthood translated into a higher employment rate in the case of men: men with children had a higher employment rate (90.6 %) than men without children (81.1 %). In **2023**, the motherhood penalty had decreased from 5.2 to 4.8 p.p. (79.7 % of women without children were employed in comparison to 74.9 % for women with children) and the fatherhood premium has reduced from 9.5 p.p. to 8.2 p.p. (83.7 % of men without children were employed in contrast to 91.9 % of men with children). This means that the gender employment gap for those with children decreased from 19.2 p.p. in 2020 to 17 p.p. in 2023, while the gender employment gap for those without children moved from 4.5 p.p. in 2020 to 4 p.p. in 2023.
- Regarding **work–life balance**, the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated gender imbalances in the time spent on care and housework: on average in **2020,** women spent 62 hours per week caring for children (in comparison to 36 hours spent by men) and 23 hours doing housework (15 hours spent by men).[31] For 44 % of women in the EU-27, the pandemic had a negative impact on their work–life balance and 25 % of women could do less paid work for a salary or wage than they wanted to because of the increase in work at home.[32] There are no periodic indicators on time use ready available, so this indicator cannot be systematically updated. However, the European Working Conditions Survey provides an indicator on the number of unpaid and paid work every three years. In 2021, women in the EU spent 30.7 hours a week in unpaid work and 40.4 in paid work, while men spent 18.2 hours in unpaid work and 45.1 in paid work.[33] Thus, men work 12.5 hours a week less than women in unpaid work and 4.7 more in paid work. In total paid and unpaid work, women work 7.8 more hours a week than men.[34] All these indicators are also relevant for the intermediate objective on gender income gaps.

The planned actions are mainly related to the transposition and the implemen-

30 Eurostat LFS [lfst_hheredty__custom_14799849].

31 Eurofound (2020). Living, working and COVID-19. Luxembourg: European Union, pp.23–24; data collected in April and July 2020.

32 European Commission (2022). Flash Eurobarometer 2022: Women in times of Covid-19.

33 Data for the 2024 wave of the EWCS will be available over 2025.

34 A. Recio Alcaide, C. Castellanos Serrano and Andrés Jiménez. (2024). Cómo incide el nuevo diseño de los permisos de nacimiento en la corresponsabilidad: Un análisis con registros administrativos de la Seguridad Social de 2016 a 2023. Working paper. Instituto de Estudios Fiscales. Serie economía, (4): 1–90.

tation of the **Work-Life Balance Directive,** which is aligned with this specific objective. The change of mindset introduced by the Directive is relevant: work–life balance measures have shifted from a women-oriented approach to a more conventional worker approach, although gender biases still exist. As the low participation of men in childcare is one of the root causes of gender gaps in the labour market,[35] focusing on this area is very relevant. However, deeper and broader actions, with corresponding outputs and objectives related to increasing men's participation in care, would be needed to achieve a more coherent approach.

Monitor gender equality challenges in Member States

Monitoring gender equality challenges in Member States is the second specific objective. This objective is relevant for various reasons. The previously presented key indicators on gender gaps in the labour market show that their systematic availability by country allows monitoring very different national situations. Monitoring systematic indicators is necessary to understand areas such as women as investors and entrepreneurs or one of the main root causes of the gender employment gaps – gender care gaps – such as monitoring the weekly hours spent in unpaid work, both care and domestic work. Moreover, indicators considering other variables in addition to sex are needed, so an intersectional approach can be further developed.

The actions planned in the Strategy within this specific objective are gender policy instruments that aimed to influence policy processes. These actions included **monitoring gender equality challenges in Member States through the European Semester** (social scoreboard); the development of **guidance for the Member States** on the impact of national tax and benefit systems on financial incentives for second earners; and the **structural reform programme** as a tool to support Member States in the processes of gender mainstreaming in public administration, state budgeting and financial management. These actions are relevant because knowing and monitoring the situation across the EU is key to establish further actions and policies, as well as providing support to structural reforms related to the main challenges.

Support women to thrive as investors and entrepreneurs

The third specific objective is to support women to thrive as investors and entrepreneurs. Its relevance for the intermediate objective of closing gender gaps in the labour market can be evidenced by the following key indicator which highlights the gender gaps in this area:

- Among the age group 20 to 64, the **gender gap in self-employment** was 5 p.p. in 2020 (13.8 % for men and 8.8 % for women in the EU-27). In 2023, the gender gaps remain unchanged (13.2 % of men and 8.2 % of women).[36] A report published by the European Investment Bank (EIB) in 2022 points to the **under-representation of women in female start-ups and scale-ups;** the share of start-ups that have (a) female founder(s) was 11 % in the

35 C. Goldin (1990). *Understanding the gender gap: An economic history of American Women*. Oxford University Press; M. Domínguez-Folgueras, M.J. González and I. Lapuerta (2022). 'The Motherhood Penalty in Spain: The Effect of Full- and Part-Time Parental Leave on Women's Earnings'. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 29 (1): 164–189. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxab046; C. Goldin (2024). *Carrera y Familia. El largo viaje de las mujeres hacia la Igualdad*. Taurus.

36 Eurostat LFS [lfsa_esgan__custom_14788834].

European Union.[37]

To support this specific objective, planned actions were built on the deployment of **EU funding programmes**: for example, support for women's entrepreneurship and their reintegration into the labour market through the EU Cohesion policy; targeted measures by the Horizon Europe European Innovation Council, including a pilot to promote women-led start-ups and innovative small and medium-sized enterprises; and the InvestEU programme supporting investments with gender-diversified portfolios. These measures are relevant but, given the importance of the financial framework for investors and entrepreneurs, actions related to financial structures should be more coherent. Given the indicators, the gender gap is much higher among investors and entrepreneurs than in self-employed workers. Further data, analysis, actions and targets on this specific objective could create a more coherent framework since more women investing and starting up organisations may be one of the ways to address phenomena such as the glass ceiling and vertical segregation, and can provide female role models in economic leadership positions.

Strengthen gender mainstreaming in social dialogue

The last specific objective within the intermediate objective of closing the gender gaps in the labour market, **strengthen gender mainstreaming in social dialogue aspects,** is relevant given the broad effects that collective bargaining and social dialogue have on the labour market. Most aspects addressed in the other specific objectives could be further advanced through social dialogue. For example, beyond the minimum standards of the directives and national regulations, if social partners introduced gender equality as a priority in their actions, social dialogue could go further in themes such as work–life balance measures focused on increasing men's participation in childcare. Thus, this specific objective is relevant as social partners are key agents in the functioning and change of the labour market; the actions to structurally integrate the gender perspective in this domain are coherent.

Some critical gaps

Beyond the relevance of the four specific objectives within the intermediate objective of closing the gender gaps in employment, some other relevant aspects are **not sufficiently addressed in the Strategy**. Although the structural under-representation of some groups of women in the labour market is mentioned in the Strategy, there are **no specific actions planned to address the intersection** of sex with conditions of vulnerability such as lower education level, foreign nationality, disability or lone parenthood. Furthermore, the planned actions do not include further support measures to the Member States to transpose, implement, monitor and update the minimum standards of the Work-Life Balance Directive. There is room for further actions to reduce and redistribute care work and responsibilities from women to men, and to the public sector, as will be analysed below. It is unclear whether or how the changes promoted by the Work-Life Balance Directive would facilitate women's smooth transition from parental leave to returning to the labour market and to encourage the uptake of parental leave by fathers.

37 EIB (2022). Support for female entrepreneurs. Survey evidence for why it makes sense.

4.1.2.2 Achieving equal participation across different sectors of the economy

The second intermediate objective of the priority area 'thriving in a gender equal economy' is **achieving equal participation across different sectors of the economy** and has three specific objectives: to close gender gaps in digital transition and in ICT and STEM studies; to address horizontal segregation and gender gaps in education and training; and to address gender balance in leadership positions within sport organisations. These specific objectives are relevant for reducing horizontal segregation, as underpinned by the indicators presented below for each specific objective, and more generally by the gender segregation index across economic sectors and occupations, which shrunk slightly since 2019 till 2022 (from 19.2 to 18.9) and was 24.4 % by occupation in both years. These figures have remained basically unchanged since 2010, when the index was 19.1 % and 24.9 % respectively.[38] This shows that segregation is a persistent phenomenon and, thus, it is relevant to address it to try to reduce it.

Close gender gaps in digital transition and in ICT and STEM studies

The relevance of this specific objective is supported by the inequalities in the educational pathways chosen by girls and boys and young women and men that were large at the time of the adoption of the Strategy. Indeed, there were two men STEM graduates for every woman graduate tertiary education (ISCED levels) 5 to 8 in 2020 and it was 1.7 in 2022. At the master's or equivalent level, the situation was slightly better, the ratio was 1.5 in 2020 and 1.4 in 2022. The doctoral level was somewhat in between: there were 1.7 men for each women STEM graduate with a doctoral or equivalent degree in 2020 and 1.6 in 2022.[39]

Key actions to achieve this specific objective include gender policy instruments such as an Updated Digital Education Action Plan, with **a specific action on women's participation in STEM**; the Updated Skills Agenda for Europe to address horizontal segregation and gender stereotypes and gender gaps in education and training, and specific mentions of encouraging women's and girls' acquisition of digital skills in the new Roadmap for Women's Rights. The WIDCON project started in January 2025, and is intended **to provide insight into the reasons behind the gender gap in ICT professions, create a network of relevant experts, and identify best practices to increase women's participation in the ICT sector.**

Address horizontal segregation and gender gaps in education and training

This specific objective is relevant according to the previous indicator and the following one:

- The gender gap in early leavers from education and training among the population aged 18 to 24 was 3.8 p.p. in 2020 (11.9 % of men and 8.1 % of women), suggesting that young men tend to engage less in school or training. In 2023, the gap reduced slightly to 3.6 p.p. (11.3 % of men and 7.7 % of

38 The gender segregation index reflects the proportion of the employed population that would need to change occupation/sector in order to bring about an even distribution of men and women across occupations or sectors; it therefore varies between 0 % (no segregation) and 50 % (complete segregation). Source: European Commission (2023). 2023 report on gender equality in the EU.

39 Eurostat [educ_uoe_grad04__custom_14792841].

women).[40]

The Strategy points out the Commission proposal for a Council recommendation on vocational education and training and the inclusion of gender equality as a key element in the Commission's Communication on the European Education Area as relevant outputs to be achieved. This was adopted in November 2020 and it recommends Member States to deliver targeted measures to promote gender balance in traditionally 'male' or 'female' professions and address gender-related and other types of stereotypes together. In addition to these, the Youth Guarantee was intended be reinforced to ensure equal opportunities for women. All of them are relevant, although a more coherent approach could include very female-dominated sectors, such as education and care, just as it includes male-dominated sectors.

Address gender balance in participation and leadership positions within sport organisations

Another specific objective that is relevant is addressing gender balance in participation and leadership positions within sport organisations. There are limitations in comparable existing data which captures the different gender-related aspects, but those available show the existence of this gender gap. However, given that sports influence different aspects of women's and men's lives, not only economic and employment dimensions, but also as a source of health, leisure, social relations and role models, the approach of the Strategy may further extend how sports are approached and include some aspects in other objectives, such as the ones related to gender stereotypes, to increase its coherence. In this sense, the actions to achieve a **renewed Strategic framework for gender equality in sport** are relevant and they could introduce this broader approach.

Several issues related to the relevance of the three specific objectives emerge in relation to the intermediate objective of achieving equal participation across sectors. First, the addressing of sectoral segregation has had a narrow approach, limited to ICT, the STEM sector and sports. For example, there is no specific emphasis on the care sector or green jobs, which have a great potential development, given the ageing population, the care crisis and the EU green transition. While the sectors addressed are relevant, there are others that are equally relevant. Segregation monitoring is focused on STEM,[41] as STEM jobs are considered jobs of the future with great opportunities, and they are in male-dominated sectors. Second, more concrete actions to address the issue can be considered. It would be possible for instance to address more attentively access to employment of women and more generally working conditions in specific sectors such as care.. Although this is partially addressed in the Care Strategy, a clear connection between the issues could improve the coherence of the Strategy.

40 Eurostat [edat_lfse_14$defaultview].

41 Examples of indicators: educ_uoe_grad04__custom_8229227, educ_uoe_grad04__custom_8230490.

4.1.2.3 Addressing the gender pay gap and pension gap

The third intermediate objective of the priority area 'thriving in a gender equal economy' is **addressing the gender pay gap and pension gap**. Different aspects of this intermediate objective are addressed through four specific objectives (Figure 1). The relevance of this subset is underpinned by key indicators that show gender income inequalities, for example:

- In the EU-27, the gender gap in at risk of poverty or social exclusion was 2 p.p. in 2020 and in 2023 (20.5 % for men and 22.5 % for women in 2020 and 20.3 % and 22.3 % in 2023). Among the population over 65 years of age, the gender gap is larger (5.8 p.p. in 2020 and 5.5 p.p. in 2023; men at 16.8 % and women at 22.6 % in 2020, and 16.6 % and 22.1 % in 2023).[42]

Address the gender pay gap through pay transparency and adequate minimum wages

The first specific objective is **addressing the gender pay gap through pay transparency and adequate minimum wages.** Its relevance is underpinned by the following key indicator:

- In the EU-27, the gender pay gap in unadjusted form was 12.9 % in 2020 and 12.7 % in 2022 (in comparison to 14.4 % in 2018).[43]

The planned actions to achieve these objectives were changes in the regulatory framework, such as binding measures on pay transparency, which eventually resulted in **the Directive on Pay Transparency**. This is a highly relevant measure. Although the other measures were not previously planned like the Directive on minimum wages, they have created a more coherent action framework, as this may improve payment conditions in female-dominated sectors, which usually have lower levels of remuneration. Both measures address different factors contributing to the gender pay gap. The Strategy coherently relates this specific objective with others that are part of the root causes of the gap, such as unequal sharing of care between men and women, horizontal and vertical segregation in the labour market, and scarcity of education and care services.

Improve knowledge and understanding about the gender pension gap

Improving knowledge and understanding about the gender pension gap is the second specific objective, which is relevant because of the existing high – although diminishing – pension gap, as the following indicator shows:

- In the EU-27, the gender pension gap was 27.6 % in 2020 and it has shown a consistently decreasing trend until 2023, when it was 25.4 % for the age group 65 years and over.[44]

The Strategy underlines that an 'accumulated lifetime gender employment and pay gap results in an even wider pension gap and consequently older women are more at risk of poverty than men'. Thus, this specific objective includes a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and all its causes, which have been mentioned in the previous sections.

42 Eurostat [ilc_peps01n__custom_14793002].

43 Eurostat [sdg_05_20].

44 Eurostat [ilc_pnp13__custom_14807197].

Measures included to address this specific objective rely on **cooperation, peer support and mutual learning**, as well as wide-ranging inclusive **consultation processes** to address the issue. Also included was exploring the **provision of pension credit for care-related career breaks** in occupational pension schemes. Furthermore, the 2021 edition of the pension adequacy report was to assess the allocation of risks and resources in pension systems among men and women. Given the level of this phenomenon, further actions are relevant, especially if they are binding to encourage further improvements.

4.1.2.4 Closing the gender care gap

The last intermediate objective of the priority area 'thriving in a gender equal economy' is **closing the gender care gap**. Different aspects of this intermediate objective are addressed through two specific objectives (Figure 1), related to increasing and improving the availability of childcare and long-term care services respectively, in the understanding that the gender care gap is one of the roots of economic inequalities. The relevance of this objective is underpinned by key indicators on gender care gaps, for example:

- In 2020, care of adults with disabilities or children as the main reason of part-time work was the case for 26.2 % of the total population of women aged 20 to 64 (compared to 5.9 % of men). The data for 2023 suggests a worsening trend since the share increased to 29.5 % for women and 8.2 % for men, with the gender gap increasing by 1 p.p.[45]

Encourage Member States to increase and improve the availability of childcare

The first specific objective is **encouraging Member States to increase and improve the availability of childcare.** Its relevance is underpinned by key indicators such as:

- At EU-27 level, the Barcelona targets adopted in 2002 regarding the share of children enrolled in formal early childhood education and care aged less than 3 years (33 %) and aged 3 years to minimum compulsory school age (90 %) were met in 2019.[46] However, considering the number of hours children are enrolled in formal care, as the revised Barcelona targets adopted in 2022 do, at the EU-27 level in 2020 the percentage of children aged less than 3 years in formal childcare for 30 hours or over was 18.2 % and for the age group from 3 years to minimum compulsory school age, this rate was 53 % in 2020.[47] The revised Barcelona targets adopted in 2022 are 45 % and 96 % respectively.[48]
- In 2018, 33.35 % of employed women in the EU-28 had to interrupt work for more than 6 months for childcare reasons, whereas only 1.3 % of employed men had to do the same.[49]
- Most Member States have a care gap between the end of well-paid parental

45 Eurostat [lfsa_epgar__custom_14792733].

46 European Commission (2022). 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.

47 Eurostat [ilc_caindformal].

48 Specific targets apply to Member States that have yet to reach the 2002 Barcelona goals.

49 Eurostat LFS 2018 ad hoc module Reconciliation between work and family life

leave and the start of ECEC entitlement of up to 58 months.[50]

For this objective, the planned actions of the Strategy included the **revision of the Barcelona targets** and a Commission proposal for a Child Guarantee, to break the poverty cycle and reduce inequalities. Further funding actions are presented together with the following specific objective. These actions are relevant, but the coherence of the targets proposed with other European objectives, such as the employment objective, could be further elaborated, considering the objective of closing gender gaps.

Support Member States to expand long-term care services

The second specific objective is supporting Member States to expand long-term care services**.** Its relevance is underpinned by the different impact on employment on women and men of long-term care needs as shown by the following key indicators:

- In 2020, 5.4 % of men aged 20 to 64 worked part-time mainly due to care of adults with disabilities or children, while 25.5 % of women were in that situation. The gender gap of 20.1 p.p. remained in 2023, where the corresponding shares were 6.1 % for men and 26.2 % for women. [51]
- In 2020, inactivity due to care of adults with disabilities or children affected 0.1 % of men and 2 % of women in the population aged 25 to 49; in 2023, the rates were 0.1 % and 1.4 % respectively. When other family and personal reasons were also considered, the share of women being inactive increased to 2.6 % in 2020 (for men, it was 0.3 %) but decreased to 2 % in 2023 (0.3 % for men).[52]

Beyond the gendered impact on employment and given the ageing population, the availability and quality of long-term care services may have further gendered impacts on how older women and men live. If care services are not available, and older women have a lower income than men, their wellbeing and health could be affected twice: once when they are at working age when they provide care, and later, at an older age, when they need the scarce resource of care services.

Both for early childhood education and care and long-term care services, **funding actions** are relevant, as these sectors are underdeveloped compared to the current need for them. The deployment of European funds, such as the European Social Fund+, European Regional Development Fund, the Invest EU Programme and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, can support Member States in their efforts to increase the availability and affordability of quality care services for children and other dependants, and is relevant and coherent. Furthermore, a **consultation process** was planned for a Green Paper on Ageing with a focus on long-term care, pension and active ageing.

The planned actions are well-aligned with the two specific objectives presented. However, further connection with the specific objective of promoting equal sharing of caring and improving the work–life balance of workers could be included to establish a more coherent approach. If gender equality in caring is the objective,

50 Leave Network (2024). Relationship between leave and ECEC entitlements: April 2024. https://www.leavenetwork.org/fileadmin/user_upload/k_leavenetwork/annual_reviews/2024/Leave_ad_ECEC_entitlements_2024_12.pdf.

51 Eurostat https://doi.org/10.2908/LFSA_EPGAR.

52 Eurostat [lfsa_igar__custom_14793074].

all leave design should provide equal incentives in practice for men and women to be equally used. High payment replacement and non-transferability are conditions for men to use leave. Equal leave for men and women is a precondition for its similar use. Measures towards that design are needed for full coherence. As the Strategy points out, the gender care gaps could close not only by increasing early education and care services but also by increasing men's involvement in care and by introducing work–life balance measures which aimed at easing full-time participation in the labour market, both for women and men across the life cycle.

4.1.3 Leading equally through society

This priority area includes two specific objectives devoted to achieving gender balance in political and economic decision-making respectively, thereby including EU institutions and bodies, EU agencies at all levels of their management, and in leadership positions. This priority area contains one of the few targets of the Strategy, which is that the Commission reaches a gender balance of 50 % at all levels of management by the end of 2024.

The relevance of this area and the specific objectives is underpinned by key indicators of gender inequalities in leadership positions:

- In the first quarter of 2020, 31 % of ministers in national governments were women (69 % men) and 32 % of members of national parliaments were women.[53] In 2024, the share of women in national governments and parliaments had increased slightly to 35 % in the first case and to 33.1 % in the second but was still far from a balance of 40 % to 60 %.[54]
- In the first semester of 2020, women constituted 29 % of the members of boards in the largest quoted companies, supervisory boards or boards of directors,[55] which increased notably to 34.7 % in 2024.
- In 2019, 41 % of managers in the Commission were women. This included 37 % of senior managers (up from 27 %) and 42 % of middle managers (up from 31 %).[56] As of 1 March 2024, women held 48.5 % of all management positions within the Commission.[57]

While the general trend of these indicators is positive, these figures mask extremely high cross-country differences, with some rating very low (below 15 %, such as the Czech Republic, Hungary, Malta and Slovakia) and others high (above 50 %, such as Belgium, Finland, France and the Netherlands). Moreover, at the EU level, the share of women in the European Parliament decreased from 40.6 % to 38.8 % between 2019 and 2024. Popular opinion also suggests some persisting gender stereotypes regarding women in leadership positions, with 19 % of recent Eurobarometer (2024) respondents thinking that women do not have the necessary qualities and skills to fill positions of responsibility in politics. The level of

53 EIGE (2020). Gender Statistics Database WMID; https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2020/domain/power; data on regional assemblies/local municipalities is available at: https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2021/domain/power.

54 Data source: EIGE. Data collection on women and men in decision-making (WMID).

55 EIGE (2020). Gender Statistics Database, WMID. https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2021/domain/power.

56 European Commission (2020). EU Strategy for Gender Equality.

57 European Commission (2024). 2024 Report on gender equality in the EU.

agreement with this statement was 2 p.p. lower in 2017.[58]

To achieve the **specific objective of improving gender balance in politics**, the Strategy included actions that promoted **best practices** to increase the participation of women in the 2024 European Parliament elections as candidates and voters. The Strategy also foresaw **changes in the regulation** on the statute and funding of European political parties that encourage gender balance in political parties when asking for EU funding.

In relation to the specific objective of improving gender balance in economic decision-making, the Strategy included a regulatory change, namely the adoption of the 2012 proposal for a Directive on improving the gender balance on corporate boards, which set the aim of a minimum of 40 % of non-executive members of the under-represented sex on company boards. Other planned actions concerned cooperation and peer support measures for the exchange of good practices regarding gender balance on executive boards and in managerial positions.

The planned actions are well-aligned with the specific objectives. Yet, planned actions might have been broadened to more explicitly encompass women from a wider range of backgrounds, acknowledging the practical complexities of addressing intersectionality.

4.1.4 Gender mainstreaming and an intersectional perspective in EU policies

The high relevance of this priority area, '**gender mainstreaming and an intersectional perspective in EU policies**', lies in its transversal nature, whereby it is combined with the rest of the targeted priority areas, reflecting the dual approach adopted in the Strategy. The specific objectives of this priority area are first to integrate a gender perspective in all major Commission initiatives, including the green and digital transitions and demographic change; and second to address intersectionality of gender with other grounds of discrimination across EU policies, responding to the specific needs of women and girls from diverse groups and to ensure that intersectionality always informs gender equality policies.

To address the first specific objective of this area, the main planned action is devoted to knowledge development, cooperation and peer support through the creation of the **Task Force on Equality.**[59] This task force is composed of representatives of all Commission services and of the European External Action Service to ensure implementation of equality mainstreaming, including gender equality at the operational and technical levels. An example of such an approach is the incorporation of gender mainstreaming in policy areas such as the European Green Deal, digitisation and health policy

Regarding the specific objective of **intersectionality**, actions included in the Strategy are geared towards cooperation to establish interlinkages between the Strategy for Gender Equality and the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion – that focuses on migrant persons – and the EU strategic frameworks on disability, LGBTIQ equality, Roma inclusion and children's rights. In addition, intersectionality has been included in key directives adopted, such as the Directive on pay transparency, the Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence, and the Directive setting standards for the independence and powers

58 The 2024 Special Eurobarometer on Gender Stereotypes. https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/api/deliverable/download/file?deliverableId=95911.

59 The Task Force on Equality of the European Commission.

of equality bodies. While the planned objectives and actions are relevant, particularly the creation of the Task Force on Equality, elaboration of the practical implementation of gender mainstreaming across all policy documents is limited. Likewise, greater clarity around the application of intersectionality would help to acknowledge and address the distinct challenges experienced by women from diverse and potentially vulnerable backgrounds. For this, knowledge development, such as intersectional data collection, would have been an important step.

4.1.5 Addressing gender equality and women's empowerment across the world

The relevance of the priority area, **addressing gender equality and women's empowerment across the world,** is supported by the fact that deep-rooted inequalities persist globally, including in basic access to health, education and jobs, and with regards to the widespread gender-based violence everywhere in the world, albeit with large variation across countries. There is also a need to mainstream gender across external EU policies which may have relevant impacts on women, such as international trade, to limit negative impacts and promote beneficial ones.

The three specific objectives of the Strategy in this priority area are first to promote gender equality and women's economic and social empowerment, including ending gender-based violence, while mainstreaming gender across all EU external action; second, to address gender-related aspects of trade; and third, to promote women's entrepreneurship and labour market participation. These specific objectives are wide enough to cover the many considerations of gender equality in the world, so they are highly relevant to the needs and concerns of women outside the EU.

The most relevant planned actions to advance the first specific objective were the launch of the **Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in External Relations 2021–2025 (GAP III)** in 2020 and its development until 2025 that involves a large variety of measures along five pillars, as well as the commitment to ensure that 85 % of all new programmes contribute to gender equality and women's empowerment; the **Spotlight Initiative**, a joint EU–UN global programme with an overall EU allocation of EUR 500 million to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls; the campaign **#WithHer to challenge gender stereotypes**; the **EU Strategic Approach and Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2019–2024;** and the **EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy (2020–2024)**

For the second specific objective, the planned actions were the adoption of the gender perspective in trade agreements and gender-disaggregated data collection. The third specific objective, the promotion of women's entrepreneurship and labour market, is addressed through funding provided in the External Investment Plan (EIP) in partner countries.

The specific objectives and the planned actions are relevant and are well-aligned. In particular, GAP III is very wide in scope and addresses many areas and actions, including gender mainstreaming across all EU external action. However, in the opinion of some of the interviewed stakeholders, a more nuanced approach that builds on a more global, rather than European, perspective was necessary to be more comprehensive.

4.2 Effectiveness

In this section, for each of the five priority areas, intermediate and specific objectives of the Strategy, as presented in Figure 1 above, the key actions, outputs and results at the EU level, whenever information is available, are presented and assessed. Thus, the section is structured according to the intervention logic focusing on the EU level and presenting examples of interventions at the Member State level.

4.2.1 Being free from violence and stereotypes

This priority area addresses two intermediate objectives, which, as mentioned in the relevance section, are **ending gender-based and domestic violence** and **challenging gender stereotypes**.

4.2.1.1 Ending gender-based violence and supporting and protecting victims

This first intermediate objective addresses the four specific objectives: preventing and combating gender-based violence and violence against women; addressing the needs of victims; fighting human trafficking; and improving availability of data.

Activity in this sub-priority area is focused mostly on regulation, such as the ratification of the Istanbul Convention by the EU and the Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence. **Several strategies** were also prepared and are being implemented including the EU Victims' Rights Strategy 2020–2025 and the EU Strategy on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings 2021–2025. Moreover, **development and exchange of knowledge and practice** as well as capacity building on prevention among practitioners has taken the form of a new EU Network on the prevention of gender-based violence and domestic violence. Finally, reliable and updated data has been made available. The main actions, outputs and results developed within each of the four specific objectives are described next.

Prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence, including harmful practices, violence and harassment in work contexts, and online violence

EU ratification of the Istanbul Convention

A first step taken by the EU to address this specific objective, as included in the Strategy, was the EU accession to the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women ('the Istanbul Convention'), which the EU had signed in 2017. In 2021, the Court of Justice of the European Union confirmed that the EU had the competence to accede to the Convention even if not all Member States consented to or had ratified it.[60] In February 2023, the Council agreed to move forward. In May 2023, the European Parliament gave its consent to the EU accession to the Convention and, following two decisions adopted by the Council in June, as one of the main outputs of this specific objective, the EU became the 38th Party to the Istanbul Convention, which entered into force for the EU on 1 October 2023.[61] The Commission, as coordinating body, then started the

60 Court of Justice of the European Union (2021). Opinion 1/19.

61 European Parliament (2024). EU accession to the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and com-

work of ensuring the implementation of the Convention in the EU.

The EU has acceded to the Convention as regards to matters falling within its exclusive competence related to institutions and public administration of the Union and to judicial cooperation in criminal matters, asylum and non-refoulement. This includes funding, policy and legislative measures.[62] At the time of writing this report (January 2025), all EU Member States have signed the Istanbul Convention, and all but five have ratified it (Bulgaria, Czechia, Lithuania, Hungary and Slovakia).

Given the challenges for the EU and Member States to ratify the Istanbul Convention, realising this output can be considered one major **output** of the Strategy. Following the entry into force, the Commission has addressed the legal and practical implications of the EU's accession, and has taken several steps to ensure its implementation across the EU. In January 2025 the expert group GREVIO launched its baseline evaluation of the EU's implementation of the Istanbul Convention. The EU has received a questionnaire, which is the first step of the process, and will have to reply to the questionnaire by November 2025. The exercise will involve all relevant EU institutions, agencies and bodies.

Adoption of the Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence

Together with the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, the Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on combating violence against women and domestic violence, signed by Parliament and Council on 14 May 2024, is **potentially the most impactful output** of the Strategy in this specific objective.[63] The Directive, which has the same objectives of the Istanbul Convention, is the first comprehensive legal instrument at the EU level to tackle violence against women and domestic violence. With this Directive, all victims of crimes of violence against women and domestic violence across the EU will benefit from the same comprehensive set of measures of protection, support and access to justice. The directive's **non-regression clause** is key to prevent a backtrack on implemented standards.

The Directive pursues the dual objective of better safeguarding the rights of victims of violence against women and domestic violence in the EU, on the one hand, and of reducing the prevalence of such violence in the long term, on the other hand. At the EU level, the Directive criminalises **certain forms of violence**

bating violence against women ('Istanbul Convention').

62 Judgement of the Court of Justice of the European Union of 16 January 2024 (Case C-621/121). It states that the Istanbul Convention lays down obligations linked to those exclusive areas of competence of the EU related to asylum and non-refoulment that empower the EU to adopt measures relating to a common European asylum system. This means that EU law which falls within its exclusive competence must be interpreted consistently with the Istanbul Convention, even by Member States that have not yet ratified that Convention.

63 The need to prevent and combat violence against women, protect victims and punish offenders was first announced by the President of the European Commission in her *Political Guidelines* (2019) as a key priority, and it is also part of the *Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025*. A draft law was eventually adopted by the European Commission on 8 March 2022. The Council of the European Union adopted its general approach to the text on 9 June 2023. The plenary of the European Parliament endorsed a negotiating position on the proposal on 12 July. An informal agreement between the co-legislators on a compromise text for this file was reached on 6 February 2024. This was formally endorsed by Parliament on 24 April and by the Council on 7 May. The Act was signed by the co-legislators on 14 May 2024 and published in the Official Journal on 24 May 2024. https://www.europeansources.info/record/proposal-for-a-directive-on-combating-violence-against-women-and-domestic-violence/.

against women offline (female genital mutilation and forced marriage) **and online** (non-consensual sharing of intimate or manipulated material, cyber stalking, cyber harassment and cyber incitement to hatred and violence on the ground of gender). The directive also **strengthens protection** and **access to justice** for victims, victim **support**, **prevention**, **coordination and cooperation**. Member States are to establish dedicated **helplines and rape crisis centres** and ensure that reporting of such crimes is safer and easier, including the possibility of online reporting. The directive pays specific attention to victims experiencing **intersectional discrimination**, such as women with disabilities, undocumented migrant women, LGBTIQ persons and women in prostitution, and recognises that they are at a heightened risk of violence.

Member States have until 14 June 2027 to transpose the Directive into their national law and policy (Article 49) and until 14 June 2029 to adopt **national action plans** for preventing and combating gender-based violence (article 39). Law enforcement authorities will have to assess if the offender might do further harm to the victim and, in that case, take necessary protection measures, such as prohibiting them to enter the home of the victim. Finally, Member States are required to collect disaggregated **administrative data** on the annual number of reported offences, convictions, number of victims who have been killed, number and capacity of shelters, and number of calls to national helplines. Member States are also bound to endeavour to conduct **population surveys** at regular intervals to assess the prevalence of all forms of violence against women. Member States are required to foster internal coordination and cooperation and exchanges of best practices among themselves and cooperate in criminal cases, including via Eurojust and the European Judicial Network.

As mentioned, the Directive is one of the most significant **outputs** of the Strategy and the **results** will become visible once the Member States transpose it. In order for the transposition to achieve the envisaged results, some NGOs and experts interviewed stressed the importance of ensuring that specialist support services are adequately valued, funded and integrated into national frameworks. They also expressed concerns that the Directive may not fully address the specific challenges faced by undocumented migrant and refugee women who are particularly vulnerable to various forms of violence, including domestic abuse and trafficking in human beings and are also particularly affected by EU migration policies.[64]

Work on the Commission's Recommendation on preventing and combating harmful practices against women and girls

The Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence states that Member States concerned shall take preventive measures that increase sensitivity about harmful practices, such as female genital mutilation and forced marriage. Further, as announced in the Strategy, the Commission has been working on the **Recommendation on preventing and combating harmful practices against women and girls.** It organised **four consultation workshops** in 2022 with international organisations and CSOs to discuss practices such as female genital mutilation, forced and child marriage, forced abortion and forced sterilisation. It also organised an expert **seminar on harmful practices** with academic experts and representatives of the **Council of Europe** and **European Institute for Gender Equality** (EIGE). A **public consultation was held in May**

64 See, also, the Joint Statement by 13 Civil Society Organizations.

2022 to gather evidence to tackle harmful practices by addressing prevention, support, training of professionals and victim-centred access to justice.[65]

In 2023, the Commission held a **targeted consultation workshop on harmful practices in the healthcare sector** to identify specific recommendations and in November 2023, the Scientific Analysis and Advice on Gender Equality Group (SAAGE) held a seminar **on obstetric violence**, attended by several specialists on the topic and Commission representatives. The topics discussed included the conceptualisation of obstetric and gynaecological violence as a form of gender-based violence and discrimination, actions taken in different Member States, and policy recommendations.[66]

The Recommendation **has not been adopted yet.** It should be noted that NGOs support the Recommendation and encourage the European Commission to adopt it in 2025, thereby including all forms of obstetric and gynaecological violence, mistreatment and abuse.[67]

Combating violence and harassment in the world of work

The European Commission committed in the Strategy to encourage Member States to ratify the 2019 International Labour Organization Convention No. 190 on **eliminating violence and harassment in the world of work.** Greece and Italy ratified it in 2021, Spain in 2022 and Belgium, France, Germany and Ireland in 2023. In March 2024, the Council adopted a decision inviting Member States to ratify the Violence and Harassment Convention.[68] As an **output** of this Council decision, Austria, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Portugal and Romania have ratified it, although it will not enter into force in some of these countries until 2025 or 2026.

In this context, in December 2023, the Commission revised its **internal policy against psychological and sexual harassment**, reinforcing data protection, broadening the scope of informal anti-harassment procedures in the Commission, expanding the coverage to all staff working for the Commission, and improving awareness, early detection and training.[69] There is not yet available data about the **results** of these actions but this will be covered in the GREVIO evaluation of the EU's implementation of the Istanbul Convention.

It can also be noted in the context of this specific objective that **the adopted 2024 Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence** adds rules on preventing and addressing sexual harassment at work in Member States where sexual harassment at work constitutes a criminal offence. It requires Member States to ensure that counselling services are available for victims and employers.. and that these services can provide advice for employers on how to address such offences appropriately (article 28 of the directive). Member States are also required to address sexual harassment at work in national policies and establish targeted actions, such as awareness-raising campaigns

65 European Commission. Prevention of harmful practices against women and girls. Call for evidence. https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/13110-Prevention-of-harmful-practices-against-women-and-girls_en.

66 SAAGE (2023). Obstetric Violence: Towards new understanding and responses.

67 See IPPF. https://europe.ippf.org/news/joint-civil-society-letter-european-commission-recommendation-harmful-practices.

68 European Union (2024). Council Decision (EU) 2024/1018 of 25 March 2024 inviting Member States to ratify the Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No 190) of the International Labour Organization.

69 European Commission (2024). 2024 Gender Equality Report.

and research and education programmes for sectors where workers are most exposed (articles 34.2 and 34.9 of the directive). Lastly, persons with supervisory functions in the workplace shall receive training on how to recognise, prevent and address sexual harassment at work (article 36(6) of the Directive.

The **outputs** in this area have been achieved in a relative short time and synergies were realised between policy areas. The **results** of these requirements will be visible only once the Member States have transposed the Directive.

Combat gender-based cyber violence

Gender-based violence is acknowledged as one of the main systemic risks stemming from the design or functioning of services offered by online platforms in the **Regulation on a Single Market for Digital Services, the 'Digital Services Act' (DSA).**[70] The DSA entered into force in November 2022 and all of its provisions are applicable from 17 February 2024 onwards. It contains obligations for online platforms to create a safer digital space in which the fundamental rights of all users of digital services are effectively protected, including equality and non-discrimination.

In this context, the Commission has to date designated 24 very large online platforms (VLOPs) including 4 adult content VLOPs – PornHub, XVideos, Stripchat and XNXX – and 2 very large online search engines (VLOSEs).[71] Under the DSA, VLOPs and VLOSEs are required to carry out an annual risk assessment to identify, analyse and assess any systemic risks stemming from the design or functioning of their service and its related systems, including algorithmic systems, or from the use made of their services. On the basis of this assessment, VLOPs and VLOSEs must put in place effective measures to mitigate systemic risks. Gender-based violence, and the negative consequences for users' physical and mental wellbeing are among the risks that VLOPs and VLOSEs must assess. VLOPs and VLOSEs were to prepare their risk assessment reports by November 2024 and many of them have done so.[72] The European Commission is monitoring compliance by all designated VLOPs and VLOSEs by exercising its enforcement powers, e.g. by opening investigations, sending requests for information, and so on.

In addition to the DSA, the **Directive on violence against women and domestic violence** (articles 5 to 8) criminalises severe and widespread forms of gender-based cyber violence: non-consensual sharing of intimate or manipulated material, cyberstalking, cyber harassment and cyber incitement to hatred or violence based on gender. The DSA does not define what content is illegal. These definitions are to be found in other Union laws or national laws. Once the Directive on violence against women and domestic violence is transposed in the EU-27, it will be used as the basis for the definition of the illegality of activities mentioned above.

In addition, the Commission has promoted under the DSA a new **cooperation framework** with EU and national authorities to ensure internet platforms meet

70 Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market for Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act), OJ L 277, 27.10.2022.

71 See: European Commission (2025). Supervision of the designated very large online platforms and search engines under DSA. Data updated on 6 February 2025.

72 Most of the individual platforms and search engines have published their risk assessment reports on their official websites. A database of all individual websites of VLOPs and VLOSEs which have published risk assessments is available at https://tremau.com/resources/dsa-database/

its obligations. By February 2024 Member States had appointed national Digital Services Coordinators, which, together with the Commission, are responsible for supervising, enforcing and monitoring the DSA.

Further, the Commission regularly monitors and evaluates the implementation of the **Code of conduct on countering illegal hate speech online**, introduced in 2016 within the EU Internet Forum, and signed since then by the major internet companies. An evaluation of the implementation of the Code of Conduct by the Commission in 2022 found a slowdown in progress,[73] although a High-Level Group on combating hate speech and hate crime, composed of the Commission, the signatories of the Code of Conduct, national authorities and CSOs, concluded in 2023 that the Code has been an efficient and successful instrument to tackle online hate speech over the years, but that more can and should be done.[74] Thus, on January 2025 a revised Code of conduct on countering illegal hate speech online +,[75] which strengthens the way online platforms deal with content deemed illegal hate speech, was mainstreamed into the regulatory framework of the DSA. As this revised Code of Conduct + covers all hate speech as criminalised in EU or national law, it is expected to cover any form of hate speech related to gender, once each Member State implements the article 8 of the Directive on violence against women and domestic violence, which covers cyber incitement to violence or hatred referred to gender.

Also, as included in the Strategy, the Commission has advanced preparatory work on the framework for cooperation with online platforms to ensure women's safety online, to be potentially implemented through a Code of Conduct on gender-based cyberviolence, integrated under the DSA. So far, .

In this area, all envisaged **outputs** were realised, with different actions complementing and reinforcing each other. It is too early to assess the **results**.

Strengthen prevention of violence against women and domestic violence

The Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence includes an entire chapter devoted to prevention and early intervention, that focuses on prevention measures, including, among many others, awareness-raising campaigns or programmes aimed at persons from an early age, measures to promote changes in behavioural patterns based on stereotypical roles for women and men, or training and information for professionals.

Also, as committed in the Strategy to address the first specific objective of the Strategy, the Commission set up in 2023 the EU network on the prevention of gender-based violence and domestic violence for Member State officials and key stakeholders, which is an important **output**.[76] The aim of the network is to provide a space for Member States to discuss violence prevention and ways to improve the work, through work with communities, engagement of men and boys, sharing knowledge and tools, and exchanging existing good practices and lessons learned on preventing violence.

73 European Commission (2022). Factsheet – 7th monitoring round of the Code of Conduct.

74 As reported here: https://www.pubaffairsbruxelles.eu/eu-institution-news/commission-advances-towards-an-enhanced-code-of-conduct-on-countering-illegal-hate-speech-online/ See also European Parliament (2024). Hate speech and hate crime: Time to act?, Briefing.

75 The code can be found here as a document.

76 European Commission Network on Prevention of Gender-Based and Domestic Violence.

The network met four times: in November 2023, April and November 2024 and March 2025. The first meeting focused on the topic of 'Early prevention mechanisms of law enforcement, health and social services, and inter-service coordination and data sharing'. The second meeting was on 'Engaging young people, in particular men and boys: role of education and digital media'. The third meeting focused on non-consensual sharing of intimate images or manipulated material and gender-based hate speech, while the fourth addressed consent and education on consent in sexual relationships. While these meetings were valuable, their final goal is not fully clear, and some stakeholders said that a roadmap for the Network, with a list and calendar of topics to be covered, was needed. Together with a lack of information about the follow-up of the conclusions and recommendations discussed in the meetings, usually directed to the Member States, the lack of clarity and clear outputs may limit its impact. The experts interviewed generally found that there is scope to reinforce prevention activities, including in the Member States.

Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE) organised a conference in September 2024, 'From emergency support to violence prevention',[77] focused on the transformative potential of primary prevention, with the participation of representatives of the European Commission. Primary prevention of gender-based violence before it happens and secondary prevention, focused on the detection of violence and immediate response, are key for improving the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of gender-based violence and domestic violence strategies.[78] Effective primary prevention strategies are school-based programmes addressing dating violence and sexual abuse prevention; home visitation and health outreach during pregnancy; interventions for children exposed to abuse or intimate partner violence; empowerment-based and participatory approaches targeting structural gender inequality; feminist self-defence training for women and girls; girls' clubs promoting social and cognitive skills; and initiatives aimed at changing social and cultural gender norms, particularly those engaging men and boys.[79]

While the envisaged **output** has been realised, it is also too early to assess the **results**.

Address the specific needs of victims

To address the specific needs of victims of gender-based violence, the second specific objective of the Strategy, the Commission adopted in June 2020 the first EU strategy on victim's rights (2020–2025),[80] that builds on the Victims' Rights Directive of 2012.[81] The objective of this strategy is to ensure that all victims of all crime, no matter where in the EU or in what circumstances the crime took place, can fully rely on their rights. It pays particular attention to the specific needs of victims of gender-based violence.

77 The program of the conference is available at: https://wave-network.org/wp-content/uploads/WAVEconfa-genda_240924_web.pdf.

78 Tere Iglesias Lopez, Silvia Menecali, Agata Teutsch and Irene Zeilinger (2024). A life free from violence Primary prevention as the key to eliminating violence against women and girls. WAVE 2024.

79 WAVE (2023); A life free from violence. Primary prevention as the key to eliminating violence against women and girls

80 European Union (2020). COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS EU Strategy on victims' rights (2020-2025). COM/2020/258 final.

81 Directive 2012/29/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2012 establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime.

This **output** is based on a two-strand approach: empowering victims of crime and working together for victims' rights. It presents five key priorities[82] and outlines actions that will be conducted by the European Commission, Member States and civil society.

One of the actions included in the Strategy on Victim's Rights was the **Victims Right's Platform,** which was set up in 2020 with the aim of ensuring integrated support to victims through bringing together for the first time all EU-level actors relevant for victims' rights. The platform is composed of 34 members that include EIGE, EQUINET, FRA, End Female Genital Mutilation European Network, European Network of Migrant Women, European Women's Lobby and Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE). The members of the Platform **meet at least once every year** and **the Commission organises regularly ad hoc meetings dedicated to specific topics** under the Strategy on Victims' Rights. As outputs of the platform, examples of such ad hoc meetings are one addressing access to justice for vulnerable adults, irregular migrants and violence against women in 2021; another held in September 2022 focused on victims of war crimes; one in May 2023 on child victims; and one in June 2024 on healing and preventing offenders from reoffending.

Also, as part of the EU Strategy on Victims' Rights, in November 2022, the Commission reserved the number 116 016 as an **EU-wide harmonised helpline number for victims of violence against women**. As of 30 April 2023, the number is available for assignment in all Member States. The Directive on violence against women and domestic violence obliges all Member States to ensure that, in addition to any existing national number, helplines for victims are operated under the EU-wide number free of charge and 24/7 so that victims will be able to use the same number when they need help (article 29).

The Commission has also launched the '**Keep your eyes open' campaign on victims' rights**. The campaign aims to encourage people willing to see, recognise and support victims in their social circle, such as victims of gender-based violence, to use their rights and resources available to them.

While these are important outputs, there is no readily available information about the **results** of the Strategy on Victim's Rights.

In June 2022, the Commission adopted the **evaluation of the 2012 Victims' Rights Directive.**[83] The evaluation showed that the Directive has had a generally positive impact on the right to information, access to victim support services, access to justice, protection measures and the provision of professional training. At the same time, several shortcomings were identified. In July 2023, following an extensive consultation process, the **Commission adopted a proposal to revise the Victims' Right Directive**[84] aimed at addressing the problems iden

tified in the evaluation. The specific objectives of the proposal and their outcomes have been assessed in the impact assessment for the revision of the Directive.[85] The proposed amendments relate to key victims' rights including access to in-

82 The five priorities are: (i) effective communication with victims and a safe environment for victims to report crime; (ii) improving support and protection to the most vulnerable victims; (iii) facilitating victims' access to compensation; (iv) strengthening cooperation and coordination among all relevant actors; and (v) strengthening the international dimension of victims' rights.

83 SWD(2022)179 final.

84 COM(2023)424 final.

85 SWD(2023)246 final.

formation, improved support and protection, improved participation in criminal proceedings, and easier access to compensation. In March 2024, the European Parliament published a **Report on the proposal directive**[86] and the Council adopted its position in June 2024, which supports improvements in crime reporting and access to support services and victim helplines.[87] **Negotiations with the European Parliament have not started at the time of writing this report.**

Whereas the envisaged **output** has been realised, it is too early to assess the **results**.

Fight against trafficking in human beings

To address this specific objective, on 14 April 2021, the Commission adopted a new **EU Strategy on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (2021–2025).** This output provides for a comprehensive response to trafficking, from preventing the crime and protecting and empowering victims to bringing traffickers to justice, while enhancing international cooperation to tackle trafficking. In this context, the Commission launched the EU-wide campaign, '**End human trafficking. Break the invisible chain**', to inform the public about the different forms of exploitation and urging the public to join the fight against them.

In December 2022, the Commission presented a proposal for a **revision of the Directive on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protection of its victims,**[88] which was eventually adopted in July 2024.[89] Under the revised directive, national laws will have to define the exploitation of surrogacy, forced marriage and illegal adoption as forms of exploitation. Those who knowingly use services provided by victims of trafficking will have committed a criminal offence. Trafficking committed through the use of information and communication technologies will be considered as an aggravating circumstance when it relates to sexual exploitation. All EU countries will nominate national anti-trafficking coordinators and will have to adopt and regularly update national action plans. EU Member States have two years (until 15 July 2026) to transpose these new rules into their national law.

Under the lead of the EU Anti-Trafficking Coordinator and with support of the EU Agencies and Member States, a common Anti-Trafficking Plan[90] to address the risks of trafficking in human beings and support potential victims among those fleeing the war in Ukraine[91] was adopted in 2022. The Plan is based on the Strategy on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and addresses the specific challenges emerging from the war on Ukraine, for example, providing information to the people arriving, setting up dedicated helplines, providing training to front-line officers to identify victims, coordinated labour inspections in high-risk sectors, and enhanced monitoring of offline and online risks with the support of Europol.

86 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2024-0157_EN.html.

87 https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/06/13/victims-rights-council-finalises-position-on-strengthened-eu-law/.

88 Directive (EU) 2024/1712 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 amending Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims.

89 Ibid.

90 A Common Anti-Trafficking Plan to address the risks of trafficking in human beings and support potential victims among those fleeing the war in Ukraine.

91 Ibid.

The **outputs** of the actions foreseen under this area have been realised. While some information on **results** is available, the findings so far are ambiguous. The European Commission reports every two years on the progress made in the fight against trafficking in human beings. The fifth **Progress report on combating Trafficking in Human Beings (January 2025**)[92] was published, providing an analysis of statistics and outlining the results of anti-trafficking actions. According to the report, the number of registered victims has increased by 20.5 % between 2021 and 2022, with the majority of victims, 54 %, being non-EU citizens. While the increase in numbers may be the result of better detection of victims, the figures may reflect new challenges such as the low numbers of prosecutions and convictions, or emerging new forms of exploitation by high-level criminal organisations. In this context, according to this report, the EU Strategy has proved a robust framework with relevant actions implemented and the revised Directive has strengthened the legal response to the crime, fostering victims' rights with a gender-sensitive and child-sensitive approach.

Improve availability of comprehensive, updated and comparable data on gender-based violence and domestic violence

The Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence establishes a framework for the collection, development, production and publication of disaggregated and comparable data on all forms of violence covered by the Directive (article 44). Member States shall endeavour to conduct regular population-based surveys and the systematic gathering of comparable administrative data from competent authorities, such as law enforcement, judicial bodies and healthcare services, disaggregated by sex, age and the relationship between victim and offender. The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) shall support Member States, including through establishing common standards that ensure comparability.

To advance towards this specific objective, Eurostat has produced the **EU-wide survey on gender-based violence against women and other forms of interpersonal violence.** EU Member States were invited to carry out the survey on a voluntary basis and, as a result, national statistical authorities in **18 EU Member States** have conducted the survey, while Italy contributes to data collection on violence against women through their comprehensive national survey. To fill the gap in availability of data from the remaining eight EU Member States, and to provide for EU-27 aggregate results, the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) and EIGE have engaged in the Violence Against Women Survey II project (VAW II), which interviews a representative, nationwide sample of women in each of the eight countries based on the EU-GBV survey questionnaire and methodology.

The release of EU-wide data by Eurostat, FRA and EIGE, including a joint publication, took place on 25 November 2024.[93]

The European Commission has also recently devoted a **Flash Eurobarometer to gender stereotypes and violence against women** with the aim of gaining a better understanding of EU citizens' attitudes towards violence, and violent or humiliating behaviours. One of the findings of the Barometer is that across the

92 REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS on the progress made in the European Union in combating trafficking in human beings (Fifth Report), COM/2025/8 final.

93 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/gender-based-violence/database.

EU, there is a very low acceptance towards minimising a lack of consent (14 %), but differences between Member States are noteworthy (ranging from 9 % to 33 %). The share of respondents that disagree that women often make up or exaggerate claims of abuse or rape is 73 % on average, but the country differences are again high, ranging from 56 % to 85 %.[94]

In light of the analysis so far, the **outputs** realised in this area are of great importance. It can be expected that they will support the other actions, especially by showing their continued relevance. As yet, the data obtained only provides partial indications of the situation with regards to gender-based and domestic violence. It should also be noted that a decrease in violence statistics does not yet provide information on the contribution made to this by the Strategy. In other words, further research and analysis will be required to measure the **results**.

Examples of actions and outputs at the Member State level

As reported by SAAGE experts, since 2020, most of the EU countries have adopted either strategies or action plans specifically devoted to combating gender-based violence, strategies or action plans against domestic violence with a gender focus, or have opted for including a specific axis in their strategies for promoting equality between women and men.

Countries have **passed or amended laws** additional or complementary to these strategies and plans, addressing varied issues related to violence against women and/or domestic violence. According to information provided by SAAGE experts, some of these laws recognise **new offences as violence against women** such as including in the definition of domestic violence the use of psychological violence (Denmark), mental violence (Bulgaria), financial violence, sexual harassment and dissemination of pornographic or sexual material against women (Cyprus), preventing access to or enjoyment of one's own or common economic and property resources (Portugal) and the forced restriction of private life, personal freedom and personal rights (Bulgaria). A number of EU countries **have recently passed legal reforms aligned with Article 36 of the Istanbul Convention**, relying on a definition of rape/sexual violence based on a lack of freely given consent.[95]

According to the information provided by SAAGE experts, at least seven countries have developed specific strategies or plans aimed at combating human trafficking: Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Malta and Spain. These strategies are largely inspired by the EU Strategy and focus on better detection of human trafficking; support and protection to victims; increasing public awareness and making human trafficking more visible; strengthening criminal liability; building the capacity of specialists working in this field; and analysis, assessment and research activities.

These examples shows that the Strategy is producing **results** at the Member State level, even if the exact contribution of the Strategy to the changes in the Member States cannot be determined.

94 European Commission (2024). Flash Eurobarometer 544: Gender stereotypes – violence against women.

95 These countries are: Belgium, Finland, Croatia, Denmark, Greece, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden.

Main intermediate impacts

The recently released survey on gender-based violence provides data for the first time at the EU level on the share of ever-partnered women who have experienced violence by an intimate partner, by type of violence:[96] **in 2021, 31.8 % of women had experienced it**, whereby 29.9 % had experienced psychological violence, 10.7 % physical, including threats and not sexual, and 17.7 % physical, including threats or sexual. Differences across Member States are wide, with shares over 50 % in Finland, Hungary and Slovakia and close to 20 % in Bulgaria and Poland. Available data does not allow monitoring advances at the EU level.

The available national data for 15 countries shows that in 8 countries, the **ratio of women victims of intentional homicide by intimate partner** (per 100 000 inhabitants) decreased between 2020 and 2022 (last data available), but increased in the remaining 7 countries (no EU-level data is available).[97] The **ratio of women victims of sexual assault** (per 100 000 inhabitants) notably increased between 2020 and 2022 from 49.81 to 64.19. The ratio among men also increased shows much lower levels (from 9.13 in 2020 to 10.9 in 2022). Similarly, the ratio of **women victims of rape** (per 100 000 inhabitants) notably increased between 2020 and 2022 from 28.03 to 38.02, where the ratio among men also increased but with much lower levels (from 3.04 to 4.08).

This data refers only partially to the specific objectives, because of the lack of available data. Also, the under-representation of data because of under-reporting should be noted. Moreover, while it could be affirmed that a sensitive legislative and policy framework is conductive to positive results, the mixed evidence shown by the data presented above cannot be directly attributed to the outputs delivered in this intermediate objective of the Strategy. It is thus too early to assess the **results**, as the data refers to 2020–2022, the ratification of the Istanbul Convention by the EU entered into force in October 2023, and the Directive was adopted in May 2024.

4.2.1.2 Challenging gender stereotypes

As described previously and reflected in Figure 1, the priority area, 'Free from violence and gender stereotypes', has two intermediate objectives, the second of which is challenging gender stereotypes. Two specific objectives are linked to it: changing attitudes and challenging stereotypes, and addressing AI-posed risks of intensifying gender inequalities.

Changing attitudes and challenging stereotypes

To address the specific objective of changing attitudes and challenging gender stereotypes, on March 2023, the European Commission launched an **EU-wide communication campaign to challenge gender stereotypes**. This **output**, the **#EndGenderStereotypes** campaign, covered gender stereotypes in different areas of life, such as career choices, sharing care responsibilities and decision-making. The campaign was awarded a Forbes Social Award 2023. However, several CSOs interviewed felt that its effectiveness and overall impact would have benefitted from deeper engagement with CSOs. They feel that this could have contributed to improving the reach of the campaign and to increasing the

96 Online data code: gbv_ipv_type. DOI:10.2908/gbv_ipv_type. Last update:25/11/2024 11:00.

97 Online data code: crim_hom_vrel__custom_14804372.

attention to the way gender stereotypes intersect with other forms of discrimination, such as those based on race, disability or socioeconomic status. .

The Commission also created in 2023 an expert group on enhancing supportive learning environments for vulnerable learners and for promoting wellbeing and mental health at school. This expert group produced in March 2024 **EU guidelines for both policymakers[98] and educators[99] making 11 recommendations addressing gender-specific challenges** such as gender stereotypes, gender biases, cyber bullying and sexual harassment. However, information about the implementation of these recommendations is not readily available.

Under the **mutual learning programme on gender equality,** a seminar on the **role of men and boys in advancing gender equality and breaking gender stereotypes** was held in February 2023.[100] Discussions during the seminar ranged from the need to enhance data collection, how to tackle emerging toxic masculinity among young boys, and sustainable funding for local projects. Some recommendations resulted from the discussions, such as the need for men and boys from different target groups to be involved in transforming gender norms and the need for strong laws and additional dedicated resources to support and implement preventative strategies that work with men and boys.

The Scientific Analysis and Advice on Gender Equality (SAAGE) network organised a thematic seminar entitled **'Women and the media: realising a potential for gender equality'** in June 2023. The seminar explored the challenges in media coverage of women (such as lack of participation, misogynistic coverage of violent crimes and gender stereotyping) and ways to advance gender equality (including good practices). A summary report was published online.[101]

All committed **outputs** in the Strategy under this specific objective have been achieved. The **results** in terms of awareness raised, mutual learning or knowledge created are significant, though not easily assessed.

Address AI-posed risks of intensifying gender inequalities

The Strategy also includes, within the intermediate objective of challenging gender stereotypes, the specific objective of addressing the risks posed by AI of intensifying gender inequalities. The need for a gender-sensitive analysis of AI has been made clear by independent experts for years, identifying AI applications and uses that have a disproportionate negative impact on women, or that reinforce gender biases and stereotypes.[102] AI's applications throughout society, from the labour market and medicine and to policies countering gender-based violence – shows that AI could reproduce gender social inequalities if legislation fails to carefully regulate it and limit its risks. Moreover, it has long been shown that databases used to train Large Language Models (LLM) and Generative AI

98 European Commission (2024). *Wellbeing and mental health at school – Guidelines for education policymakers*. Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

99 Ibid.

100 The discussion papers drafted by Member States and a summary report are available at: https://commission.europa.eu/publications/eu-mutual-learning-programme-gender-equality-role-men-and-boys-advancing-gender-equality-and_en.

101 N. Crowley (2023). Women and the Media: realizing a Potential for Gender Equality.

102 A. Karagianni (2025). The EU Artificial Intelligence Act through a Gender Lens. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. January.

might include gender-biased data, where AI replies to users' prompts convey stereotyped understandings of men's and women's roles in society.[103] Moreover, an intersectional approach is necessary, for example because black women are reported to be the social group least represented in AI and the recognition rate of black women's faces is much lower compared to white men (and white people in general).[104]

The **Regulation laying down harmonised rules on artificial intelligence and amending regulations, the Artificial Intelligence Act (AI Act), was adopted**.[105] The AI Act is the first-ever comprehensive legal framework on AI worldwide and acknowledges the risk of AI systems perpetuating gender stereotypes and biases. Its aim is to ensure that AI systems respect fundamental rights, safety and ethical principles. Therefore, the regulation obliges providers of AI models to take measures to assess and mitigate risks of the generation and dissemination of harmful, illegal and discriminatory content**.**

While the AI Act establishes a basis and framework to mitigate AI-induced gender biases, it may not fully address the complexities of gender bias in AI. It could also benefit from more explicit guidelines on assessing and mitigating gender-specific risks.[106] In fact, observers highlighted the predominantly gender-neutral language used in the AI Act, where references to possible discrimination are recurrent, whereas gender issues are scarcely considered. References to 'gender equality' are limited to Recitals 27 and 48 of the AI Act, together with another mention in Article 95(2)(e) AI Act, which requires the AI Office and Member States to assess and mitigate the negative impacts of AI systems on vulnerable groups, including women. The term 'women' also appears in Recitals 56 and 57 of the AI Act in relation to discrimination patterns against women and individuals based on sexual orientation.[107] As an example, Article 5 of the AI Act – prohibiting the use of biometric categorisation systems based on sensitive characteristics – does not mention gender in the list of protected characteristics. Moreover, a marginal role is given to the Gender Impact Assessment (GIA) of AI, unclearly conflated with the Risk Management System (RMS) and the Fundamental Rights Impact Assessment (FRIA). These tools may not be able to detect the possible negative impact of AI tools on women and instead focus on other aspects and risk which are not necessarily or explicitly related to gender equality.

The AI Act lacks comprehensive mechanisms for judicial review in cases where AI systems may cause gender discrimination, because it does not mandate fundamental rights assessments, nor does it ensure diversity in data, which could lead to continued biases, and does not provide technical solutions for compliance. In addition, while the AI mentions transparency obligations, the law does not enforce obligations where discrimination derives from the application of AI systems. This may limit avenues for redress when AI applications perpetuate or exacerbate

103 UNESCO (2024). Challenging systematic prejudices: an investigation into bias against women and girls in large language models. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000388971.

104 J. Buolamwini and T. Gebru (2018). 'Gender Shades: Intersectional Accuracy Disparities in Commercial Gender Classification' in Proceedings of the 1st Conference on Fairness, Accountability and Transparency, PMLR 81: 77–91. https://proceedings.mlr.press/v81/buolamwini18a.html.

105 Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 laying down harmonised rules on artificial intelligence and amending Regulations (EC) No 300/2008, (EU) No 167/2013, (EU) No 168/2013, (EU) 2018/858, (EU) 2018/1139 and (EU) 2019/2144 and Directives 2014/90/EU, (EU) 2016/797 and (EU) 2020/1828 (Artificial Intelligence Act).

106 F. Lütz (2024). The AI Act, gender equality and non-discrimination: what role for the AI office?

107 A. Karagianni (2025). The EU Artificial Intelligence Act through a Gender Lens: 5.

gender stereotypes.[108] National Human Rights Institutions (NHRI) or similar national bodies are not provided with a direct monitoring or oversight role under the AI Act. According to the AI Act, independent authorities must be consulted and involved when it comes to the use of real-time remote biometric identification systems in publicly accessible spaces for the purpose of law enforcement. Moreover, each Member State is required to establish and appoint an independent notified body with a legal personality. It is worth noting that Article 77 of the Act rules that national public authorities or bodies which supervise or enforce the respect of obligations under Union law protecting fundamental rights, including the right to non-discrimination, shall have the power to request and access any documentation created or maintained under this Regulation in an accessible language and format when access to that documentation is necessary for effectively fulfilling their mandates within the limits of their jurisdiction. However, this power is limited to AI tools and systems classified as high-risk. Moreover, Article 77 of the AI Act must be drafted by national authorities, made publicly available and include national equality bodies.[109]

The **Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence** complements the AI Act through specific provisions. For example, whereas the AI Act mostly stipulates transparency, the Directive explicitly criminalises, as mentioned previously, the non-consensual sharing of material that make it appear someone is engaged in sexually explicit activities (article 5). The Directive also foresees prompt removal and disabling access to such material (article 23).

The AI Act is a very important **output** with a high potential for **results** on addressing the AI risks of intensifying gender stereotypes. Given that it was adopted in mid-2024, no information is available yet regarding potential results.

Examples of actions and outputs at the Member State level

Awareness of the role of gender stereotypes and subsequent actions are varied among Member States. According to information provided by SAAGE experts referring to the period 2020–2024, the issue is not high on the agenda in a number of countries, but **breaking gender stereotypes** is a primary objective of recent national strategies and/or action plans for gender equality.[110]

Other more specific initiatives address **sexist treatment of women** in advertisements and the media, education of children in stereotype-free environments, gender stereotypes that limit the presence of women in STEM disciplines, gender stereotypes regarding care and work–life balance, gender stereotypes conducive to gender-based violence and the subject of gender-neutral language**.**

For example, in **Croatia**, training programmes are provided for courts, social services and police staff to address holding gender stereotypical beliefs. In **Lithuania**, educational campaigns and policy initiatives have been launched to challenge traditional gender roles and stereotypes and to promote gender equality in all spheres. In **Portugal**, the Digital Education Reform programme aims to combat gender stereotypes and sexual segregation in the field of technology.

108 A. Kundu (2024). The AI Act's gender gap: When algorithms get it wrong, who rights the wrongs? *Internet Policy Review.*

109 Equinet (2024). The Gendered Impact of AI: Mapping the Problem, Exploring Solutions. April.

110 Including in Bulgaria, Czechia, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg and Spain.

A direct link between these country initiatives and the outputs of the Strategy cannot be made. Yet, these examples show that efforts at both the EU and Member State levels are often aligned and reinforce each other.

Main intermediate impacts

The previously mentioned 2017 Eurobarometer on gender equality and the 2024 Special Eurobarometer devoted to gender stereotypes provide non-comparable information and the impact of the outputs in this specific objective on gender stereotypes before and after the Strategy cannot be fully assessed. Nevertheless, some questions were repeated, allowing for some degree of comparison, also with the 2014 Eurobarometer on gender equality. While in 2017 44 % of surveyed persons believed that the most important role of a women is to take care of her home and family and 43 % believed that the most important role of a man is to earn money, these shares have reduced to 38 % and to 42 % in 2024 respectively. Also, 51 % of surveyed persons in 2024 believed that family life suffers when the mother has a full-time job, which means a decreased compared to 60 % in 2014, but the gap among member States has widened. The 2024 Eurobarometer does show that while EU citizens generally support gender equality as beneficial for all, major differences are detected between Member States and age groups. Certain gender stereotypes persist: 40 % of surveyed persons agree that men often earn more than women because their jobs are more demanding, while 34 % think that women should give priority to their family responsibilities over their career. A share of 23 % agree that women are not ambitious enough to get more senior positions in an organisation and 19 % that men taking parental leave show a lack of career ambition.[111]

4.2.1.3 Effectiveness at priority area level

The European Union has been **very active** in this priority area. **Most of the actions** committed in the EU Strategy for Gender Equality 2020–2025 **have been developed and significant outputs have been achieved**, such as the ratification of the Istanbul Convention by the EU, the adoption of the Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence and of the revised Directive on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protection of its victims, together with the new EU Strategy on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (2021–2025). The approval of the Digital Services Act (DSA) in 2022 and of the AI Act in 2024 are also crucial steps in addressing cyber violence, together with the Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence, the new cooperation framework under the DSA, and the revised Code of conduct on countering illegal hate speech online +.

While the legally binding character of these measures is possibly the strongest element of these measures, stronger and better structured dialogue with CSOs and women's specialist services could contribute to improving engagement and effectiveness of the work performed by all stakeholders. In the same vein, setting clear objectives for the Network on the prevention of gender-based and domestic violence and a roadmap for its work could contribute to progressing towards the adoption of a prevention approach, including **work with men and boys** and **work with perpetrators.**

111 European Commission (2024). Special Eurobarometer 545 – Gender Stereotypes.

Similarly, the **#EndGenderStereotypes campaign** has been effective in addressing gender stereotypes in different areas of life, but according to stakeholders consulted, it could have further improved reach and effectiveness through better consultation and coordination with CSOs, WROs and other stakeholders. A

Availability of data at the EU level is crucial and EU data is an important **outcome**. However, the most relevant indicators cannot be monitored yet. While available partial data does not show significant improvement, this cannot be attributed to the Strategy; not enough time has passed since the main outputs have been delivered.

Mixed progress was reported by stakeholders regarding the degree of achievement of the specific objectives of this area. As assessed by SAAGE experts, the average level of advancement in the Member States has been 3.1 on a scale of 1 to 5, the second highest across the priority areas, although the advancement in addressing gender stereotypes tends to be scored lower. There are wide differences across Member States, with Hungary (1) and Czechia, Malta and the Netherlands (2) scoring low. The specific contribution of the Strategy for Gender Equality to the achievement of the objectives in this thematic priority has been rated even higher: 3.4 on a scale of 1 to 5, the second highest mark.

SAAGE and the other stakeholders and consulted experts have pointed out to inhibiting factors behind the poor advancement towards the objectives of the Strategy, such as the **Covid-19 pandemic** and the lockdown measures that have aggravated domestic gender-based violence.[112] The **rise of populist right-wing parties** and accompanying public discussions about the so-called 'gender ideology' contribute to trivialising the impacts of violent and stereotypical discourse. Further, limited attention has been given to **perpetrators of gender-based violence and to the role of men and boys**.

4.2.2 Thriving in a gender-equal economy

The European Commission points out in the Strategy the relevance of equal treatment legislation, laws to address particular inequalities and 'efforts to mainstream the gender perspective into different policy areas' as effective tools to make progress over the past decades. Moreover, regarding the economic realm, the Strategy makes clear that women spend more time on care than men, either paid or unpaid, formal or informal. Women in the EU spend 22 hours per week on care and household work, while men spend only 9 hours.[113] Gender gaps in the labour market, in participation across sectors, pay, pension and care are strongly related to the lower participation of men in care.[114] Regarding childcare and long-term care, 'insufficient access to quality and affordable formal care services is one of the key drivers of gender inequality in the labour market'.[115] As much evi-

112 See also EIGE (2021). The Covid-19 pandemic and intimate partner violence against women in the EU.

113 European Commission (2020). A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025. COM (2020) 152 final.

114 C. Goldin (1990). *Understanding the gender gap: An economic history of American Women*. Oxford University Press; J.A. Fernández-Cornejo, E. Del-Pozo, L. Escot and C. Castellanos-Serrano (2018). 'Can an egalitarian reform in the PLS reduce the motherhood labor penalty? Some evidence from Spain'. *Revista Española de Sociología*, 27(3): 45–64. Federación Española de Sociología. https://doi.org/10.22325/fes/res.2018.33; M. Domínguez-Folgueras, M.J. González and I. Lapuerta (2022). 'The Motherhood Penalty in Spain: The Effect of Full- and Part-Time Parental Leave on Women's Earnings'. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 29(1): 164–189. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxab046.

115 F. Hoffmann and R. Rodrigues (2010). 'Informal carers: who takes care of them?'. Policy brief. April. Vien-

dence shows, a key reason explaining the differences in employment patterns of women and men is the gender-based division of meeting care needs, especially for children.

Thus, although the activities and expected outputs included in the Strategy are divided into four intermediate objectives (closing gender gaps in the labour market, achieving equal participation across different sectors, addressing gender pay and pension gaps, and closing the gender care gap), they may impact several of the specific and intermediate objectives, showing the high degree of interconnection and complexity of gender inequality. The fact that all these specific and intermediate objectives are together in the Strategy is effective for adequately defining the complex problem and developing solutions.

According to the stakeholders, beyond the particular results and impacts achieved or expected by each action and output analysed below, a positive impact is that the narrative, analysis and action framework is advancing towards a paradigm change in how care is seen in society, understanding that the way care needs are addressed by men, women, organisations and the public sector impacts women's and men's economic achievements. The Strategy advances a paradigm where men and the public sector should provide more care so women's economic conditions can improve.

Gender stereotypes were analysed in the previous section but are also relevant for the participation of men and women in the labour market and care. The #EndGenderStereotypes Campaign launched in 2023 covers key topics such as career choices and caring dads.[116] The following sections provide more details of the measures implemented from 2020 to the end of 2024.

4.2.2.1 Closing the gender gaps in the labour market

This first intermediate objective is structured in four specific objectives, as shown in Figure 1, that are related to promoting equal sharing of caring and improving work–life balance; monitoring gender equality challenges in the Member States; supporting women as investors and entrepreneurs; and mainstreaming gender in the social dialogue.

The main actions are related to the implementation of the Work-Life Balance Directive, the inclusion of gender equality objectives in employment in the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, monitoring the corresponding indicators through the Social Scoreboard, and some targeted actions related to entrepreneurship and social dialogue. Thus, the main actions undertaken are predominantly related to monitoring regulatory implementation and cooperation; gender mainstreaming and awareness-raising actions; and the provision of funding for the Strategy's actions.

na: European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research.

116 Examples in https://end-gender-stereotypes.campaign.europa.eu/work-life-balance_en.

Promote equal sharing of caring and improve the work–life balance of workers

The **2019 Directive on work-life balance for parents and carers**[117] introduced paternity leave and carers' leave; expanded minimum standards for parental leave; the right to request flexible working arrangements and legal protection. The Directive is expected to help obtain the Treaty-based goals of equality between men and women regarding labour market opportunities, equal treatment at work and the promotion of a high level of employment in the Union. The Work-Life Balance Directive provides four months of parental leave for each parent, two of which should be non-transferable, and the payment should be set 'in such a way as to facilitate the uptake of parental leave by both parents' (which provides a wide margin of national interpretation). The minimum paternity leave (10 working days or 2 natural weeks) should be paid at least equivalent to the level of national sick pay.

The **transposition of the Work-Life Balance Directive** in each country, encouraged by actions related to monitoring its implementation, is considered one of the most relevant outputs of the Strategy to advance towards a gender-equal economy. This transposition has triggered significant changes in parental and paternity leave, as well as leave for caring for older dependents in many countries and in the whole EU. It has led to national law changes which are considered effective in increasing work flexibility, improving work–life balance and starting to reduce gender gaps in parental leave systems and to consequently use the leave systems.

The 2019 Work-Life Balance Directive had its transposition deadline in **August 2022** for most elements. However, there are still elements in some countries which have not yet been fully implemented. Although most countries have notified full transposition, analysis from the legal network exposes that in June 2023, only the Netherlands had generally satisfactory transposed the Directive.[118] In November 2023, the European Commission referred Belgium, Ireland and Spain for failing to notify national measures to fully transpose the Directive on work–life balance.

By the end of 2024, outputs of the monitoring activities are evident: all Member States have communicated actions to transpose it.[119] The compliance check of the national rules against the provisions of the Directive is taking place, but further actions are still needed to monitor and support its full implementation. Moreover, systematically evaluating results regarding changes in taking up leave and impacts on gender equality in the labour market is needed. Evaluating if and how reforms coming from the Work-Life Balance Directive lead to more participation of men in care, especially childcare, is relevant to fine-tune further actions to reduce the gender care gap.

Yet, given that minimum standards set in the Work-Life Balance Directive are not expected to provide similar behaviour for men and women,[120] and that the level of

117 Directive (EU) 2019/1158 on work-life balance for parents and carers. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=LEGISSUM:4413650.

118 M. De la Corte-Rodríguez (2024).*The transposition of the Work-Life Balance Directive in EU Member States (II) – Considerable work still to be done*. European Commission: Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers.

119 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/NIM/?uri=CELEX:32019L1158.

120 M. De la Corte-Rodríguez (2024).*The transposition of the Work-Life Balance Directive in EU Member States (II) – Considerable work still to be done*. European Commission: Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers; C. Castro-García and M. and Pazos-Moran (2016). 'Parental Leave Policy and Gender Equality in Europe'. *Feminist Economics*, 22(3): 51–73. https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2015.1082033; T. Jurado-Guer-

payment will be decided by each country, it is important to monitor implementation and evaluate the results and impacts across the EU in the labour market for the next period to develop new actions. Harmonised data on maternity, paternity, parental and carers' leave use, considering the degree of payment, proportion of transferability and solo care,[121] is not yet available, so results cannot be analysed systematically across the EU.

In the Netherlands, men took 14 % of total maternity, paternity and parental leave in 2023.[122] So, despite the full transposition of the Work-Life Balance Directive, gender equality in taking up leave is far from being met. However, there is evidence of some positive results for gender equality from Spain's 2021 paid leave reform, which was passed in 2019 just before the Work-Life Balance Directive, and introduced most of the incentives for men to increase uptake of paternity and parental leave, which are combined and called 'birth and childcare leave'.[123] Spain is the only EU country where men and women use a similar number of paid leave days each year, a result of the design of its 2021 reform. Men used 42 % of paternity, maternity and parental leave in 2023.[124] The 2021 reform in Spain introduced paid leave which is equal for men and women (16 weeks), non-transferable and 100 % paid with a high ceiling. Given to the 'passerelle' clause in article 20(6) of the Work-Life Balance Directive, which recognises that family-related time off work due to maternity, paternity, parental and carers´ leave provided at the national level counts to meet the requirements of Maternity and Work-Life Balance Directives, the Spanish reform covers the minimum standards for men (about 9 weeks of paid leave). However, as the requirement for biological mothers is higher than for fathers, the Spanish reform did not cover the minimum standards, which stands at about 23 weeks.[125] Considering other national dispositions who provide three more paid weeks (pregnancy and nursing baby care leave), four more weeks of paid leave would be needed in Spain to reach the standards of both Directives.[126] The leave system design matters for gender equality.[127] Results in Spain showed a rapid change in men's uptake of paid leave, surpassing the levels achieved by the Nordic countries,[128] where

rero and J. Muñoz-Comet (2021). 'Design Matters Most: Changing Social Gaps in the Use of Fathers' Leave social gaps in the use of fathers' leave in Spain'. *Population Research and Policy Review*, 40(2): 589–615. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11113-020-09592-w.

121 C. Castellanos-Serrano, L. Escot and J.A. Fernández-Cornejo (2024). 'Parental Leave System Design Impacts on Its Gendered Use: Paternity Leave Introduction in Spain', *Family Relations*. https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12875.

122 A. Recio Alcaide and C. Castellanos-Serrano (2025). '¿Qué factores influyen más en que los padres usen el permiso por nacimiento sin solaparlo con la madre? Caracterización del solo care en España y comparativa con los países de la Unión Europea [*What factors most influence fathers to take birth leave without overlapping with the mother? Characterization of solo care in Spain and comparison with European Union countries*]. Working paper 2/2025. Instituto de Estudios Fiscales. Serie economía

123 C. Castellanos Serrano and A. Recio Alcaide (2025). Use of Paid Parental Leave in Spain by Mothers and Fathers of Children Born in 2023. The Problem of Simultaneity in the Parental Leave System Design. UNED.

124 A. Recio Alcaide and C. Castellanos-Serrano (in press).

125 M. De la Corte-Rodríguez (2024). *The transposition of the Work-Life Balance Directive in EU Member States (II) – Considerable work still to be done.* European Commission: Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2838/33291.

126 C. Castellanos Serrano and A. Recio Alcaide (2025). Use of Paid Parental Leave in Spain by Mothers and Fathers of Children Born in 2023. The Problem of Simultaneity in the Parental Leave System Design. UNED.

127 Ibid.

128 A. Recio Alcaide, C. Castellanos Serrano and J. Andrés Jiménez. (2024). Cómo incide el nuevo diseño de los permisos de nacimiento en la corresponsabilidad: Un análisis con registros administrativos de la Seguridad Social de 2016 a 2023. Working paper. Instituto de Estudios Fiscales. Serie economía, (4): 1–90.

the fathers' quota has a longer history, previous to the Strategy. In Sweden, the country with the second lowest gender gap in use of leave, men took 28 % of leave used in 2023.[129]

Despite these positive results, **advancement in solo care** *(*fathers on leave while mothers return to work*)* is still rare: only about 20 % of fathers using parental leave extend their childcare time at home as much as the law allows them. In Spain, most men use paid parental leave at the same time as mothers, as encouraged by law.[130] Solo care is the norm when men use leave in the Nordic countries, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. For example, the figures were 28 % in Sweden and 14 % in Netherlands in 2023. In contrast, there is a growing number of Member States where the simultaneous use of leave is becoming the norm when men are at leave, such as Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain.[131]

In order to evaluate the impacts of the Work-Life Balance Directive national reforms, how men use leave and impacts on men's and women's participation in care, labour market participation, must also be evaluated. Moreover, designs which promote simultaneous use through transferability or reduced payments can maintain gendered leave use. According to the literature[132] and the current leave design in the EU legislation,[133] most mothers are expected to be on leave between more than 5 and more than 9 months (more than 3 months of maternity leave plus their paid parental leave and the transferable part of parental leave for fathers), while most fathers are expected to be on leave between 0.5 months and 2.5 months (paternity leave and their non-transferable parental leave), depending on the final level of payment of parental leave. This supposes an improvement of men's involvement in childcare but maintains and legally reinforces the gender gaps in the labour market and care.

While some **partial information on positive results is available**, it is too early to assess the results in many countries where reforms have happened from 2022 on, as they are still in process and the transposition is not fully achieved in some countries and the compliance is not totally attained according to its monitoring. However, most experts expect some positive results as labour market legislation encourages men to become or increase their role as caregivers in most Member States.

129 A. Recio Alcaide and C. Castellanos-Serrano (2025).

130 A. Recio Alcaide, C. Castellanos Serrano and J. Andrés Jiménez. (2024).

131 Ibid.

132 I. Dobrotić, S. Blum, G. Kaufmann, A. Koslowski, P. Moss and M. Valentova (eds.) (2024). *International Review of Leave Policies and Research* 2024. https://www.leavenetwork.org/annual-review-reports/review-2024/; M. De la Corte-Rodríguez (2024). *The transposition of the Work-Life Balance Directive in EU Member States (II) – Considerable work still to be done*. European Commission: Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers; C. Castro-García and M. Pazos-Moran (2016). 'Parental Leave Policy and Gender Equality in Europe'. *Feminist Economics*, 22(3): 51–73. https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2015.1082033; C. Castellanos-Serrano, L. Escot and J.A. Fernández-Cornejo (2024). 'Parental Leave System Design Impacts on Its Gendered Use: Paternity Leave Introduction in Spain', *Family Relations.* https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12875; A. Recio Alcaide, C. Castellanos Serrano and J. Andrés Jiménez. (2024). Cómo incide el nuevo diseño de los permisos de nacimiento en la corresponsabilidad: Un análisis con registros administrativos de la Seguridad Social de 2016 a 2023. Working paper. Instituto de Estudios Fiscales. Serie economía, (4): 1–90.

133 Council Directive 92/85/EEC and Work-Life Balance Directive.

Monitor gender equality challenges in Member States

The **European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan,**[134] proposed by the European Commission and adopted by the European Council in 2021, set targets to increase overall employment in the EU to 78 % by 2030 and at least halve the gender employment gap compared to 2019. This output, which supposes the inclusion of gender indicators in the European Pillar of Social Rights, is a significant advancement towards gender mainstreaming in coordination and monitoring processes. Yet, the monitoring only partially includes a gender perspective to follow key dimensions of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

The **Social Scoreboard** systematically monitors how countries are advancing in key areas that support the European Pillar of Social Rights,[135] including three aspects related to gender gaps in the labour market: the gender employment gap as the headline indicator and the gender gap in part-time employment and gender pay gap as secondary indicators. Children aged younger than 3 years in formal childcare is another indicator analysed, which is a relevant factor for female labour market participation.[136] Where the gender dimension is directly considered, this scoreboard is an effective way to monitor the advancement of particular gender challenges in the labour market.

The labour market is a relevant aspect within the **European Semester**. This well-established monitoring and coordination process is a key element to understand and push for advancement in closing the gender gaps in the labour market. While specific gender-related topics such as early childhood education and care (ECEC) and long-term care (LTC) are included as policy areas in the **Country-Specific Recommendations** (CSRs) **database,**[137] gender equality on its own is not recognised as an area. Some countries have specific recommendations on increasing female labour market participation, and on other key areas included in the Strategy. Although a gendered approach is not introduced systematically in the review process (the national headline targets for countries for employment, education and poverty reduction are not disaggregated by sex),[138] the CSRs related to gender gaps in the labour market is a **positive result** which could contribute to encouraging national actions.

Support women to thrive as investors and entrepreneurs

Among the targeted actions related to entrepreneurship are Women Tech EU,[139] aimed to support early-stage tech start-ups funded and led by women, and its Women Leadership Programme,[140] to provide coaching and mentoring to European Innovation Council (EIC) funded women entrepreneurs. In 2024, the Horizon

134 The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan.

135 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/dashboard/social-scoreboard/.

136 Other relevant gendered dimensions such as unemployment and activity, people with tertiary education attainment, NEETs (not in education, employment or training) or early school leavers **are not systematically monitored by sex**, as is the case for other topics, such as healthy life years at age 65.

137 https://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/country-specific-recommendations-database/.

138 State of Play on the national targets for 2030: https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=25728&langId=en.

139 https://eismea.ec.europa.eu/programmes/european-innovation-ecosystems/women-techeu_en.

140 https://eic.ec.europa.eu/eic-funding-opportunities/bas/eic-women-leadership-programme_en#:~:text=The%20EIC%20Women%20Leadership%20Programme%20offers%20recurring%20cohorts%20aimed%20at,and%20broaden%20their%20professional%20connections.

Europe EIC 2023 Report[141] was an output including a section regarding Women Innovators. This showed that 16 % of applicants and 19 % of successful companies are led by women CEOs. Under the Pathfinder programme,[142] it was shown that 28 % of Project Coordinators and 27 % of participants were women. These are the kind of positive results obtained from these funding actions. The section on Women Innovators was not repeated in the 2024 report. Another output is that the EIC and the European Institute for Innovation and Technology have created an annual EU Prize for Women Innovators which will be awarded in mid-2025.[143] Most results on how these actions have supported women to thrive as investors and entrepreneurs are still unknown, but they are expected to be positive, although quite moderate given the scope and size of the actions.

Strengthen gender mainstreaming in social dialogue

Reinforcing gender equality within the social dialogue has been an objective of Strategy actions. In January 2023, the Commission presented an initiative to strengthen and promote **social dialogue** with concrete measures at the national and EU level and stressed the importance of reinforcing women's presence in social partners' organisations. As an output, the **Council Recommendation on strengthening social dialogue**[144] in the EU was adopted in June 2023. It includes a clear remark about the gender equality objective, pointing out the relevance of encouraging measures aiming at 'promoting gender equality and equal opportunities for all in terms of representation and thematic priorities'. Moreover, the Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Men and Women produced some recommendations regarding an information and awareness-raising campaign, the involvement of Member State stakeholders in the implementation of the Pay Transparency Directive, and funding for implementing this Directive.[145] The results are still unclear, as it is too early to assess the results.

Examples of actions and outputs at the Member State level

The Strategy, through the Work-Life Balance Directive, has encouraged the implementation of legal changes at the Member State level in this area. All Member States have carried out legal actions to transpose the Work-Life Balance Directive. By June 2023, almost one year after the transposition deadline, all Member States (except Germany) had implemented paternity leave, although some issues concerning payment remained in several countries, and only 10 countries have implemented two months of non-transferable parental leave paid at an adequate level.[146] A total of 10 countries (Austria, Cyprus, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Romania, Slovenia and Spain) reported changes in carers' leave in 2022 and 2023 and, by 2024, all EU Member States offer carers' leave, although some

141 European Commission: European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency, (2024). *The European Innovation Council – Impact report 2023 – Accelerating Deep Tech in Europe*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2826/072707.

142 https://eic.ec.europa.eu/eic-funding-opportunities/eic-pathfinder_en.

143 https://eic.ec.europa.eu/eic-prizes/european-prize-women-innovators-powered-eic-eit_en.

144 COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION of 12 June 2023 on strengthening social dialogue in the European Union (C/2023/1389). https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:C_202301389.

145 Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Men and Women (2024). Opinion on the role of social dialogue in implementing the principle of equal pay between women and men for the same work or work of equal value.

146 M. De la Corte-Rodríguez (2024).*The transposition of the Work-Life Balance Directive in EU Member States (II) – Considerable work still to be done*. European Commission: Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers: 17.

characteristics are different to those required by the Work-Life Balance Directive.

According to the SAAGE country experts, the national law reforms of parental leave systems encouraged by the Directive have been among the most relevant positive outputs of the Strategy to reduce gender gaps in the labour market. As previously described, experts foresee positive results, especially for countries where non-transferable and well-paid paternity and parental leave for men increased. More generally, the change of paradigm introduced by the Work-Life Balance Directive and in some national laws has increased men's role in care responsibilities. For example, Spain has shown positive results in men's uptake of paid parental leave.[147] However, given the lack of development of a systematic monitoring system for leave[148] and the ongoing reform process, it is still too early to assess the results.

Some countries have received country-specific recommendations on increasing female labour market participation, such as Austria and Germany. This recommendation to act, together with ESF funding, the renewed Barcelona targets and the European Care Strategy, are considered relevant for the enhancement of childcare facilities through the KiTa Quality Act in **Germany**, which supports the federal states in 2023 and 2024 with about EUR 4 billion for measures to further develop quality and improve participation in children's daycare.

Most EU Member States have developed strategies or specific projects to encourage women to participate in employment on a more equal basis to men, as salaried employees or as entrepreneurs. Another complementary approach has been passing laws, strategies or plans for equal opportunities between women and men, where an axis on equal access to employment and reducing gender gaps has been included. For example, **Portugal** has approved a new edition of the National Plan of Action for Equality between Women and Men for the period 2023–2026; the Strategy was a driving force for it. In **Luxembourg**, the Coalition Agreement 2023–2028 'Lëtzebuerg fir d'Zukunft stäerken' (Accord de coalition 2023–2028) contains a sub-section about gender equality and diversity. In **Romania**, the National Strategy for Employment 2021–2027, encouraged by the European Social Pillar, has a specific action for reducing gender disparity in employment. The SAAGE country experts consider all these changes at the Member State level as outputs facilitated by the Strategy.

Main intermediate impacts

At the EU level, over the Strategy period (up to where data is available), subtle advancements are observed in all aspects. The gender employment gap decreased by 0.8 p.p. since 2020 to 2023, when it reached 10.2 p.p. This decreasing trend is an advancement after several years with a flat trend, staying between 11.1 p.p. and 11.3 p.p. between 2013 and 2019. The gender gap in part-time employment has been reduced by 1 p.p. from 21.2 p.p. in 2020 to 20.2 p.p. in 2023. The gender gap in self-employment decreased 0.5 p.p. from 7.4 p.p. in 2019 to 6.9 p.p. in 2022.

147 A. Recio Alcaide, C. Castellanos Serrano and J. Andrés Jiménez. (2024). Cómo incide el nuevo diseño de los permisos de nacimiento en la corresponsabilidad: Un análisis con registros administrativos de la Seguridad Social de 2016 a 2023. Working paper. Instituto de Estudios Fiscales. Serie economía, (4): 1–90.

148 A. Bártová, I. Dobrotić and Á.A. Arnalds (2024). Parenting leave policy data gaps: Monitoring the implementation and impact of the EU Work-Life Balance Directive. Policy Brief. COST Action Parental Leave Policies and Social Sustainability. https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/yhncb.

So far, it is not possible to attribute causality between Strategy actions and the evolution of key indicators measuring intermediate objectives as evidence of results and impacts is not available or scarce in most cases. However, according to literature and stakeholders', all the actions adopted , and especially the binding measures, are key factors for the improvements observed in this intermediate objective. Moreover, experts expect further positive impacts when recently passed directives are fully transposed, the Work-Life Balance Directive is fully transposed and national reforms properly implemented.

Many countries still have implementation gaps in transposing the Work-Life Balance Directive, especially in implementing the two-month non-transferable parental leave paid at an adequate level, which is a key measure of the Work-Life Balance Directive to improve the sharing of childcare between men and women, and to provide a positive gender impact in labour market participation. In general, no ex ante evaluations have been carried out in each Member State. However, it could be argued that because the new paternity leave for fathers (or equivalent) and the two-month non-transferable parental leave paid at an adequate level, where it exists, are generally shorter than leave used by mothers and/or are poorly compensated, paternity and parental leave are not expected to serve parents to alternate in the role of main caregiver and thus to achieve gender equality in labour market impacts.[149] There is a gender gap in uptake of leave in all countries except Spain.[150] Nevertheless, some positive impacts are expected and observed, as more men are using paternity and parental leave. Stakeholdersconsider that Work-Life Balance Directive implementation has had a positive impact towards encouraging working men to be caregivers. Moreover, its binding nature is considered useful to counteract the anti-gender equality movement, beyond the degree of advancement in men's use of leave.

At present, there is no harmonised and periodic data on time use surveys where parental leave use is registered, nor a detailed parental leave use included in periodic statistics such as EU-SILC and EU-LFS. Thus, no systematic evidence is available at the EU level on results about the long-term participation of fathers in childcare related to the uptake of parental leave, and the impact on closing gender gaps in the labour market. However, there are impact assessments for some countries such as Iceland, Norway, Spain and Sweden which have introduced well-paid non-transferable parental leave, the so-called fathers' quota. The paternity leave and parental leave quotas for fathers promotes men's involvement in childcare to some degree.[151] Generous parental leave systems are a determinant factor for closing gender gaps in the labour market. However, these quotas do not necessarily promote the gender-equal sharing of uptake of leave[152]

149 A. Lütolf (2024). 'Caring breadwinners? A comparative analysis of parental leave policies to promote fathers' care work'. *Swiss Political Science Review* 2024;00: 1–22.

150 A. Recio Alcaide, C. Castellanos Serrano and J. Andrés Jiménez. (2024). Cómo incide el nuevo diseño de los permisos de nacimiento en la corresponsabilidad: Un análisis con registros administrativos de la Seguridad Social de 2016 a 2023. Working paper. Instituto de Estudios Fiscales. Serie economía, (4): 1–90.

151 A.A. Arnalds, G.B. Eydal and I.V. Gislason (2022). 'Paid Parental Leave in Iceland: Increasing Gender Equality at Home and on the Labour Market', in C. de la Porte et al. (eds). *Successful Public Policy in the Nordic Countries*. Oxford University Press; A-Z. Duvander and S. Cedstrand (2022). 'Gender Equal Parental Leave Use in Sweden. The Success of the Reserved Months' in C. de la Porte et al. (eds). *Successful Public Policy in the Nordic Countries*. Oxford University Press; J.A. Fernandez-Cornejo, C. Castellanos-Serrano, E. Del Pozo-García, L. Escot, J.I. Cáceres-Ruiz and M.T. Palomo-Vadillo (2024). 'Do I feel entitled to it? Caring dads after the equalization of parental leave in Spain'. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy.* DOI: 10.1108/IJSSP-08-2024-0406.

152 A. Lütolf (2024). 'Caring breadwinners? A comparative analysis of parental leave policies to promote fathers' care work'. *Swiss Political Science Review* 2024;00: 1–22; G. Kaufman (2020). *Fixing Parental Leave.*

and equal leave use between men and women if the quotas are only applied to a reduced part of the total leave. According to the Work-Life Balance Directive, by August 2027, all Member States should provide aggregated data on the uptake of different types of leave and flexible working arrangements.

If there continues to be a gender gap in parental leave use, discrimination will keep happening and gender gaps in the labour market will remain.[153] Moreover, if men use the paid parental leave at the same time as mothers,[154] this reduces the potential positive impacts on favouring mothers' returning to the labour market, as a care gap between paid leave and childcare services exists in most countries and women keep the role of main caregiver. Most men are not covering the care gap, totally or partially. Currently, statistical discrimination due to different uptake of paid leave is generally persistent. In any case, it still lacks EU and national impact assessments related to labour market impacts which show if, how, to what extent and for whom the parental leave reforms have caused a reduction in gender gaps in the labour market. This is relevant for collecting evidence on the impacts and advancement towards the design of leave systems that promote gender equality in the labour market.

4.2.2.2 Achieving equal participation across different sectors of the economy

The three specific objectives included in this intermediate goal relate to: closing the gender gaps in digital transition, ICT and STEM studies; addressing horizontal segregation; and gender balance in leadership positions in sport organisations. For this, the main actions are related to the introduction of the gender perspective, to some degree, in targeted, sectoral and educational European actions and strategies, in particular, the new Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027), the Digital Decade Policy Programme, the Updated Skills Agenda for Europe, the 2020 Recommendation on Vocational Education and Training, the reinforced Youth Guarantee, the European Education Area and the actions proposed to increase gender equality in sports. Thus, the main actions undertaken are predominantly related to gender mainstreaming within gender policy instruments, and particular actions have received funding, as expected in the Strategy.

Close gender gaps in digital transition, in ICT and STEM studies

The first Digital Education Action Plan passed in 2017 was updated and, as an output of the Strategy, addresses this specific objective, the new **Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027)**[155] which includes within Priority 2 'Enhancing digital skills and competences for the digital transformation' a specific action (Action 13) to promote women's participation in STEM. In this way, it aims at reducing the gender gap in STEM education and encouraging women to work in male-dominated sectors with better labour market conditions and with a potential high impact in the future. Beyond this positive output, the Action Plan has not integrated a systematic gender perspective. There is no readily available monitoring system and evidence on results from the Digital Education Action Plan are not currently available.

The Six Month Solution. New York University Press.

153 G. Kaufman (2020). *Fixing Parental Leave. The Six Month Solution.* New York University Press.

154 A. Recio Alcaide, C. Castellanos Serrano and J. Andrés Jiménez. (2024). Cómo incide el nuevo diseño de los permisos de nacimiento en la corresponsabilidad: Un análisis con registros administrativos de la Seguridad Social de 2016 a 2023. Working paper. Instituto de Estudios Fiscales. Serie economía, (4): 1–90.

155 European Commission (2021). Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027).

The Strategy stated that measures to implement the 2019 **Ministerial declaration of commitment on 'Women in Digital'** were going to be taken and that the **'Women in Digital'[156] scoreboard** would be used more systematically. In practice, this strand of work has been incorporated into the **Digital Decade Policy Programme**, which established targets on ICT skills and careers, connectivity, businesses and the public sector for 2030. The target to increase the number of ICT specialists to 20 million by 2030 mentions the aim of achieving gender balance and promoting women's access [to the sector] but no specific target was set for reducing the ICT gender gap. The Women in Digital scoreboard, formerly part of the Digital Economy and Society Index, is now integrated into the annual **Report on the State of the Digital Decade.** This report, **first published in 2023,**[157] tracks the EU's progress towards the Digital Decade targets. The 2024 Digital Decade report[158] comprises multiple elements, of which the most relevant to the Strategy are SWD(2024),[260] section 4.1.1.2. and the country-specific documents. National strategic roadmaps[159] detail the actions which Member States plan to implement to collectively reach the 2030 Digital Decade goals, including actions to promote women's access to the ICT sector.

Regarding the **Updated Skills Agenda for Europe,**[160] which includes quantitative objectives for improving existing skills and training in new skills to be achieved by 2025, there are some gender-related actions which can be highlighted. In the Action 1 'Pact for Skills', all the stakeholders must sign a Charter defining key principles, including anti-discrimination and gender considerations. It explicitly points out the relevance of providing equal access to additional upskilling opportunities for all people, regardless of gender, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation, and including low-qualified and low-skilled adults and people with a migrant background. Moreover, Action 7 aims at increasing the number of STEM graduates and fostering entrepreneurial and transversal skills by raising the attractiveness of STEM studies and careers, with focused actions to attract girls and women, and by leveraging and connecting existing networks to provide European entrepreneurial support for aspiring entrepreneurs, focusing on young women entrepreneurs and self-employment opportunities in the digital and green economy.

The European Skills Agenda sets objectives to be achieved by 2025, based on well-established quantitative indicators, but no indicators or objectives disaggregated by sex are declared. In this context, from March 2023 on, the year was declared as the European Year of Skills. In March 2024, the **Commission action plan[161] aimed at tackling labour and skills shortages**[162] in the EU by helping to activate under-represented people in the labour market; support skills, training and education; improve working conditions; improve intra-EU mobility for workers and learners; and attract talent from outside the EU. Member States are encouraged to carry out **tax reforms that reduce the tax wedge for second wage earners and low-income earners**, which can promote actions with positive

156 https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/women-digital.

157 https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/2023-report-state-digital-decade.

158 https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/factpages/state-digital-decade-2024-report.

159 https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/national-strategic-roadmaps.

160 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-promoting-our-european-way-of-life/file-updated-skills-agenda.

161 European Commission (2024). Commission sets out actions to tackle labour and skills shortages. Press release. 20 March. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_1507.

162 https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=27473&langId=en.

gender-equality impacts. This is considered an output of the implemented gender mainstreaming activities. Although actions related to this specific objective have been implemented, evidence on results is not yet available.

Address horizontal segregation and gender gaps in education and training

This specific objective was addressed through the **Recommendation on VET for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience,** which was passed by the Council in November 2020. This output aimed at defining key principles for ensuring that vocational education and training (VET) is agile in that it adapts swiftly to labour market needs and provides quality learning opportunities. The Recommendation includes measure number 19 that encourages Member States to adopt targeted measures to 'promote gender balance in traditionally "male" or "female" professions and address gender-related and other types of stereotypes together'. Moreover, it includes context information considering sex and age. This output comes from the Strategy's gender mainstreaming actions. No other gender-responsive approaches are observed in the Recommendation. SAAGE experts and the European Commission[163] have not reported on further related actions or outputs since the adoption of the Recommendation.

The **reinforced Youth Guarantee,**[164] adopted in 2020, is a commitment by all Member States to ensure that all young people under the age of 30 receive a good quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeships or traineeships within a period of four months of becoming unemployed or leaving education. As a Strategy output, it integrated a gender-sensitive approach in its conception and specifically when addressing women that are not in education or training (NEET). It specifically considers care as a gendered factor that has differentiated consequences for men and women across the life cycle. The Recommendation is backed up by significant EU financing under Next Generation EU and the long-term EU budget. The mutual learning activities support Member States to strengthen their infrastructure and measures for the reinforced Youth Guarantee. There are National Youth Guarantee implementation plans[165] and the EU shares information about actions taken across Member States, reports and guidelines, although the monitoring process does not sufficiently include a gender perspective.[166]

In the Communication on **Achieving the European Education Area (EEA) by 2025,**[167] the European Commission proposed in 2020 an **inclusion and gender dimension** as one of the six key dimensions of the EEA. The others were quality, green and digital, teachers and trainers, higher education, and the geopolitical dimension. The EEA aims to promote cooperation among the EU Member States

163 https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/vocational-education-and-training/about-vocational-education-and-training.

164 COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION of 30 October 2020 on A Bridge to Jobs – Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee and replacing the Council Recommendation of 22 April 2013 on establishing a Youth Guarantee https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32020H1104(01).

165 https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/european-employment-strategy/youth-employment-support/reinforced-youth-guarantee/youth-guarantee-country-country_en.

166 https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/european-employment-strategy/youth-employment-support/reinforced-youth-guarantee/youth-guarantee-knowledge-centre_en.

167 COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS on achieving the European Education Area by 2025 COM/2020/625 final https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex-%3A52020DC0625.

to build more resilient and inclusive national education and training systems. In this context, the **Education and Training Monitor**[168] provides a monitor toolbox whose main complementary indicator and most of the rest can be broken down by sex. The inclusion of the gender perspective has gone beyond the Communication towards the strategy and monitoring process, although the main targets do not explicitly include the gender dimension.

Actions and outputs foreseen have been realised, but information on how these have influenced the results is not yet available.

Address gender balance in leadership positions within sport organisations

With a similar action to what was enacted for the previous specific objective, the Strategy proposed to address the specific objective of addressing gender balance in sport organisations by establishing a **High-Level Group on Gender Equality in Sport** in December 2020, made up by 15 experienced and distinguished, highly qualified individuals who met for the first time in February 2021. The work of these experts is expected to lead to the implementation of concrete actions at the national and European level. In 2022, the **Recommendations and an action plan from this High-Level Group on Gender Equality in sport**[169] was published, covering various aspects, such as leadership, media coverage, social and economic aspects of sports, and several cross-cutting and transversal recommendations related to gender mainstreaming and intersectionality, and the role of men.

Regarding most of the actions and outputs described within this intermediate goal, which mainly refer to the introduction of the gender perspective in different actions and plans, evidence of results – how they impacted sectoral gaps in ICT, STEM, sports and other sectors – is not readily available. What was planned was done, but more evidence is needed to evaluate the results.

Examples of actions and outputs at the Member State level

SAAGE experts have reported on some actions and outputs at the Member State level that were prompted by the Strategy. One output in **Portugal** was the Impulso Jovem STEAM programme 2021–2026 setting an obligation to attract girls and women to the fields of engineering and technology. In **Spain**, the Council of Ministers passed a strategy for 2021–2027, the 'Youth Guarantee Plus of decent work for young people', with a roadmap for all relevant stakeholders to implement the Youth Guarantee, and particular measures aimed at increasing young women in STEM and supporting women in rural areas to ensure better access to employment and different formulas of self-employment and entrepreneurship. In **Austria**, the fund, 'LEA – Let's empower Austria', was launched in 2022, with three focal points: empowerment of women and girls, enthusiasm for an education and career in the STEM sector, and LEA as a knowledge platform for the topic of equality.

168 https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eac/education-and-training-monitor/en/monitor-toolbox/monitor-toolbox.html.

169 European Commission (2022). Towards more gender equality in sport – Recommendations and action plan from the High Level Group on Gender Equality in Sport. Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/10036

Main intermediate impacts

At the EU level, gender segregation remained stable from 2019 to 2022. There is no evidence of improvement. According to the gender segregation indexes, the occupations index stayed at 24.4 and that related to economic sectors decreased by 0.3 p.p. from 19.2 p.p. to 18.9 p.p. Segregation in education in STEM and construction remained practically unchanged from 2019 to 2021. The ratio (men for every woman) in graduates per 1 000 inhabitants in tertiary education in male-dominated sectors was 1.9 in 2021, which means a 0.1 p.p. decrease in two years.

The specific documents and actions directly targeted to introduce the gender equality perspective are producing deeper analysis, action proposals and measures, such as in the EEA to some extent, or the Recommendations and action plan from the High Level Group on gender equality in sport. However, although some positive results have been achieved, the Strategy has not impacted strongly gender mainstreaming in key frameworks such as the Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027), the Digital Decade Policy Programme or the Updated Skills Agenda for Europe.

4.2.2.3 Addressing the gender pay gap and pension gap, poverty, social protection and social inclusion

The main actions under this intermediate objective, which has two specific objectives related to reducing the gender pay gap through pay transparency and adequate minimum wages, and improving knowledge and understanding of the gender pension gap, are related to the adoption of the Directive on adequate minimum wages in October 2022 and the Directive on pay transparency in May 2023. There were some less relevant actions related to the inclusion of the gender perspective in analysis of areas of concern for closing gender income gaps. The main actions undertaken are predominantly regulatory and there are also other actions aimed to develop knowledge. All actions and outputs expected have been achieved.

Address the gender pay gap through pay transparency and adequate minimum wages

The European Council and European Parliament eventually adopted the so-called **Directive on Pay Transparency**[170] in May 2023. This Directive aims at strengthening the application of the **principle of equal pay for equal work or work of equal value between men and women,** included in the Treaties since 1957, through pay transparency and enforcement mechanisms. The Directive requires that EU companies share information on pay gaps and act if their gender pay gap exceeds 5 %. It also includes mechanisms to compensate victims of pay discrimination and it includes fines for employers who do not follow their obligations under the Directive. Member States have until **June 2026** to comply with the Directive and inform the European Commission. Thus, although some outputs have started to be reported, the next period is expected to see further results, impacts and

170 DIRECTIVE (EU) 2023/970 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 10 May 2023 to strengthen the application of the principle of equal pay for equal work or work of equal value between men and women through pay transparency and enforcement mechanisms. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32023L0970.

measures to monitor and support transposition and implementation, especially for employers with fewer than 250 workers. This will be essential to fully deliver positive gender equality impacts, similar to the situation with the Work-Life Balance Directive over the Strategy period. Systematic evidence at the EU level on results on how pay transparency helps to address gender pay gap is needed.

Moreover, to address the gender pay gap, the Council and the European Parliament adopted the **Directive on adequate minimum wages**[171] in October 2022 as a tool to help to achieve decent working and living conditions for employees in the European Union. The main objectives of the Directive are to develop frameworks in the Member States for adequate statutory minimum wages, promote collective bargaining on wage setting, and enhance effective access of workers to their rights of minimum wage protection. Mechanisms such as automatic indexation, trainings and penalties are explicitly included. As women are over-represented among worse paid workers, setting minimum wages at adequate levels may help to reduce the gender gap in pay and pensions in the future to some extent. Adequate minimum wages could reduce the risk of poverty for workers, reducing the feminisation of poverty. This outcome, although not directly related to actions proposed in the Strategy, is considered by stakeholders as key to closing the gender pay gap.

The transposition deadline of the Directive on minimum wages was **November 2024**. According to information provided by Member States by January 2025,[172] all EU countries have adopted measures to transpose the Directive except Denmark, Cyprus, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland and Portugal. These national regulatory changes are considered relevant outputs.

Evaluation of the transposition is not available yet. As reflected in the Directive, reducing the gender pay gap should be one of the objectives of mechanisms to set and update statutory minimum wages, and all statistics provided by the Member States should be disaggregated by sex. The Directive is potentially expected to have strong positive gender results and impacts, although a gender equality perspective is not fully and systematically integrated. In any case, there is no evidence yet on the results and impacts. They will be likely seen when they are fully transposed and implemented in the following years, especially if impact assessments are developed.

Stakeholders expect positive results from these key outputs, but more time is needed for full transposition and for results to be achieved and evidenced at the national and EU level.

Improve knowledge and understanding about the gender pension gap

Career breaks, especially those related to childcare, are among the factors that impact on gender pension gaps. Outputs of this specific objective such as **the 2024 pension adequacy report**,[173] which includes specific sections on the gender pension gap and analysis of pension credits for childcare, are relevant for raising awareness and better understanding of the magnitude of the phenomena and potential scenarios, encouraging knowledge development. Almost

171 Directive (EU) 2022/2041 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on adequate minimum wages in the European Union.

172 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/NIM/?uri=CELEX:32022L2041.

173 European Commission (2024). The 2024 pension adequacy report – Current and future income adequacy in old age in the EU. Volume I. Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/909323.

all Member States provide pension credits for childcare breaks, though these may be age-limited or conditional on recipients being entitled to childcare benefits. Care-related career breaks in occupational pension schemes have been analysed in the **Study supporting the monitoring of care credits in occupational pension schemes**,[174] published in October 2024. These credits are closely related to leave provision and, based on the five case studies analysed (Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden), care credit provisions need to be refined to reduce the gender pension gap and make systems more inclusive, especially regarding long-term care.

The **Green Paper on Ageing,**[175] which was published in 2022, is another output. It opens debate on the impact of the trend of men's and women's increasing life expectancy on citizens and society as a whole. As these effects span across the life cycle and are related to growing care needs, this analysis is very relevant for gender equality. It introduces the gender equality approach, although only partially. There is so far not clear evidence on how these outputs result in strengthening collaboration with the Member States to address the gender pension gap.

Examples of actions and outputs at the Member State level

Even when relevant actions are not yet taken, Directives help to increase awareness-raising and political debate. For example, in **Poland**, the Directive on pay transparency has not been implemented but public debate around measures to counteract the gender pay gap has been influenced and encouraged by the Directive. Thus, outputs at the national level go beyond implementation of the Directive.

According to information provided by SAAGE experts regarding actions related to social protection and social inclusion, the Strategy has contributed and influenced the content of the Welfare Development Plan 2023–2030 in **Estonia**. In other countries, such as **Ireland** and **Lithuania**, the EU monitoring systems and gender statistics, together with the reinforcement of the European Pillar of Social Rights, all play critical roles in highlighting inequalities, identifying discrimination and supporting the development of effective equality policies and practices. These factors have to different degrees supported and spurred anti-poverty actions, which are especially relevant as poverty levels are very high among significant groups of women such as lone parents, elderly women and women with disabilities.

Main intermediate impacts

Gender gaps in pay and pensions persist. The latter are considerably larger than the former. Women are more likely to live at risk of poverty and social exclusion than men, especially if living alone with children and this trend is worsening. The gender pay gap in unadjusted form very slightly decreased from 12.9 % in 2020 to 12.7 % in 2022, with significant variations across Member States. It has decreased only minimally over the last 10 years, showing the persistence of this phenomenon and the need for action. Stakeholdersexpect positive results

174 https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/study-supporting-monitoring-care-credits-occupational-pension-schemes-final-report_en.

175 European Commission (2022). Green paper on ageing. Directorate-General for Communication Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2775/785789.

and impacts, especially from the Directives on pay transparency and adequate minimum wages. However, given the time lapsed since the approval and the lack of impact assessments, any positive impacts of the Strategy are not yet evident in relation to income gaps. The gender overall earnings gap was 36 % in 2018, increasing from 33 % in 2010. The gender pension gap in 2017 was 36 %.[176] Further statistics are needed to present up-to-date evidence on this topic.

In the EU, women are more likely to live at risk of poverty or social exclusion by 2 p.p. in 2023; 22.3 % of women and 20.3 % of men lived at risk of poverty in 2023. This gap has decreased by 0.3 p.p. since 2022 but is the same as in 2020. If only people over 65 are considered, the gender gap in people living at risk of poverty or social exclusion was 5.5 p.p. in 2023 (22.1 % women and 16.6 % men), 0.6 p.p. less than in 2022 (22.8 % and 16.7 %) and 0.3 p.p. less than in 2020 (22.6 % and 16.8 %). The proportion of households composed of one adult with dependent children living at risk of poverty and social exclusion has increased from 40.9 % in 2019 to 43.5 % in 2022. The adult of most households with this composition is a woman.

4.2.2.4 Closing the gender care gap

The two specific objectives in this intermediate goal are to encourage Member States to improve and increase the availability of childcare and to expand long-term care services. The main actions developed by the European Commission within this intermediate objective have produced relevant outputs such as the Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee (2021), the European Commission Communication on the European Care Strategy (2022),[177] the Council Recommendation on early childhood education and care (ECEC) and the Council Recommendation on long-term care (LTC) services. The European Commission actions have focused predominantly on developing soft law which frames the EU position on the relevance of unpaid care, the need to expand affordable and quality early childhood education and care and long-term care services, and how these are key factors influencing gender equality in the labour market. Gender mainstreaming and awareness-raising actions have been developed, and funding provided for the Strategy's actions. All actions and outputs expected have been achieved.

Encourage Member States to increase and improve availability of childcare

In September 2022, the European Commission published the **European Care Strategy,**[178] that points out that care is essential and should concern everybody. High-quality care services have clear benefits for children, adults and the elderly, but these services are not available, affordable or accessible for many people. The Strategy aims to improve the situation for both carers and care receivers and calls for boosting access to quality, affordable and accessible care services and improving working conditions and work–life balance for carers. When early childhood education and care and long-term care services are not provided as needed, women are disproportionally negatively impacted as they are the main

176 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/631033/IPOL_BRI(2019)631033_EN.pdf.

177 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.

178 Ibid.

informal carers. This scarce services provision affects their work–life balance and options to take on paid work. The poor labour conditions of the care sector also disproportionally impact women, as it is a female-dominated sector.

This EU Strategy led to the approval of two Council Recommendations on childcare services and long-term care services in December 2022, which are key outputs of the Strategy. The **Council Recommendation on childcare services** has set the **new Barcelona targets** by 2030: ECEC access rates should achieve 45 % of children under 3 years of age and 96 % for children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age. Moreover, it recommends 'that Member States take steps to make ECEC services available in a way which allows children to participate at least 25 hours per week'.[179] This is a positive change from the 2002 Barcelona targets which established targets at 35 % and 90 % respectively. Data shows positive results in increasing childcare availability in several EU Member States comparing 2019 with 2022.[180]

Following the actions proposed in the Strategy, the **Council passed the Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee** in 2021. This output aims to help ensure that every child in Europe at risk of poverty or social exclusion has access to free healthcare, education, early childhood education and care, decent housing and adequate nutrition. It states that Member States should include the gender perspective when implementing the Recommendation, enabling its use as a tool to support actions across Member States which can increase children's wellbeing while the gender equality objective is fully considered. To implement the Recommendation, the Member States have nominated national **Child Guarantee Coordinators** and **prepared national action plans**, which cover the period until 2030. In October 2024,[181] the national Child Guarantee coordinators from 24 Member States met for the 17th time to discuss the implementation of the measures, such as the role of local governments in the implementation of the national action plan, considering the case of Portugal.

As the **Child Guarantee** targets children in need, it complements and reinforces the need for using an intersectional approach when advancing the Recommendation on ECEC services. Member States with a level of child poverty above the EU average (23.4% – AROPE 2017–2019) should allocate at least 5 % of their European Social Fund (ESF+)[182] resources to tackle child poverty. The monitoring framework[183] will allow a better understanding of the size and situation of the child guarantee target group (children in need) as well as monitoring access to the six services covered by the child guarantee – early childhood education and care, education (including school-based activities), at least one healthy meal per school day, healthcare, healthy nutrition, and adequate housing – and provide evidence for the results.

In general, monitoring and publishing results on gender equality targets, such as the Barcelona targets or gender gaps in the labour market, have had a positive impact on awareness raising and on national policies, according to stakeholders.

179 European Union (2022). COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION of 8 December 2022 on early childhood education and care: the Barcelona targets for 2030 (2022/C 484/01): 8.

180 I. Fernández Lozano and C. Castellanos-Serrano (in press). 'Access to early childcare and education in contemporary Europe. Who is being left out?' in Česnuitytė, Meil, Rogero-García and Budginaitė-Mačkinė (eds); *European Families Facing Hard Times: Challenges, Strategies, and Family Policies*. Emerald.

181 https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/european-child-guarantee-coordinators-meeting-2024-10-03_en.

182 European Social Fund.

183 https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=27275&langId=en.

The stakeholders also considered that this framework will help to develop positive results. However, more time is needed for full development and monitoring of results and impacts.

Encourage Member States to increase and improve availability of long-term care

The European Commission adopted the **Green Paper on Ageing** in 2021,[184] an output expected in the Strategy. With the objective of increasing labour market participation and improving working lives, the paper points out that action to improve gender equality in the labour market and close the gender gap could enhance men's participation in household work and family care, if coupled with structural measures reforming the tax and welfare systems. This foresaw a scenario of the growing care needs of an ageing population and related to the Care Strategy on long-term care.

The **Council Recommendation on long-term care**[185] aims to improve the working and living conditions of carers and of people receiving care. As most carers are women, both in the formal and informal sectors, the potential gender impact of this recommendation is high. Member States are encouraged to improve working conditions for care workers, and address skills needs and the shortage of workers. This document points out the special relevance of long-term care for women, and it recommends to Member States that they should implement measures to tackle gender stereotypes and gender segregation and to make the long-term care profession attractive to both men and women. This is a reference point to advance in this key sector, despite not including a systematic gender approach. Evidence of results of this recommendation and EU funding in expanding long-term care services is so far not available.

The Commission has launched a **new sectoral social dialogue committee for social services** and four expert reports[186] were published in November 2024 regarding knowledge gaps in the long-term care workforce,[187] the application of the EU labour law in the long-term care sector,[188] access for domestic workers to labour and social protection, and occupational safety and health in the health and social care sector.[189] Moreover, in April 2023 a new large-scale partnership for long-term care was launched under the Pact for Skills.[190] The long-term care sector faces the challenge of adapting and training at least 60 % of the long-

184 European Commission (2021). *Green paper on ageing. Fostering solidarity and responsibility between generations.* COM(2021) 50 final.

185 Council Recommendation of 8 December 2022 on Access to affordable high-quality long-term care 2022/C 476/01.

186 https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/new-reports-reviewing-application-eu-standards-governing-working-conditions-long-term-care-sector-2024-11-29_en.

187 https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/e278c3b7-e4ee-4973-a2eb-b7460009a213_en?filename=ESPAN_LTC%20workforce_Policy%20Brief.pdf.

188 https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/ece-thematic-review-2022-2023-application-eu-labour-law-long-term-care-sector_en.

189 D. Ghailani, E. Marlier, I. Baptista, T. Deruelle et al. (2024). *Access for domestic workers to labour and social protection – An analysis of policies in 34 European countries – 2024.* European Commission: Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/7687903.

190 https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/pact-skills-launch-large-scale-skills-partnership-long-term-care-2023-04-20_en and https://pact-for-skills.ec.europa.eu/about/industrial-ecosystems-and-partnerships/health_en.

term care workforce (3.8 million workers) every year by 2030. Evidence on results from the Pact is not available either.

Examples of actions and outputs at the Member State level

Several examples illustrate how the Strategy and in particular the Care Strategy are encouraging countries' actions and outputs. For example, in **Denmark**, population ageing and the resulting lack of staff in the health and care sectors were significant external factors, added to the Strategy actions, to set up a tripartite agreement between the government and the social partners of the public sector to increase wages for several female-dominated professions in 2023.

In **Spain**, funding from EU Next Generation has been key for advancements in long-term care and childcare provision, with the Dependency Shock Plan 2021–2023 and an investment of EUR 666.6 million on early childhood education and care from 0 to 3 years included in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan.

In **Poland**, the 'Maluch Plus' programme was significantly expanded with the government's budget nearly doubling from PLN 2.54 billion to PLN 5.5 billion for the 2022–2029 period. This expansion aims to create an additional 100 000 places in nurseries, enhancing the availability of formal childcare services. This initiative was crucial for supporting women's participation in the labour market, especially for those balancing work with caregiving responsibilities. According to the SAAGE expert, this national result is backed by the Strategy's actions and outputs on childcare.

Main intermediate impacts

In the EU, 6.8 % of men aged 20 to 64 years worked part-time because of caring for adults with disabilities or children in 2023, while this was the case for 27.2 % of women. This proportion has increased by 0.9 p.p. for men and 1 p.p. for women since 2020. Thus, the gender gap is higher than 20 p.p. and has increased slightly over the Strategy period.[191] The motherhood penalty has been a widespread and persistent phenomena across the EU over some years.[192] This evidence shows that, even if the Strategy goes in the right direction, its results have not been sufficiently positive to advance in closing the gender care gap. More time and evidence are needed to fully evaluate its impacts.

While part-time work is similar among men with and without children, the situation varies hugely for women across the EU. The highest share of part-time work for women aged 25 to 54 with children in 2023 was recorded in Austria (69.2 %), the Netherlands (67.9 %) and Germany (65.4 %), and shows a large difference with women without children. In contrast, women with children in countries like Denmark, Sweden and Croatia have higher employment rates compared to those without children and a minimal or even negative difference in part-time work.[193]

In the EU, 22.4 % of children under 3 years old were in formal childcare or education for 30 hours or more a week in 2022. This increased by 1 p.p. from 2019. Regarding those from 3 years to minimum compulsory school age, 55.5 % were

191 Eurostat, LFS. Main reason for part-time employment – Distributions by sex and age (%) lfsa_epgar.

192 H. Kleven, C. Landais and G. Leite-Mariante (2023). The Child Penalty Atlas. National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper 31649. http://www.nber.org/papers/w31649.

193 Eurostat (2024). Part-time and full-time employment – statistics. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?oldid=612325.

in formal childcare or education for 30 hours or more, decreasing from 60.3 % in 2019.[194]

When there is no universal access, inequality in early childhood education and care access has significant negative consequences for gender equality and children's equal opportunities. The ECEC enrolment rate for children aged below 3 in households at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) is 22 % while that in non-AROPE households is 37 %.[195] Unequal access goes beyond low-income households. Children with unemployed or inactive mothers, parents with low education achievements, migrant parents or parents with conservative attitudes towards employment and family receive ECEC services in a lower proportion than other children.[196]

Regarding long-term care needs, less systematic indicators are available so evidence on results and impacts are less robust. As people in Europe are ageing, the demand for long-term care is rising. The number of people in the EU in need of long-term care is projected to increase from 30.8 million in 2019 to 38.1 million in 2050.[197] In 2019, only around a quarter of people with severe difficulties with personal care or household activities were receiving home care.[198] Retaining and attracting formal care workers is often difficult and there are relevant social inequalities and territorial gaps. Their labour conditions are usually not attractive enough. Long-term care has a strong gender dimension, as most people providing and in need of care are women.

The stakeholders believe that in general, monitoring and publishing results on gender equality targets, such as the Barcelona targets or gender gaps in the labour market, has had a positive impact on awareness raising and national policies.

4.2.2.5 Effectiveness at the priority area level

The most important outputs developed to support the objective of thriving in a gender-equal economy have been the transposition of the Work-Life Balance Directive, the adoption of the Directive on Pay Transparency and of the Directive on minimum wages, and the launch of the European Care Strategy with the two recommendations on early childhood education and care and long-term care services. **These outputs are expected to impact positively on the four intermediate objectives of this policy priority, because they are interrelated,**

194 Eurostat, ILC, ilc_caindformal.

195 S. Flisi, Z. Blasko and E. Stepanova (2022). Indicators for early childhood education and care — Reconsidering some aspects of the Barcelona target for younger children. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. doi:10.2760/44338, JRC130350.

196 E. Pavolini and W. Van Lancker (2018). 'The Matthew effect in childcare use: a matter of policies or preferences?' *Journal of European Public Policy*, 25(6): 878–893. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2017.1401108; W. Van Lancker and E. Pavolini (2022). 'Understanding the immigrant-native gap in childcare use: An empirical exploration for 21 European countries'. *Acta Sociologica*. 66. 000169932211025. 10.1177/00016993221102506.; J. Wood, K. Neels and J. Maes (2023). 'A closer look at demand-side explanations for the Matthew effect in formal childcare uptake in Europe and Australia'. *Journal of European Social Policy*, volume 33, issue 4; I. Fernández Lozano and C. Castellanos-Serrano (in press). 'Access to early childcare and education in contemporary Europe. Who is being left out?' in Česnuitytė, Meil, Rogero-García and Budginaitė-Mačkinė (eds) *European Families Facing Hard Times: Challenges, Strategies, and Family Policies*. Emerald.

197 https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/social-protection-social-inclusion/social-protection/long-term-care_en.

198 Ibid.

as gender care gaps and gender gaps in the labour market are two sides of the same coin.

In general, according to the indicators presented, progress has been recorded in labour market participation, although limited, while gender segregation and gender pay and pension gaps remained at the same level. There are advancements in access to ECEC services but not for LTC services. The gender care gap has not been lowered. This lack of significant advances can be explained because implementation gaps persist and some Directives still need more time to be implemented. At the same time, outputs have not been sufficiently deep and wide to address the roots of gender gaps in the economy, such as the low participation of men in caring activities and the structural lack of educational and care services.

First, transposition of the Work-Life Balance Directive has been largely achieved, and many Member States have introduced or redesigned extended non-transferable paid periods of parental leave and introduced or extended paternity leave. But doubts arise about their effectiveness in reducing the current gendered division of taking up leave because the level of payments may not be high enough to provide incentives to men to use parental leave; because most fathers can still transfer a considerable share of their leave days to mothers; and, ultimately, because there are no significant periods of solo care from fathers while mothers return to the labour market in most countries, although this is considered the experience which increases fathers' involvement in unpaid work after paternity leave.[199]

Consequently, a significant increase in the leave uptake rate of fathers has not yet been reported or is expected in most countries in the medium term. Even if sharing childcare is possible, the leave designs promoted by the Work-Life Balance Directive are not expected to produce an equal sharing of leave.[200] Despite these considerations, many stakeholders consider this the most effective output to positively impact this priority area because it is considered a first step to change the paradigm of work–life balance policies by including men as workers with care responsibilities. Moreover, its transposition over the Strategy period has resulted in changes in the laws of Member States which are already advancing national political debates on this topic.

Second, the **two Council Recommendations for childcare and long-term care services** are considered key frameworks by most stakeholders and experts, even if they are not binding documents for Member States. Setting 2030 objectives for ECEC participation as renewed Barcelona targets and the standards of use intensity above 25 hours per week, which may be compatible with full-time work, are key aspects for female labour market participation in the labour market. The **European Care Strategy** and its monitoring is a positive step to provide evidence of what is needed and speed advancement; yet, at the same time, it also shows **low coherence with labour market objectives** (78 % of labour market participation and halving the gender labour gap), since not even half of children (the target is 45 %) aged from birth to 3 years are expected to attend ECEC systems by 2030.[201] Care continues to be a gendered factor in working part-time

199 M. Bünning (2015). 'What happens after the 'Daddy Months'? Fathers' involvement in paid work, childcare, and housework after taking parental leave in Germany'. *European Sociological Review*, 31(6): 738–748. http://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcv072.

200 A. Lütolf (2024). 'Caring breadwinners? A comparative analysis of parental leave policies to promote fathers' care work'. *Swiss Political Science Review*, 2024; 00: 1–22.

201 I. Fernández Lozano and C. Castellanos-Serrano (in press). 'Access to early childcare and education in

or being out of the labour market. Stakeholders consider that these outputs will contribute to positive impacts although not enough to close the gender gaps in the labour market.

Third, **the policies relative to paid leave and childcare services should be coherent**. The parental leave system should be coherent with ECEC participation rates, so there are no care gaps between paid leave and ECEC. The ECEC participation rates for children under 3 and the length of paid maternity, paternity and parental leave are strongly related.[202] This is to say that even if the renewed Barcelona targets and the parental leave, as in the Work-Life Balance Directive, were fully attained and transposed, the care gap would still be too high and the female employment participation target would not be achieved. Indeed, while the factors behind the care gap are strongly and positively influenced by the Strategy, a systemic integration of the leave system and early childhood education and care and long-term care provision (the Care Strategy and Recommendations) has not been fully achieved. Thus, positive but limited impacts are expected.

Finally, positive impacts can be expected from the gender mainstreaming actions, although the **gender mainstreaming and intersectional approach has not been systematically translated** into all actions, with related documents where the gender approach is weak or lacking. The establishment of the specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound (SMART) objectives of halving the employment rate gap in the European Pillar of Social Rights and targets for ECEC participation (the renewed Barcelona targets) are positive, as they provide clear signals of the degree and speed of advancement expected. The objective to improve the long-term care sector is also positive, although the lack of a particular target points out how much is still to be done.

Mixed progress was reported by stakeholders in the degree of achievement of the specific objectives of this area. As assessed by SAAGE experts, the average level of advancement in the Member States has been 3.4 on a scale of 1 to 5, the highest across the priority areas. There are wide differences across Member States, with Sweden (1) and Malta, Italy and Czechia (2) scoring low, according to the country experts, and other countries scoring higher, including Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovenia (4).

The specific contribution of the Strategy for Gender Equality to the achievement of the objectives in this thematic priority was rated even higher as 3.7 on a scale of 1 to 5, also the highest mark across the five priority areas. A number of countries scored 5: Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Romania and Spain. The advancement of this priority area and the contribution of the Strategy is higher than in other areas especially because key directives have been passed and the transposition of the Work-Life Balance Directive is already producing positive results. SAAGE experts expect positive impacts from those, both from the change of paradigm which includes male workers as caregivers who may leave the labour market to care for children, as well as from increasing pay transparency and supporting a decent minimum wage. Binding measures were especially assessed positively as they counteract the current gender backlash.

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contemporary Europe. Who is being left out?' in Česnuitytė, Meil, Rogero-García and Budginaitė-Mačkinė (eds). *European Families Facing Hard Times: Challenges, Strategies, and Family Policies*. Emerald.

202 S. Flisi, Z. Blasko and E. Stepanova (2022). Indicators for early childhood education and care — Reconsidering some aspects of the Barcelona target for younger children. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. doi:10.2760/44338, JRC130350.

4.2.3 Leading equally through society

The actions developed to address the two specific objectives included in this priority area (achieving gender balance in political and economic decision-making) are mainly regulatory and are accompanied by support to stakeholders through guides with recommendations, information and the development of knowledge, including dissemination of data and analyses.

4.2.3.1 Achieving gender balance in political decision-making

To address this specific objective, the Commission presented in November 2021 a proposal to amend the **Regulation on the statute and funding of European political parties**[203] that included the obligation for European political parties to incorporate rules on gender equality in their statutes and to demonstrate that they have given information on gender representation among the candidates in the previous 12 months at the last elections to the European Parliament. While the Council reached its general approach in March 2022, the European Parliament adopted its position in September 2022 and proposed amendments to further improve the gender balance and strengthen gender equality.[204] However, **the amended regulation has not yet been adopted, as committed in the Strategy,** and the 2024 elections to the European Parliament were governed by the former rules.

Another relevant proposal targeted the European Electoral Act. On 3 May 2022, the European Parliament adopted a proposal for a Council Regulation on the election of the members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage. A key political objective of the proposal is that the common rules for the European Parliament elections ensure gender equality through quotas or zipped lists, where male and female candidates alternate. The proposal was discussed in the Swedish and Spanish Presidencies in 2022 and 2023, but has not yet been adopted by either.

In December 2023, the Commission presented the Recommendation on inclusive and resilient electoral processes in the Union and enhancing the European nature and efficient conduct of the elections to the European Parliament.[205] This soft output contains recommendations for Member States on gender equality such as: encouraging gender balance in governing bodies of electoral management bodies; promoting measures such as alternating women and men on candidate lists; linking the allocation of public funding for political parties to gender parity, internal party policies, training and awareness raising; and measures to effectively prevent and address gender-based hate speech against politically active women. Also in December 2023, the Commission published a Guide of good electoral practices in Member States addressing the participation of citizens with disabilities in the electoral process,[206] that makes an explicit reference to the impact of intersectional characteristics such as age, gender and socioeconomic status on their political participation.

203 Proposal for a REGULATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL on the statute and funding of European political parties and European political foundations (recast) COM/2021/734 final.

204 Amendments adopted by the European Parliament on 15 September 2022 on the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the statute and funding of European political parties and European political foundations (recast).

205 COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION (EU) 2023/2829 of 12 December 2023.

206 SWD(2023) 408 final.

While no information is available on the **results** of the implemented measures – the Recommendation on inclusive and resilient electoral processes and the Guide of good electoral practices for citizens with disabilities – research by EIGE in 2022 found that the **application of legislative quotas** in the period 2004–2021 had a positive impact and that while countries with legislated quotas were expected to achieve gender balance in five years (by 2026), countries with no such action would take closer to two decades (by 2038).[207] Similarly, in 2023, the European Commission requested the European Equality Law Network (EELN) to carry out a study on the **Promotion of gender balance in political decision-making** in the EU, Iceland, Lichtenstein, Norway and the United Kingdom.[208] The study finds that **well-designed quotas work**, especially when they are accompanied by efficient enforcement measures, but stresses that other factors are also important, such as flexible and family-friendly working conditions and measures to encourage institutional and cultural transformation. These studies suggest that once the previously described regulations are adopted, important results can be achieved.

In March 2024, the European Commission organized a high-level event focused on "Women in public life" in Brussels, aimed to address challenges faced by women in politics, journalism, and civil society, and to identify solutions for promoting their increased participation. These solutions included engaging media platforms, regulatory bodies, and political parties to foster a more inclusive environment. Also in March 2024, the **European Parliament** published a briefing on '**Women in politics in the EU**', analysing the state of play in 2024, a 'super-election year', including the use of quotas. According to the document, 11 Member States (Belgium, Croatia, France, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia and Spain) have binding gender quotas for European elections in their legislation. While gender quotas are a common measure to increase women's representation in political decision-making, they remain highly controversial among Member States. Moreover, the spread of online violence against women in decision-making positions is not being addressed by Member States.

Within this specific objective, the Strategy also included the aim of improving **gender balance in EU institutions and bodies** at all levels of management within the Commission and set one of the few targets of the Strategy, which is that the Commission reaches gender balance of 50 % at all levels of its management by the end of 2024. To this aim, the **Commission's corporate female talent development programme** consists of tailored coaching, support and preparation for higher management and leadership responsibilities. As a **result** of this, in the period 2019–2024, the share of women in management functions within the European Commission has increased by 13 percentage points at senior management levels 1 and 2, so that women held **48.3 % of all management positions within the Commission** in 2024. Significant progress has also been recorded **within the Council**, where the share of women as senior administrators (levels 1 and 2) has increased from 30.4 % before the Strategy in 2019 to 39.2 % (up 8.8 p.p.). In the **European Parliament**, the share of 32.3 % increased by 14.8 p.p. to 48.1 %. In the **European Agencies**, on average, the share of women in the highest decision-making bodies has also improved from 34 % to 37.7 % between 2019 and 2024, although again with large differences between agencies (with, e.g., 12.5 % of women in Frontex and 84.2 % in EIGE). **While**

207 EIGE (2022). Statistical brief: gender balance in politics 2021.

208 European Commission (2023). *Promotion of gender balance in political decision-making*. B. Kotevska and V. Pavlou (authors). : Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2838/749712.

the evolution is positive, parity was not reached by the end of 2024 as intended.

It is also worth mentioning that on 27 November 2024, the European Parliament approved the composition of the **new College of Commissioners** presided over by Ursula von der Leyen for the next five years. Out of the 27 members (including the president), 11 are women and 16 are men, thus, 40 % women. However, the new Commission does not include a commissioner with a single mandate for equality, as the former one did, since the current Commissioner for Equality also holds the responsibility for Preparedness and Crisis Management. This is perceived as a downgrading of the fight against gender inequality and discrimination.

Two of the expected **outputs** foreseen in this specific objective could not be realised, but other outputs related to knowledge, analyses and data have been produced and disseminated. A **result** of this is the advancement towards the 50 % gender balance target, although it has not been fully achieved.

Examples of actions and outputs at the Member State level

SAAGE experts reported that in parallel with the activities developed at the EU level, some Member States have promoted actions that address this specific objective. There are a number of examples. In **Denmark**, as of 1 January 2023, the Law on Gender Equality, which stipulates that women and men should be equally represented on the boards of public institutions and companies, was expanded to also cover public entities without a board. Thus, ministries, municipal and regional administrations and public utility companies are also obliged to promote gender equality at the managerial level. Moreover, the requirements for the covered public institutions and companies have been aligned, so that 'equal gender composition' means that each gender will be represented by a minimum of 40 %. In **Ireland,** the adoption of the 30 % gender quota legislation has been effective, but is applied to limited areas of governance. The number of women elected rose from 16 % in 2011 to 22 % in 2016, but progress has stalled since then with women's representation moving only to 22.5 % in 2020 and to 23 % in 2024. **Malta** applied a new gender corrective mechanism in the 2022 election aimed to encourage more women in politics, which practically doubled the number of women in parliament.

4.2.3.2 Achieving gender balance in economic decision-making

As foreseen in the Strategy, this specific objective was addressed in 2022, with the adoption of the **Directive on improving gender balance on corporate boards**[209] by the European Parliament and the Council, which entered into force in December that year. The Directive is the main **output** of the Strategy for this specific objective. It sets targets for large listed companies in the EU to accelerate progress towards gender balance on their boards. The aim is for the under-represented sex to make up at least 40 % among non-executive board members or 33 % of all directors **by 30 June 2026**. Companies not complying with these targets will be required to make appointments on the basis of a comparative analysis of the qualification of candidates. The criteria for board positions are to be established by the companies themselves.

The deadline for the transposition of the Directive by Member States was **28 December 2024,** although the Directive included a suspension clause allowing Member States to suspend the application of some articles of the Directive if they already have domestic measures in place that are equally effective. To assist Member States, the Commission held an implementation workshop in November 2023 at which it clarified a number of questions and Member States' representatives had an opportunity to discuss implementation issues with their peers. In January 2025, 17 Member States received letters of formal notice from the Commission for not having communicated the full transposition of the Directive by the transposition deadline.[210]

The main **output** of this specific objective (the adoption of the directive) has been produced and the **results** (the transposition of the Directive in Member States) partially achieved. The extent to which the transposition has been adequate needs to be assessed, but there are some positive examples, as described next. Moreover, as shown below, the proportion of women on the boards of listed companies in the EU has experienced a significant increase over the period of the Strategy, from 28.4 % at the end of 2019 to 34.7 % in 2024, which highlights the impact already achieved by the Directive.

Examples of actions, outputs and results at the Member State level

SAAGE experts have provided some examples about initiatives adopted in this context at the Member State level, that show that the Strategy is producing **important results** in the Member States. In **Denmark**, as mentioned previously, the Law on Gender Equality stipulates that women and men should be equally represented on the boards of public institutions and companies, i.e. at least 40 % of board members should be of each gender. As of January 2023, the Gender Equality Act was reformed[211] to strengthen the gender balance at the managerial or board level. Equality targets for the under-represented gender must be set. The law encompasses large companies with more than 250 employees.

In **France**, the Rixain Law n° 2021-1774 of 24 December 2021, aiming to accelerate economic and professional equality, requires big firms with 1 000 employees and above to publish the gender gap in the top management and in

209 Directive (EU) 2022/2381 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 November 2022 on improving the gender balance among directors of listed companies and related measures, OJ L 315/44, 7.12.23.

210 These countries are Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechia, Cyprus, Demark, Estonia, Ireland, Greece, France, Latvia, Luxembourg, Hungary, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal and Romania.

211 LBK nr 1575 of 19/12/2022.

the executive committee. They are also subjected to gender quotas, i.e. to have 30 % of women in their executive committees and in their top management by 2027, and 40 % by 2030. Following these deadlines, firms will have two years to comply with these quotas; otherwise, they will incur economic penalties up to 1 % of their total payroll. More recently, Ordinance nº 2024-934 of 15 October 2024 has been published, thereby transposing the Directive on gender-balanced representation on the boards of listed companies. It introduces a significant change by including employee and shareholder representatives in gender quotas, as included in the Directive, but previously excluded in France.

This should trigger major changes in human resources policies, particularly in sectors where women are under-represented, by fostering gender diversity and thus reducing gender segregation in professions. Indeed, it forces employers in male-dominated sectors to attract and retain female candidates, thus putting pressure on training institutions and schools to attract girls to their programmes. In 2024, 58 % of the concerned companies have declared their results (they were 49 % in 2023); 57 % of these companies have fewer than 30 % women among their senior executives (compared to 60 % in 2023), and 38 % have less than 30 % women on their management committees, against 44 % in 2023. Although companies are slow at publishing their figures, there seems to be progress towards better representation of women.

In **Spain**, as a response to the Directive on gender-balanced representation on the boards of listed companies, the **Consolidated Act on equal representation of women and men**[212] was passed in August 2024, establishing the objective of 40 % female participation in public and private management bodies. Listed companies should ensure that their boards of directors have at least 40 % female directors. In senior management positions, they must adjust the selection processes so that this objective is achieved. Gender equality is guaranteed in election processes through zipped lists, where male and female candidates alternate. Further, the principle of balanced representation applies to candidates to government positions, the Constitutional Court, State Council, Public Prosecutor's Office, Court of Accounts, senior management of the public administration, public radio and TV bodies, trade unions, employers' organisations, foundations, third sector and social economy organisations, and the national University Student Council.

Main intermediate impacts

Mixed trends are observed in this priority area that cannot clearly be attributed to the described **outputs**, that have possibly not yet produced the impacts which were desired. The share of women in the **European Parliament** reduced from 40.6 % in the fourth quarter of 2019, before the Strategy for Gender Equality was adopted, to 38.8 % in the fourth quarter of 2024. In contrast, very slight progress has been recorded in **national parliaments**, where the share of women members of parliament has increased from an EU-27 average of 32.1 % to 33.1 % in the same period. But large differences exist at the country level, with four countries with less than 25 % women (Cyprus, with only 14.3 % women in the fourth quarter of 2024; Hungary with 14.6 % and Greece and Ireland, both with 23.3 %). The share of women senior ministers in **national governments** has also slightly improved from an EU-27 average of 30.4 % to 32.8 % in the

212 Organic Law 2/2024, of 1 August, on equal representation and balanced presence of women and men.

period.[213]

There are significant gender disparities in other key positions. The share of women judges in the **Court of Justice of the European Union** stayed at 30.4 % in 2024, having increased from 21.9 % in 2019. Across the EU Member States in 2024, an average of 45.1 % of **Supreme Court Judges** were women, which is 2.9 p.p. more than before the period of the Strategy in 2019. The share of women as **Presidents of National Supreme Courts** is slightly lower, but has increased significantly from 18.5 % in 2019 to 40.7 % in 2024, thus nearing parity. These proportions vary significant from 0 % in Malta to 100 % in 10 countries.[214] Finally, the proportion of women in key decision-making bodies in **Central Banks** was lower than that found in parliaments, national governments and listed companies or among Supreme Court Judges. At the EU level, the average was 32 % in 2023 (up from 24.3 % in 2019), but in Austria, Romania and Slovakia, there were zero women in decision-making positions in 2024. In 2024, the country with the highest rate was Spain, with 62.5 %.

In terms of **gender balance in economic decision-making,** the proportion of women on the boards of listed companies in the EU has experienced a significant increase over the period of the Strategy and reached 34.7 % in 2024 compared to 28.4 % at the end of 2019. But this average masks extremely high differences across Member States, ranging from 10.2 % in Hungary to 47.5 % in France (both in 2024-B2). Six countries have reached the aim of at least 40 % of each gender on company boards of directors in 2024: France (47.5 %), Italy (44.6 %), Denmark (42.8 %), the Netherlands (41.8 %), Spain (41.3 %) and Ireland (40.1 %).

The 2024 EIGE Index rated women's empowerment in economic decision-making at 57.6 points out of 100, 2.9 points higher than in 2023, again masking very high cross-country differences.[215]

4.2.3.3 Effectiveness at the priority area level

The effectiveness of the actions in the Strategy in this priority area is mixed. There were delays in adopting some important pieces of legislation, such as the Regulation on the statute and funding of European political parties and the Council Regulation on the election of the members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage. However, the Directive on improving gender balance on corporate boards adopted in 2022 is a very relevant **output,** which may have a significant impact on the number of women in economic decision-making positions. The **results** of the transposition of the Directive, due by 28 December 2024, need to be assessed, along with how many companies meet the target of 33 % persons of the less represented sex on corporate boards by June 2026. Yet some examples show that the Strategy is already producing encouraging **results** in the Member States that are transposing the Directive.

Mixed progress was reported by stakeholders regarding the degree of achievement of the specific objectives of this area. As assessed by SAAGE experts, the average level of advancement in Member States was 2.7 on a scale of 1 to 5, with wide differences across Member States. Some countries scored low according to SAAGE experts (Czechia, Estonia, Malta, Slovakia and Sweden scored 1) and

213 Data source: EIGE, Data collection on women and men in decision-making (WMID).

214 Belgium, Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, Italy, Cyprus, Lithuania, Latvia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland and Romania.

215 EIGE (2024). Index Domain Power.

some high: France and Bulgaria scored 5 and others 4 (Belgium, Finland, Germany, Greece, Latvia and Luxembourg). The specific contribution of the Strategy to the achievement of the objectives in this priority area was rated as 2.9 on a scale of 1 to 5, with the Directive on improving gender balance on corporate boards being signalled as an important facilitator, particularly in contexts where there is a lack of political will for the equal distribution of power and influence. Other factors hampering progress have been identified, such as neoliberal and conservative opposition to any regulation on gender equality in the labour market, the potential impact or extra costs on the financial performance in companies, gender stereotypes and traditional attitudes. On the other hand, strong involvement of civil society in supporting gender equality was mentioned as a facilitator.

4.2.4 Gender mainstreaming and an intersectional perspective in EU policies

Within this priority area, two specific objectives are addressed: 'integrating the gender perspective across all policy areas and in structures and processes' and 'adopting an intersectional approach of gender with other grounds of discrimination across EU policies'. Regulation, knowledge development, cooperation and gender policy instruments, such as gender mainstreaming in the budget, were the main types of actions developed.

4.2.4.1 Gender mainstreaming in different policy areas and in structures and processes

As committed in the Strategy, the main tool to address this specific objective is the Task Force on Equality, which was set up in 2019 (thus, before the Strategy was adopted). It is composed of representatives of all Commission services and of the European External Action Service, who are called **Equality Coordinators**. The aim of the Task Force is to ensure the implementation of equality mainstreaming, including gender equality, at the operational and technical levels. The role of the Equality Coordinators is to mainstream equality into policies developed by their own Directorate-General, and thus to contribute to the implementation of the Strategy in their respective policy area. The **Secretariat of the Task Force on Equality** organises trainings on equality mainstreaming, including specific ones on gender mainstreaming, open to Equality Coordinators and all Commission staff.

In 2021, the work of the **Equality Coordinators** focused on the development of their respective services' **equality mainstreaming work plans**, in which they specified how equality aspects, including gender equality, should be incorporated in their Directorate-General's activities and initiatives.[216]

Significant initiatives to promote gender equality are identified in the policy areas of Common Agriculture Policy, Artificial Intelligence, Transport, the European Green Deal and the Just Transition, including the digital and energy transition, health policy including sexual and reproductive rights, sports, research and innovation, and the space sector, among others. Some concrete examples of resulting initiatives in policy areas include:

- EIGE's identification of ways to integrate gender into the **European Green Deal** and the initiative **Towards a Green and Gender Equal Europe, #3StepsForward**[217]

216 European Commission (2022), 2022 Report on gender equality.

217 https://eige.europa.eu/newsroom/green-deal-and-gender-equality?language_content_entity=en.

- The launch by the Commission in 2021 of the **Equality Platform for the Energy Sector**[218] as a space for energy stakeholders to network and share good practices for promoting equality, diversity and inclusion in their activities; the Commission also joined the **Equal by 30 Campaign** aimed at promoting women's participation and leadership in 2023.
- The **Be Equal Award** was given during the **2023 EU Sports Forum** to projects that recognise the added value of gender equality in sport, provide safe sporting environments for girls, and empower women to develop resilience and self-confidence.

The Task Force is a valuable coordination, cooperation and communication instrument among the policy areas involved. Yet, as assessed by stakeholders interviewed, the actual level of coordination and communication on gender equality between policy areas is weaker than needed, which hampers effective gender mainstreaming across other policy areas and the adoption of positive gender measures in other areas.

Further initiatives have been developed that complement the work of the Task Force with different types of tools that have worked towards the goal of gender mainstreaming from different angles, be it legally binding or supporting Member States and other stakeholders, like social partners at the EU level and NGOs:

- Although not mentioned in the Strategy for Gender Equality, the Commission adopted in December 2022 **two proposals for council directives to strengthen equality bodies**, so that they can combat discrimination in Europe more effectively, including on the grounds of sex. The two proposals **were adopted in May 2024,**[219] laying down minimum requirements to ensure that people in all Member States enjoy a common minimum level of protection against discrimination. They establish common EU-wide minimum standards concerning the mandate, independence, resources, tasks and powers of equality bodies to (1) engage in the prevention of discrimination and awareness-raising activities; and to (2) deal with cases of discrimination and assist victims. Member States are required to adapt their national legislation to the provisions of the directives by 19 June 2026. With increased competences, powers and resources, equality bodies are expected to function more effectively, leading to improved enforcement of gender equality regulations and the promotion of gender equality across all policies.
- **Also relevant in this context, EIGE has continued to support EU institutions and EU Member States** governmental bodies **to integrate a gender perspective in their work**, through producing and adding relevant information and tools in the **gender mainstreaming platform.** EIGE has analysed gender challenges in 21 policy areas, including agriculture and rural development, justice, and environment and climate change. It has also produced step-by-step toolkits related to gender budgeting, gender audits,

218 https://energy.ec.europa.eu/topics/energy-strategy/equality-platform-energy-sector_en.

219 Council Directive on standards for equality bodies in the field of equal treatment between persons irrespective of their racial or ethnic origin, equal treatment in matters of employment and occupation between persons irrespective of their religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation, equal treatment between women and men in matters of social security and in the access to and supply of goods and services, and amending Directives 2000/43/EC and 2004/113/EC and (EU) 2024/1499; and Directive (EU) 2024/1500 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on standards for equality bodies in the field of equal treatment and equal opportunities between women and men in matters of employment and occupation, and amending Directives 2006/54/EC and 2010/41/EU.

gender equality training, gender-responsive public procurement, gender impact assessments, gender-responsive evaluations and gender equality in academia and research (GEAR tool), among others.[220] EIGE has also worked on a methodology for and identification of good practices of gender mainstreaming into varied issues. In December 2024, EIGE celebrated the **Gender Equality Forum** and presented the 2024 Gender Equality Index; discussions were organised focused on gender-based violence, including cyberviolence; gender and intersecting inequalities, and countering the gender backlash, and more.[221] In addition, **EIGE** has recently published **'Gender Equality Action Plans for Parliaments: step-by-step-tool'**[222] aimed at supporting parliaments in gender-responsive institutional transformation.

- Finally, the activity of the **EU Advisory Committee on equality between women and men** is also relevant in the context of this specific objective. It has continued meeting and facilitating exchanges of relevant experience, policies and practices between EU countries, social partners at the EU level and NGOs. In 2022, it issued a specific opinions aimed at guiding the Commission's work: one on gender mainstreaming in budgets at the national, regional and local levels and in 2020 another on the area of intersectionality.[223]

Gender mainstreaming in the EU budget

Gender mainstreaming in the budgetary process[224] has experienced noticeable advancement during the period. In 2021, the European Court of Auditors prepared a special report and concluded that the Strategy for Gender Equality did not sufficiently promote the use of gender mainstreaming in the EU budget, and that its institutional framework, although it had been reinforced, did not fully support gender mainstreaming. It also developed **recommendations for gender mainstreaming in the EU budget**.[225] Subsequently, the Commission, has developed a **methodology to track all EU spending programmes' contributions to gender equality under the 2021–2027 multiannual framework**, which was piloted in the 2023, 2024 and 2025 draft budgets.

According to the methodology, a programme may qualify for one or more gender scores[226] based on the objectives pursued by its respective interventions. Since the financial year 2023, the 'Programme Performance Statements' provide detailed performance information at the programme level and include relevant gender-disaggregated information available for each programme. In the context of the Draft budget 2025, which reported on the year 2023, 11 % of the EU budget contributed concretely to the promotion of gender equality (scores 2 and 1), rep-

220 Available here: https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/toolkits.

221 https://eige.europa.eu/newsroom/events/gender-equality-forum-2024.

222 EIGE (2024). Gender Equality Action Plans for Parliaments: Step-by-step tool. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

223 https://commission.europa.eu/publications/opinions-advisory-committee-equal-opportunities-women-and-men_en.

224 EIGE (2019). Gender Budgeting: Mainstreaming gender into the EU budget and macroeconomic policy framework.

225 European Court of Auditors (2021). Gender mainstreaming in the EU budget: time to turn words into action. Special Report 10/2021.

226 Interventions scored as 0 are those not having a significant bearing on gender equality; score 0* are interventions having the potential to contribute to gender equality; score 1 are interventions having gender equality as an important and deliberate objective (but not as the main reason for the intervention); and score 2 are those whose principal objective is to improve gender equality.

resenting EUR 48 billion, while 20 % has the potential to contribute (score 0*) to this objective. In contrast, 69 % of the EU budget in 2024 can be considered not to have a (significant) bearing on the promotion of gender equality on the basis of the information currently available. It is worthwhile mentioning that this latter percentage has reduced notably from 95 % recorded in 2021 (as reported in the draft budget 2023),[227] pointing at an improvement in the methodology and quality of data. This initiative is a relevant evolution since a wide array of gender-disaggregated data has been made available and analysed, but challenges remain in relation to the methodology and the application of gender budgeting so that **gender budgeting has not yet become part of the budget and programming cycle from planning to evaluation**. Instead, it has been applied primarily as a tracking mechanism, which limits its transformative potential.[228]

In 2023, for the first time in the Multiannual Framework 2021–2027, the **gender tracking information**[229] system captured information on the gender contribution of the **cohesion policy funds** (European Regional Development Fund, European Social Fund+ and the Just Transition Fund). Over 30 % (EUR 110 billion) of all cohesion policy investments were assessed as supportive of gender equality in the 2021–2027 period, either through direct gender equality measures or through gender mainstreaming. Yet, as pointed out by the European Parliament, only 2 % and 9 % of total funds are assigned to programmes with gender equality as their primary or important goal (score of 2 and 1 respectively).[230]

To support the development and implementation of gender budgeting and gender mainstreaming in **Member States,** the Commission, through the Technical Support Instrument (TSI), initiated in 2022 **the flagship project on Gender mainstreaming in public policy and budget processes.** The project supports administrations to analyse policies and budgeting processes from a gender mainstreaming perspective. Support is provided to build capacity and implement good practices, methodologies and tools for mainstreaming gender equality throughout the policymaking process. The project also facilitates peer learning opportunities between the participating Member State authorities. The flagship project has led to a multi-country project with the participation of seven Member States.[231]

Monitoring framework

Another key tool to mainstream gender is monitoring the progress towards the objectives in the Strategy for Gender Equality. To this aim since 2021, the Commission has been developing a specific monitoring framework in collaboration with EIGE. It is comprised of indicators reflecting the main aspects and key policy objectives of the Strategy which are gathered in an online platform, the **Gender Equality Strategy Monitoring Portal**.

EIGE has continued developing and adding to the **Gender Statistics Database,**

227 As reported in 2024 report on gender equality in the EU.

228 European Parliament (2024). European Union gender budgeting – state of play 2024. Briefing.

229 The tracking resource allocations for gender equality in the EU Funds aims to contribute to effective gender equality across the EU cohesion policy programmes and is based on the OECD gender equality policy marker. It can be used for the implementation of the tracking mechanism foreseen in Annex I, Table 7 of the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR, (EU) 2021/1060). More can be found here.

230 European Parliament (2024). European Union gender budgeting – state of play 2024. Briefing.

231 France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal and Romania. See https://www.expertisefrance.fr/en/fiche-projet?id=876698.

that contains statistics at the EU and Member State level aimed at providing statistical evidence to support EU institutions and Member States to monitor their progress. A relevant tool in this context is the **Gender Equality Index**, that measures equality through 31 indicators divided into 6 core domains (work, money, knowledge, time, power and health) and also pays attention to intersecting inequalities and violence against women.[232]

Examples of actions and outputs at the Member State level

Gender mainstreaming in key strategies and policies is implemented in EU Member States to varied degrees and in varied forms, according to SAAGE experts. Yet, in some countries (Estonia, Greece, Italy, Malta and Slovakia), gender mainstreaming has not been decisively embedded in policy processes in the period of the Strategy for Gender Equality, is almost invisible or is not being properly implemented (such as in Malta's first Gender Equality and Mainstreaming Strategy and Action Plan 2022–2027). In contrast, in many Member States, gender mainstreaming is supported by **national laws for gender equality** (such as in **Belgium, Denmark**, **Finland, Greece, Italy, Portugal** and **Spain**) and/or by periodically designed medium- to long-term gender equality strategies, often divided into shorter-term action plans.

The **Belgian federal government** adopted, in June 2021, **the Federal Gender Mainstreaming Plan 2020–2024**.[233] This plan identifies many policies where the government is committed to gender mainstreaming. In terms of capacity building, it has organised training sessions on gender mainstreaming for key stakeholders in the government, including several ministerial cabinets. In **Latvia,** principles of gender equality are taken into consideration when developing policies in any area and at all levels. Each Ministry and the State Chancellery has appointed one public official in charge of the implementation of the fundamental principle of gender equality in their area of competence. In **Spain**, one of the specific targets of the plan for gender equality developed in the national administration and its public bodies is gender mainstreaming. This target particularly applies when analysing and designing strategies with a gender perspective, when carrying out gender impact assessments, gender mainstreaming in the budget, and when defining and applying gender indicators in all internal policies of the administration. The plan also provides for training to acquire knowledge, tools and instruments to integrate the gender perspective in their work.

As regards gender budgeting, 12 Member States[234] have introduced gender budgeting at different stages of implementation. It is usually part of wider frameworks for gender equality or gender mainstreaming. In some cases, it is also part of broader structures for performance budgeting. In some of them, gender budgeting or auditing has been a practice – in some, even an obligation – for

232 The 2024 edition of the Gender Equality Index (GEI) shows that gender equality disparities within the EU decreased between 2010 and 2022 and that 15 Member States are now closer to the EU average than in 2010. The Gender Equality Index score for the European Union in 2024 is 71 out of 100 points, which marks an incremental 0.8 point improvement on the 2023 Index score and an increase of 7.9 points in total since 2010.

233 The case of Belgium stands out because it relies on a specific Gender Mainstreaming Law of 2007, which obliges each minister to ensure the implementation of gender mainstreamed strategic objectives in all activities which fall within their competence.

234 Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Spain and Sweden. Source: European Parliament (2024). Gender budgeting in the Member States. Briefing.

some years already and is now in the process of improving implementation and documentation; other countries are using pilot projects. Yet gender budgeting has been applied primarily as a tracking mechanism rather than being embedded throughout the entire budget cycle, from planning to evaluation, which limits its transformative potential. Lack of resources and knowledge on the topic is an obstacle for Member States to implement gender budgeting.[235]

These examples shows that the dual approach of the Strategy – the combination of gender mainstreaming and positive actions for gender equality – is shared in many Member States, which can be considered a **result of the Strategy**, even if the exact contribution of the Strategy to the changes in the Member States is uncertain.

Main intermediate impacts

There are various **outputs** of actions foreseen in the Strategy, including the equality mainstreaming work plans prepared by the Gender Equality coordinators of the Task Force and the mainstreaming of gender into relevant policy areas, such as the Common Agriculture Policy, AI, transport and European Green Deal. However, this has been achieved, according to stakeholders interviewed, to varied degrees. The two directives adopted to strengthen Equality Bodies are also important **outputs**, whose **results** in terms of transposition in the Member States will be seen in due time. The methodology to measure expenditure promoting gender equality at the EU budget programme level is a major **output,** which has **resulted** in improved (and improvable) knowledge of the gender impact of the EU budget. Finally, the new monitoring portal of the Gender Equality Strategy is another important realised **output** that results in improved knowledge on progress on the policy objectives of the Strategy and to follow development over time. It is also worth mentioning in this context that the EIGE indicator measuring gender mainstreaming[236] reached 38.6 % of its maximum value in 2020 and that it decreased to 34 % in 2024 due to the lack of use of gender mainstreaming tools. [237]

Assessing the **results** of gender mainstreaming of various policy areas and of the two directives is not feasible, as information about their extent does not exist. As mentioned, the result of the methodology to measure the EU budget is improved knowledge of the gender impact of the EU budget, which should in turn lead to a higher gender impact of the EU budget. In this same vein, the result of the new monitoring portal of the Gender Equality Strategy is improved knowledge on the implementation of the Strategy, which in turn should contribute to improving it.

4.2.4.2 Address the intersectionality of gender with other grounds of discrimination across EU policies

The second specific objective of this priority area is to address the intersectionality of gender with other grounds of discrimination across EU policies. Indeed,

235 Ibid.

236 The current description of the indicator is available at EIGE (2025). 2024 data collection on institutional mechanisms for gender equality and gender mainstreaming – Methodological report. Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

237 See EIGE Gender Statistics Database and EIGE (2025). 'EU Member States need to strengthen institutional mechanisms for the promotion of gender equality'. 5 March.

the European Strategy for Gender Equality recognises that women and girls are a heterogeneous group and may face intersectional discrimination based on several characteristics and that laws, policies and their implementation should therefore respond to their specific needs and circumstances.

Throughout the period of the Strategy, intersectionality has been introduced across some instruments, both legally binding and not. An important output in this respect is the **definition of intersectional discrimination** included in the **Directive on pay transparency,** which entered into force in May 2023, as that 'based on combination of sex and any other ground or grounds of discrimination',[238] thereby mentioning women with disabilities, women of diverse racial and ethnic origin including Roma women, and young or elderly women among the groups which may face intersectional discrimination. The Directive gives **a clear mandate to courts, equality bodies and other competent authorities to take this into account when redressing gender pay discrimination for instance when it comes to awarding compensations and setting penalties**. The provision stresses the importance of making visible and validating the harms of intersectional discrimination and its specific nature.

The **Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence Directive, adopted in May 2024,** also defines intersectional discrimination and highlights that people facing intersectional discrimination are at a heightened risk of violence. These victims should consequently receive specific protection and support, and Member States should consider the issue. Article 33 of the Directive is devoted to targeted support for victims with intersectional needs and groups at risk, which include those with disabilities and third-country nationals.

Finally, the **Directives setting standards for the independence and powers of equality bodies adopted in May 2024** include references to the need for Member States to ensure that equality bodies take into consideration specific situations of disadvantage resulting from intersectional discrimination, which is understood as discrimination based on a combination of sex and one or more of grounds of discrimination such as age, disability, sexual orientation, religion or belief, and racial or ethnic origin.[239]

In addition to these considerations of intersectionality, some policy tools have been adopted in the period devoted to specific groups of women, such as Roma women, women with disabilities and migrant women, which are briefly described next.

Women with disabilities

The **EU 2021–2030 Strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities**[240] promotes an intersectional perspective and addresses specific barriers faced by persons with disabilities who are at the intersection of identities (gender, racial, ethnic, sexual and religious), or in a difficult socioeconomic or other vulnerable situation. But this Strategy is not gender mainstreamed and fails to address the diverse and specific needs of women, including their experiences of violence, poverty or caregiving responsibilities. This Strategy contains a set of seven flagship initiatives, including the **Flagship Disability Employment Package to**

238 Article 3.1.(e) of the Directive.

239 Directive 79/7/EEC, 2000/43/EC, 2000/78/EC or 2004/113/EC.

240 European Commission (2021). Union of Equality: Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030, COM (2021) 101 final.

improve labour market outcomes for persons with disabilities, launched in September 2022. While sex is mentioned as a ground of intersectional discrimination in the Disability Employment Package, a gender perspective should be integrated into all employment-inclusive measures to address the specific needs of women with disabilities.[241]

Roma women

The **EU Roma Strategic Framework 2021–2030**,[242] adopted in October 2020, explicitly acknowledges the compounded discrimination faced by Roma women due to their gender, ethnicity, and, in some cases, additional factors such as poverty or migration status. The Strategic Framework sets seven objectives at the EU level and **quantitative headline targets** to monitor these objectives for the period up to 2030. While most of the targets are gender neutral (e.g. 'cut poverty gap between Roma and general population by at least half'), one of the targets is 'cut the gender employment gap for Roma by at least half'. On 9 January 2023, the Commission published an **assessment report of the Member States' national Roma strategic frameworks**,[243] which they were asked to adopt under the EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality. According to the report, addressing intersectional and multiple discrimination on all grounds of vulnerability is only included in some national frameworks. Most Member States address the gender gap in employment by including measures aiming at labour market activation for Roma women, but this receives insufficient attention.

In March 2021, the Council adopted the **Recommendation on Roma equality, inclusion and participation**,[244] which states the importance of acknowledging the specific needs or vulnerabilities of certain groups, including Roma women, and that measures to promote the equality, inclusion and participation of Roma should pay special attention to intersectionality and gender.

Migrant women

In November 2020, the **Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027** was adopted,[245] intended to ensure effective integration and inclusion in the EU of migrants and EU citizens with a migrant background with a gender and anti-discrimination mainstreaming approach. It recognises the additional obstacles to integration of migrant women and girls compared to migrant men and boys and sets specific objectives and measures addressed to migrant women, such as participation in the labour market, inclusive entrepreneurship, specific health challenges faced by migrant women, and participation in society.

241 A. Atanasova (2023). Narrowing the employment gap for people with disabilities. The need for effective policy implementation. ETUI Policy Brief. September.

242 European Commission (2020). A Union of Equality: EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation. COM(2020) 620 final.

243 European Commission (2023). Assessment report of the Member States' national Roma strategic frameworks. COM(2023) 7 final.

244 Council Recommendation of 12 March 2021 on Roma equality, inclusion and participation (2021/C 93/01), that replaces the Council Recommendation of 9 December 2013 on effective Roma integration measures in the Member States.

245 European Commission (2020). Action plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027, COM(2020) 758 final.

Within the Action Plan, the Commission has been supporting Member States and other key actors, such as local and regional authorities, through funding,[246] developing guidance and practical tools, coordination, monitoring and fostering partnerships at the local and national level. The EU hosts the Migrant integration hub, which is the EU's main source of information on the inclusion of migrants, bringing together in one place information about EU initiatives supporting integration, as well as news, facts and stories of successful projects from all the 27 EU countries. The Migrant integration hub contains an interactive migrant integration and inclusion dashboard with indicators disaggregated by sex in most of cases. A progress tracker tool serves the purpose of monitoring the goals and the implementation of the actions of the Action Plan. One key action is the European Partnership for Integration which started in 2017 and was renewed in 2022.

The European Migration Network (EMN) published in 2022 the report '**Integration of migrant women**',[247] highlighting that Member States acknowledge the need for specific integration policies tailored to migrant women, but that the integration of migrant women is not a national policy priority. This being said, most Member States have developed dedicated policies that address the integration of migrant women, primarily in relation to accessing the labour market, civic integration, language training, education and health.

Examples of actions and outputs at the Member State level

Based on information from and the opinions of SAAGE experts, attention to intersectionality remains largely absent, since policies generally address single factors of inequality (e.g. related to gender, migration status or ethnic origin). This being said, two focuses of intersectionality addressed in recent strategies or programmes and projects in a few countries have been identified: first, that of **women victims of gender-based violence intersecting with other vulnerabilities,** such as having a disability or being migrants, Travellers or Roma, LGBTIQ or victims of trafficking; and second, that of **women belonging to ethnic minorities**, such as Roma or Sinti women.

The **Belgian National Action Plan to combat all forms of gender-based violence** incorporates an intersectional approach to account for complex situations when people find themselves simultaneously at the intersection of several oppressions, such as racism, poverty, sexism, homophobia, biphobia and transphobia. In **Lithuania**, **the project 'Visible: Attention to Violence against Women with Disabilities'** aims to increase the capacity of professionals working in social or mental healthcare institutions to respond to gender-based violence against women with disabilities. In **Croatia**, through the project '**Educated Roma women, Strengthened Roma communities**', young Roma women are educated in women's human rights, especially the right to live without violence, sexual and reproductive rights, and health. In **Finland**, the third **National Roma Policy** ROMP03 (2023–2030) pays particular attention to gender equality in matters such as education, health, wellbeing and feelings of security.

246 European Regional Development Fund, European Social Fund Plus, Asylum and Migration Fund, Erasmus+, Invest EU and the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme.

247 EMN (2022). Integration of migrant women.

Main intermediate impacts

The definitions of intersectionality included in the previously mentioned directives are **outputs** of the actions undertaken within this specific objective, as well as of the references (to different degrees) to gender equality in the strategies for the rights of persons with disabilities, for Roma people and the Action Plan for persons with migrant backgrounds. The Recommendation on Roma equality, inclusion and participation is also an important output, as well as the Flagship Disability Employment Package (although with a poor gender approach) and the European Partnership for Integration. The **results** of these outputs are difficult to assess, given the wide variety of results, but the adoption by Member States of the EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality (with intersectionality and the goal of closing gender gap in employment adopted in some national frameworks) should be highlighted.

4.2.4.3 Effectiveness at the priority area level

Significant efforts have been made to develop and adopt gender mainstreaming tools and governance processes that support the streaming of gender equality across different policy areas within the European Commission, such as the **Task Force for Equality** and the equality mainstreaming work plans made in each service of the European Commission. EIGE has further supported EU institutions and EU Member States with relevant information and tools on the **gender mainstreaming platform.** At the Member State level, the Council directives to strengthen equality bodies should also support gender mainstreaming. Very relevant advancements have been recorded in gender mainstreaming in the budget, although more work is needed to refine the methodology and be able to extract sound conclusions. An operational definition of intersectionality has been included in relevant legislative acts and the concept has been included to varied degrees in some strategies and documents. The monitoring portal of the Strategy is also an important support for this priority area, although it should expand to specifically cover the priority areas and the intermediate and specific objectives.

SAAGE experts assess the level of advancement in this priority area rather poorly, with a scoring of 2.7 (from 1 to 5). A number of countries have reported a limited understanding of intersectionality, even pointing out that a **lack of an intersectional focus could be one relevant reason behind poor advancements in gender equality in the period**, since the needs of large groups of women at disadvantage are not properly understood and addressed. Further, **gender mainstreaming in the EU budget is also being seen more as an auditing exercise than a transformative tool.** Other country experts do report slow advancements in gender mainstreaming in various policy areas. The contribution of the Strategy to the achievement of the objectives in the countries is scored 2.8 out of 5, although it is often mentioned as a strong but limited contributor.

The **following inhibitor factors** should be noted: first, a lack of political will to further support gender mainstreaming and intersectional analysis, which in some countries is shaped by the current political climate that is influenced by far-right and neoliberal ideologies and the anti-gender movement; second, little understanding of gender mainstreaming and intersectionality and therefore low commitment; and third, a lack of resources and the capacity to enforce and monitor gender mainstreaming.

On the positive side, gender is being mainstreamed, to varied degrees, in some relevant policy areas. A strong example is environmental and energy policies as a response to Covid-19 and the War in Ukraine, and the subsequent energy and prices crisis; many policies reacted with a gender-sensitive approach to try to address the specific difficulties faced by women. As examples, the Spanish Recovery and Resilience Plan is structured around four guiding principles: ecological transition, digitalisation, gender equality, and social and territorial cohesion, and aims to address the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women; the Italian Recovery and Resilience Plan also recognises gender equality challenges, with some of its objectives referring to gender equality and recognising impacts in relation to gender equality, such as improved work–life balance and the increased employment of women;[248] in response to the war in Ukraine, Finland emphasised gender equality in its humanitarian aid, focusing on victims of gender-based violence[249] (see also section 5.2). Gender mainstreaming tools are providing sound and useful knowledge and an evidence base.

4.2.5 Addressing gender equality and women's empowerment across the world

The Strategy's commitment to this priority area, gender equality across the world, is addressed through three specific objectives: promoting gender equality and women's empowerment; addressing the gender-related aspects of trade; and women's entrepreneurship and labour market participation. The actions developed revolve mainly around the Gender Action Plan III 2021–2025 (GAP III) that assigns funding to the many areas included in it. At the same time, the EU External Investment Plan (EIP) consists mainly of funding to women's entrepreneurship and labour integration. Development of knowledge and cooperation are also actions implemented under this priority area.

4.2.5.1 Promote gender equality and women's economic and social empowerment, including ending gender-based violence, while mainstreaming gender in EU external action

The main output related to this first specific objective of this priority area is the EU Gender Action Plan on gender equality and women's empowerment in external relations (GAP III),[250] which was launched in November 2020. It calls for a gender-equal world and adopts gender equality as a cross-cutting priority of the EU's external agenda. One pillar of GAP III is gender mainstreaming across all external policies and sectors and the adoption of a gender-transformative, rights-based and intersectional approach. GAP III focuses on six thematic areas: addressing gender-based violence; promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights; strengthening economic and social rights and empowering girls and women; advancing equal participation and leadership; integrating the women, peace and security agenda; and addressing the green transition and digital transformation.

One of the GAP III targets is to ensure that by 2025 at least 85 % of the EU's new external actions have gender equality as a principal or significant objective.[251] A

248 EIGE (2023). Evidence to Action: Gender equality and gender mainstreaming in the COVID-19 recovery. Publications Office of the European Union.

249 See: https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/-/government-finland-continues-its-strong-support-for-ukrainian-civil-society.

250 European Commission (2020). EU Gender Action Plan (GAP) III – An ambitious agenda for gender equality and women's empowerment in EU external action. JOIN(2020) 17 final.

251 According to OECD marker G1. See methodology in OECD DAC Gender Equality Policy Marker. Guidance

significant result has been recorded, with the share increasing from 64.71 % in 2019 to 72 % in 2022. While in 2021, the budgetary commitments that promote gender equality and women's empowerment as a significant or principal objective were 74.2 % of the budget, they had increased to 77.5 % in 2022. In 2021–2022, during the first years of GAP III, the EU committed EUR 22.4 billion to contribute to building a more gender-equal world. [252]

In the framework of GAP III, the EU delegations and Member States have supported partner countries in designing country-level implementation plans (CLIPs), and as a result of this support, 131 had been prepared by 2022. These CLIPs are instrumental in mainstreaming gender equality in programming EU actions in all regions and involve actions and funding for gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment. In 2022, gender equality was on the agenda of political, security and/or human rights dialogues in about 100 partner countries. In 33 of these countries, dialogues focused exclusively on gender equality.[253]

The role of EU delegations in the implementation of GAP III is key as they actively engage with partner governments, CSOs and other stakeholders to advocate for gender equality and monitor progress.

Specifically considering candidate and potential candidate countries, the European Commission assesses the state of play in each candidate country and potential candidates in its Enlargement Package yearly, and sets out guidelines on reform priorities, always including an assessment of gender equality and women's rights.[254] In 2023, in-depth assessments of gender equality and women's rights were conducted in North Macedonia and Albania.

In this context, the EU has been supporting the **EU–UN Spotlight Initiative**,[255] the largest global initiative aiming to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls by 2030, involving men and boys and traditional and religious leaders. The Spotlight initiative was showcased at the 2023 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Summit as one of 12 high-impact initiatives. Since its launch, more than 540 laws or policies have been signed or strengthened to end violence against women and girls, USD 195 million was delivered to CSOs, more than 5 000 local and grassroots women's rights organisations reported having greater influence and agency and close to 3 million women and girls accessed gender-based violence services, including long-term recovery services, among others.[256] The #WithHer campaign[257] has raised awareness about gender-based violence by shining a light on all forms of violence.

Also as part of GAP III, the EU has been working on the implementation of the **EU Strategic Approach to Women, Peace and Security (WPS) 2019–2024**[258]

for the EFSD+.

252 European Commission (2023). Joint report to the European Parliament and the Council of 20 November 2023, Joint mid-term report on the implementation of the EU Gender Action Plan III (GAP III). JOIN(2023)36 final.

253 Ibid.

254 See, for instance, the 2024 Enlargement Package, including findings and recommendations for the 10 candidate and potential candite countries.

255 https://spotlightinitiative.org/.

256 Spotlight Initiative (2024). Unprecedented: A Pathway for Ending Violence against Women and Girls - Spotlight Initiative Impact Report 2017–2023 and Global Annual Narrative Progress Report 01 January 2022 – 31 December 2022.

257 https://www.spotlightinitiative.org/withher.

258 Council of the European Union (2018). Women, Peace and Security – Council Conclusions.

and its Action Plan 2019–2024[259] in regional partnerships (such as the Council of Europe, African Union, League of Arab States, NATO and others). One of the key priority areas of the Action Plan is gender mainstreaming and its monitoring and reporting is aligned with GAP III, which has contributed to broadening the approach to gender equality in external action.[260] The EU Member States have focused on developing and implementing national WPS action plans or on supporting partner countries in this regard – most notably by strengthening CSOs, preventing sexual and gender-based violence and supporting women's participation and leadership in peace processes. The development of the CLIPs has allowed integrating WPS in them.[261]

In order to build on the achievements of GAP III and align it with the 2022–2027 multiannual financial framework, which has proven to be effective, it was decided to extend the duration of GAP III until 2027. The implementation of GAP III is producing important positive results in terms of mainstreaming gender equality in EU external action. Based on GAP III, the EU and its Member States have supported partner countries in achieving further gender equality. They have thus contributed to increase protection against gender-based violence and harmful practices, promoted women's and girls' participation in public and political life and improved access to quality education, health and social protection for women and girls.[262]

However, challenges remain as regards the quality and ambition of the CLIPs, which vary substantially from country to country. Moreover, challenges persist in some countries, particularly in mixed or low engagement of national authorities, meaningful engagement and funding access for local smaller CSOs and women rights' organisations (WROs), the internal expertise and capacity of EU delegations, and gender mainstreaming across all sectors, in particular, sectors like the green and digital transition, security and trade, which do not traditionally incorporate gender equality.[263] Gender analysis and data collection disaggregated by sex needs improvement so as to better monitor and assess progress. More efforts are needed to develop the gender knowledge and expertise of EU delegation staff through training and exchange of best practices, including on refining the gender-marker system.[264]

Further, as announced in the Strategy, the **EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy** (2020–2024)[265] was adopted in 2020. It aims to mainstream human rights into all EU activities and policies and sets out priority areas, including gender equality, freedom of expression online and offline, eradication of torture, the abolition of the death penalty, and the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence. A mid-term review published in 2023[266] showed that through

259 Council of the European Union (2019). EU Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) 2019–2024.

260 European Commission (2023). Joint report to the European Parliament and the Council of 20 November 2023, Joint mid-term report on the implementation of the EU Gender Action Plan III (GAP III), JOIN(2023)36 final.

261 S. Desmidt (2021). How the women, peace and security agenda is integrated into the EU's gender action plan, ECDPM Briefing Note No. 141.

262 As assessed in the Joint mid-term report on the implementation of the EU GAP III, JOIN(2023) 36 final.

263 Concord (2023). Implementing the EU Gender Action Plan III: Turning ambition into impact?

264 European Commission (2023). Joint report to the European Parliament and the Council of 20 November 2023, Joint mid-term report on the implementation of the EU Gender Action Plan III (GAP III), JOIN(2023)36 final.

265 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eu_action_plan_on_human_rights_and_democracy_2020-2024.pdf.

266 Council of the European Union (2023). Joint SWD on the Mid-term Review of the EU Action Plan on

this Action Plan, gender equality has been mainstreamed across EU's external policies, instruments and tools. The elimination of sexual and gender-based violence, including in armed conflicts, has also featured high in the EU's external action, through the previously mentioned EU–UN Spotlight Initiative and the EU approach to women, peace and security (WPS). In May 2023, the EU announced the extension of the Action Plan until 2027.[267]

The many outputs within this specific objective mostly revolve around GAP III, the Spotlight Initiative, the #WithHer campaign and the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy. Many important results have been identified in terms of mainstreaming gender equality in EU external action: the preparation of 131 CLIPs in countries (with are instrumental in mainstreaming gender equality in programming EU actions), 33 of which were devoted exclusively to gender equality; the adoption or strengthening of more than 540 laws or policies to end violence against women and girls; and the development of programmes by grassroots women's rights organisations. Awareness about gender-based violence by shining a light on all forms of violence has been raised through the #WithHer campaign. Finally, the number of new external actions with gender equality as a principal or significant objective increased from 64.7 % in 2019 to 72 % in 2022, thus nearer to the objective of 85 % by 2025.

4.2.5.2 Address gender-related aspects of EU trade policy

Regarding the specific objective of addressing the gendered impact of trade policy, in 2021 the Commission adopted the 'Trade Policy Review – An Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy'[268] that references the EU Gender Equality Strategy and GAP III. In this document, the Commission commits to developing a better understanding of the gender equality implications of trade policy and to support gender awareness and gender-responsive trade policies, including in the EU Aid for Trade strategy. The EU trade policy has shifted from implicit inclusion of gender to explicitly addressing gender in EU trade policy and trade agreements,[269] in particular under the EU Strategy for Gender Equality and GAP III.[270] All EU ex ante and ex post evaluations of trade agreements contain a gender analysis to assess their impact as much as possible with available data.[271] This shift signals a progressive step and a consistent approach to mainstreaming gender in trade policy, but measuring the impacts of trade on gender is still a challenge, which is limiting the transformative potential of the EU's gender-responsive trade policy.[272]

Dedicated provisions on gender equality and women's economic empowerment have been included in EU Free Trade Agreements since 2022 (starting with New Zealand in June 2022, followed by those with Kenya and Chile in 2023[273] and

Human Rights and Democracy 2020–2024.

267 Council Conclusions on the alignment of the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020–2024 with the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021–2027.

268 European Commission (2021). Trade Policy Review – An Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy, COM/2021/66 final.

269 M. García (2021). 'Trade Policy' in *The Routledge Handbook of Gender and EU Politics*, Routledge.

270 European Parliament (2024). Gender mainstreaming in EU trade agreements. Briefing.

271 European Commission (2023). Joint report to the European Parliament and the Council of 20 November 2023, Joint mid-term report on the implementation of the EU Gender Action Plan III (GAP III). JOIN(2023)36 final.

272 C. Gammage (2022). 'Empowering women in trade: how gender responsive are the EU's trade agreements?', Chapter 9, in *Understanding the EU as a Good Global Actor*. Fahey and Mancini (eds).

273 See Key elements of the EU-New Zealand trade agreement, the EU-Kenya agreement explained and the

Mercosur in 2024[274]), often in a chapter dedicated to Trade and Sustainable Development, that covers labour, women's empowerment, environmental and climate matters. The dedicated provisions also contain commitments on the relevant UN and ILO conventions on women's economic empowerment and gender equality, including the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

The adoption by the European Commission of the Trade Policy Review in 2021 is the main output within this specific objective, as foreseen in the Strategy. The inclusion of dedicated gender equality provisions in the latest EU Free Trade Agreements is a positive result of this output.

4.2.5.3 Promote women's entrepreneurship and labour market participation

This specific objective has been addressed through the EU External Investment Plan (EIP). The EIP is a framework to leverage innovative private investments to foster sustainable and inclusive growth and to create more decent jobs that particularly targets women, migrants and refugees in partner countries in the EU Neighbourhood. The European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD+) is the financing arm of the EU EIP. It is endowed with EUR 40 billion and aims to mobilise up to EUR 135 billion; a gender perspective will be integrated through the application of the OECD Development Assistance Coordination (DAC) gender equality marker.[275]

The funding made available through the EIP is the main output within this specific objective. There is no readily available information on the results or impacts on women of activities related to the EIP.

4.2.5.4 Effectiveness at the priority area level

The implementation of GAP III and the accompanying initiatives, including the Spotlight Initiative, the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy and the EU Strategic Approach and Action Plan on WPS, has elevated gender equality as a strategic priority in EU external actions. However, as previously described, important challenges remain to be addressed regarding the closer involvement of WROs and smaller CSOs, including access to funding, and better capacity of staff and monitoring efforts. Together with significant progress in mainstreaming gender equality into EU trade policy, there is scope to make EU trade agreements more gender responsive, with binding and enforceable gender provisions and provisions for proper monitoring and compliance as well as with gender-balanced representation and gender expertise on trade negotiating teams.[276]

SAAGE experts have assessed the average level of advancement in the Member States in this area as 2.5 on a scale of 1 to 5, the lowest rating across the five priority areas. Some experts have warned about the lack of information, so this average may be lower than it could be, and any interpretation should be made cautiously. Similarly, the specific contribution of the Strategy for Gender Equality to the achievement of the objectives in this thematic priority was rated as 2.2 on a scale of 1 to 5, also the lowest contribution among the five priority areas,

EU-Chile Agreement explained.

274 See Annex to the Trade and Sustainable Development chapter of the EU-Mercosur text of the agreement.

275 OECD (2023). OECD DAC Gender Equality Policy Marker. Guidance for the EFSD+.

276 European Parliament (2024), Gender mainstreaming in EU trade agreements. Briefing

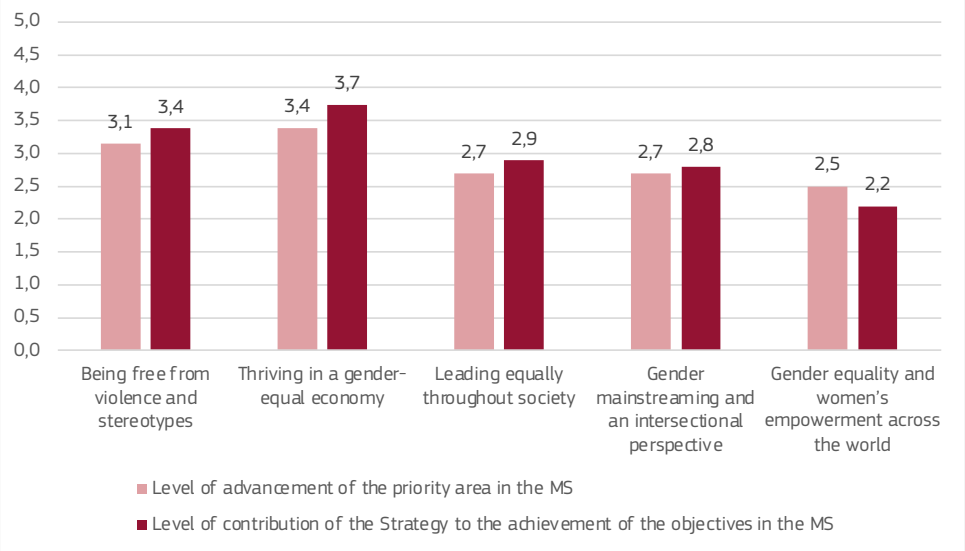
with large country variation. However, some country experts assessed the EU's strategic approach as a key policy and a highly relevant back-up, especially in the current political situation (with scores of 4 to 5) and others stated that the influence is unclear or not existent or they recognised a lack of information (with scores of 1 to 2)

4.2.6. Expert opinions on the effectiveness of the Strategy and its contribution towards gender equality

On average, the level of advancement towards the intermediate and specific objectives included in the Strategy priority areas in the Member States was considered by SAAGE experts as medium-high across the five areas, with an average rating of 2.9 on a scale of 1 to 5. Similarly, the contribution of the Strategy to advancements in the Member States was rated as 3 on the same scale (Figure 2).

The national experts in the 27 Member States rated both the level of advancement and the contribution made to this by the Strategy clearly higher for two priority areas: 'Thriving in a gender-equal economy', with advancement rated on average as 3.4 on a five-point scale and the contribution of the Strategy to this advancement as 3.7 on average; and 'Being free from violence' was assessed higher than others with average scores of 3.1 and 3.4 respectively. Among the three remaining priorities, 'Gender equality and women's empowerment across the world' stands out, not only because of receiving the lowest scores, but also because it is the only priority area for which experts rate the contribution made by the Strategy lower than the level of advancement made in the area. However, country experts often mentioned a lack of information when assessing this area, so this finding should be interpreted with care.

Figure 2. SAAGE experts' assessment on level of advancement at the priority area level and contribution of the EGES to the achievement of the objectives (scale of 1 to 5).



Note: MS = Member State.

4.3 Added value

The added value of the Strategy at the Member State level can be analysed in terms of volume, scope, role and process effects.

4.3.1 Volume effects

Volume effects refer to how the Strategy adds to existing actions, i.e. to what extent the Strategy mobilizes a greater amount of activity, resources and investment than would have occurred without it, either by intensifying or expanding existing national efforts ('boosting'), inspiring or legitimising national action ('mirroring'), or mobilising additional resources, funding or actors. Regulations of the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021–2027 have reinforced a commitment to gender equality. Gender mainstreaming in the budget is starting to provide information on how much funds are dedicated to gender equality actions. However, it is not yet possible to quantify the specific budget related to the actions of the Strategy. While some stakeholders refer to Citizenship Equality Rights and Values (CERV) as a key programme for gender equality, the EU analysis of the budget shows that in 2021–2023, this provided EUR 390 million for actions related to gender equality (Score 1 and 2). In contrast, the Recovery and Resilience Facility provided more than EUR 21 billion for actions related to gender equality in 2021–2023,[277] showing that gender mainstreaming in funding is key to expanding the effects. In any case, there is no clear evidence on the role played by the Strategy regarding volume effects and how different programmes are impacting on national and regional funds aimed at actions working for gender equality.

4.3.2 Scope effects

Scope effects refer to how the Strategy expands existing actions by strengthening policy areas or groups of persons that would otherwise not have received support. The Strategy has had a scope effect on the expansion of national policies in some Member States in areas such as parental leave, gender-based violence, women on boards and the gender pay gap, which would otherwise not have or would hardly have received support.

The Strategy has had a significant regulatory impact on Member States, evidence of an agenda-setting role. Several legislative and institutional measures at the Member State level are directly linked to the Strategy actions, for example, actions taken to transpose the Directive on adequate minimum wages or the Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence. Even in countries where actions at the national level are not explicitly related to the Strategy, the actions often refer to policy objectives promoted by the Strategy; hence, stakeholders and SAAGE experts have recognised the supporting framework of the Strategy.

The Work-Life Balance Directive is an example of providing a wide scope effect. As a binding measure, it has resulted in relevant changes in the parental leave systems of many Member States with important legislative changes. Moreover, and potentially more relevant in the long term, it has supported a change of narrative and changes in the analysis framework. The parental leave system, in addition to protecting work–life balance measures for all workers, is conceived as a key measure to involve men in care, addressing the gender division of work as a root cause of gender gaps in the labour market.

277 Budget contribution – gender equality (commitments).

The Strategy has established a roadmap to address structural problems with binding measures where soft measures have proved not effective, such as in the Directive on improving gender balance on corporate boards.[278] It helps to increase the visibility of gender-related problems and potential solutions by supporting research and generating spaces for political and evidence-based analysis and conversations. The annual reports on equality between women and men in the EU, with monitoring of activity and country comparisons, help to provide a comparative EU-wide perspective, which promotes and strengthens EU and national actions beyond the initial expected ones.

4.3.3 Role effects

The Strategy reinforces the role of the EU as a leader in promoting gender equality, providing an example of a political plan to address different issues through a wide range of gender equality policies. This is particularly relevant in Member States where gender equality is not considered a political priority. Moreover, it has also encouraged the use of plans, methodologies and tools, such as gender budgeting and gender mainstreaming. Soft measures such as mutual learning practice, training and networks also provide a role effect. The Strategy serves as a model for other administrative levels, either local or regional, depending on which administration is responsible for the particular policy area, to take up policies such as policies against gender-based violence and policies on early childhood education and care.

4.3.4 Process effects

Process effects refer to how the Strategy influences the way Member States and stakeholders involved in the programmes promoted by the Strategy operate. The Strategy has provided a framework for cooperation within different areas in the Commission through the Task Force for Equality, and also between the Commission, other EU institutions, Member States and stakeholders. The Strategy has encouraged the coordination of gender equality policies, though to a limited extent, as not all Directorates-General have systematically included the objectives of the Strategy or the gender dimension in their action plans.

In general, the Strategy has created space for deliberation on varied topics concerning gender equality in the Member States. It has supported the involvement of actors such as researchers, CSOs and WROs in the process by encouraging funding gender equality–related actions. In this context, within the European Semester, some countries have received country specific recommendations (CSR), for example on increasing female labour market participation, and encouraging actions in gender-related policies, such as childcare or long-term care, which is a clear example of added value at the EU level, as gender equality on its own is not recognised as an area within the CSRs.

278 R. Mateos de Cabo, S. Terjesen, L. Escot and R. Gimeno (2019). 'Do "soft law" board gender quotas work? Evidence from a natural experiment'. *European Management Journal*, 37(5): 611–624. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2019.01.004.

5. The role of EU funding

Together with regulatory changes, European funding is possibly the most important instrument for making progress towards the objectives set in the Strategy, due to its transformative potential. This chapter analyses the most relevant funding programmes and how they have integrated gender aspects. It analyses the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESI Funds), such as the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), Cohesion Fund (CF), European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF); the Recovery and Resilience Facility; Horizon Europe; the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme and Justice programme; and the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). Creative Europe, InvestEU and Erasmus are also part of the funding framework for gender equality to some extent, and are also briefly analysed in the chapter.

The current Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2021–2027 was formulated after the adoption of the Strategy, which foresaw the integration of the gender dimension throughout the MFF. Most importantly, as described in section 4.2.4 Gender mainstreaming and an intersectional perspective in EU policies **.**, a gender assessment of the EU budget was carried out by the Commission and EIGE, which is a key step in demonstrating the relevance of gender mainstreaming in the budget. This chapter focuses on the relevant individual EU financing instruments.

5.1 European Structural and Investment Funds

As proposed in the Strategy, the **Regulation laying down common provisions (CPR)** for the five ESI Funds – ERDF, ESF+, CF, EAFRD and EMFAF[279] – in the current programming period 2021–2027 has strengthened the legal requirements for promoting gender equality. It continues to include gender equality **as a horizontal principle**. Within policy objective 4, 'A more social and inclusive Europe implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights', the second **enabling condition for the ERDF, ESF+ and Cohesion Fund** is for Member States to have **national strategic frameworks for gender equality in place** that include evidence-based identification of challenges to gender equality and measures to address gender gaps in employment, pay and pensions, and to promote work–life balance for women and men, including through improving access to early childhood education and care, with targets, while respecting the role and autonomy of the social partners (Article 15 and Annex III of CPR). The national strategic frameworks for gender equality contribute to highlighting gender inequalities that can be addressed through the ESI funds, thereby helping to integrate gender considerations into policies and funding decisions. Finally, a **gender equality–related**

279 Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund Plus, the Cohesion Fund, the Just Transition Fund and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund and financial rules for those and for the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Internal Security Fund and the Instrument for Financial Support for Border Management and Visa Policy.

expenditure tracking system was included for the ESF+, ERDF and Cohesion Fund which will allow for better monitoring of investments related to gender equality (see section 4.2.4 on mainstreaming gender in the budget). It has been estimated that over 30 % (EUR 110 billion) of all cohesion policy investments (the EARDF, ESF+ and Just Transition Fund) in 2023 supported gender equality either through direct gender equality measures or gender mainstreaming.[280]

Moreover, **the specific ESF+ Regulation**[281] establishes that Member States and the Commission should ensure that the ESF+ contributes to the promotion of equality between women and men and take into consideration the needs of persons with disabilities and those who face multiple discriminations (recital 30). Specific objectives include to promote gender-balanced labour market participation, equal working conditions and a better work–life balance including through access to affordable childcare and care for dependent persons (article 4.1(c)), and to combat the feminisation of poverty and gender discrimination in the labour market and in education and training (article 6).

For the whole 2021–2027 period**, almost EUR 85 billion** (out of EUR 142.7 billion) **from the ESF+ investments** have been planned by the Member States to contribute to gender equality through gender mainstreaming or specific measures. The new tracking system should allow a better mapping of how funding is reaching projects that have the biggest impact on gender equality.[282] Indeed, out of nearly EUR 33 billion committed in the period 2021–2023, interventions for EUR 27 billion (82 %) have gender equality as an important and deliberate objective but is not the main reason for the intervention (Score 1),[283] and only EUR 1.3 billion (4.2 %) is for interventions whose principal objective is gender equality (Score 2). The 2021–2023 commitments in the ReactEU and ESF+ strand (including the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) and the Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) programme), totalling EUR 56.3 million, are fully devoted to interventions whose principal objective is to improve gender equality (Score 2).[284]

The new specific **ERDF and CF regulation**[285] includes a provision requiring Member States and the Commission to aim at eliminating inequalities, promoting equality between men and women and integrating the gender perspective in the ERDF and Cohesion Fund, as well as at combating discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation (recital 5). Yet the indicators included in the regulation are still not gender-sensitive, i.e. they do not allow a proper analysis of structural barriers, gender roles or social norms behind gender inequalities,[286] and are not disaggregated by sex (presented separately for women and men), as they were in the 2014–2020 period.[287] EUR

280 European Commission (2024). 2024 Report on Gender Equality.

281 Regulation (EU) 2021/1057 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 establishing the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1296/2013.

282 As reported at: https://european-social-fund-plus.ec.europa.eu/en/news/esf-invests-in-gender-equality.

283 Interventions scored as 0 are those not having a significant bearing on gender equality; score 0* are interventions having the potential to contribute to gender equality; score 1 are interventions having gender equality as an important and deliberate objective (but not as the main reason for the intervention); and score 2 are those whose principal objective is to improve gender equality.

284 European Commission (2024). Gender Overview 2024. Budget contribution - gender equality (commitments; million EUR) 2021–2023.

285 Regulation (EU) 2021/1058 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 on the European Regional Development Fund and on the Cohesion Fund.

286 As described by EIGE: https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/tools-methods/gender-statistics-indicators.

287 As highlighted by the Court of Auditors in 2021.

80 billion committed in 2021–2023 has been assessed as not having a significant bearing on gender equality (Score 0), while interventions with a total budget of only EUR 8 billion had as the principal objective to improve gender equality (Score 2).[288] Examples of such projects are 'The Next Chapter – Women Making the Difference (2014–2020)' that supports women in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland's border counties to address gender inequality by developing ideas, building communities and entering politics. In contrast to the ESF+, the 2021–2023 commitments in the ReactEU-ERDF and CF strand, which amounts to EUR 30 billion, are fully dedicated to interventions with no significant impact on gender equality (Score 0).

Even worse is the specific **regulation of the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF);**[289] it does not include any specific gender equality–related objective or measure.[290] Neither do the transitional regulation of the **European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development** (EAFRD) and that of the **European Agricultural Guarantee Fund** (EAGF).[291] Yet the indicators in EMFAF do take account of actions related to improving gender equality and the employment of the long-term unemployed and people with disabilities, and some of the indicators are sex-disaggregated. [292] Within the EMFAF, committed interventions for only EUR 40.6 million in 2021–2023 have the potential to contribute to gender equality (Score 0*), and the remaining EUR 2.3 billion do not have a significant impact (Score 0). Meanwhile, all of the commitments of the Common Agricultural Policy in 2021–2023 (EUR 161 billion) are assessed as only having a *potential* to contribute to gender equality.

These regulations for the ESI Funds (CPR, ESF+, ERDF and CF, EMFAF, EAFRD and CAP) in the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2021–2027 do not apply to ESI expenditure under the 2014–2020 multiannual framework, which was in place until the end of 2024. The most recent **2023 Summary Report on the implementation of the ESI Funds** covering implementation in 2014–2020 does not report on any achievements related to gender equality,[293] but the 2022 Summary Report does include two examples of how the ESI Funds focus on the needs of women and on gender equality. According to the report, the participation of women in ESF projects to improve employment opportunities was 52.9 % by the end of 2021 and it mentions the ESF '100 Percent' project in Austria that supports companies to close the gender gap.[294] An ex post evaluation of ERDF and CF Funds in 2014–2024 is ongoing.[295]

288 Budget contribution – gender equality (commitments).

289 REGULATION (EU) 2021/1139 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 7 July 2021 establishing the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund and amending Regulation (EU) 2017/1004.

290 A mid-term evaluation of EMFAF is ongoing: https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/14119-EU-Maritime-Fisheries-and-Aquaculture-Fund-EMFAF-2021-2027-midterm-evaluation_en.

291 Regulation (EU) 2020/2220 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 December 2020 laying down certain transitional provisions for support from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and from the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF) in the years 2021 and 2022.

292 European Commission (2022). Fisheries and aquaculture monitoring and evaluation (FAME).

293 European Commission (2024). European Structural and Investment Funds 2023 summary report of the annual programme implementation reports covering implementation in 2014-2020, COM(2024) 6 final.

294 European Commission (2023). European Structural and Investment Funds 2022 Summary report of the programme annual implementation reports covering implementation in 2014-2020, COM(2023) 39 final.

295 As reported at: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/evaluations/ec/2014-2020_en.

5.2 Recovery and Resilience Facility

The proposal for the European Commission to establish a temporary facility, the **Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)**, the centrepiece of the **NextGenerationEU** instrument formulated as a response to the Covid-19 crisis in **May 2020,** was seen as gender blind, and hence had serious limitations in addressing the challenges in the care sector and the specific needs of women aggravated by the crisis.[296] Yet the eventually adopted RRF regulation underlined, among its general objectives, special attention to women in mitigating the impact of the crisis.[297]

More specifically, national recovery and resilience plans (**RRPs**) were expected to detail how the planned measures would contribute to gender equality, equal opportunities for all and the mainstreaming of the objectives. Also, RRPs were required to address country-specific recommendations, including gender-related ones. Furthermore, the Commission adopted in 2021 two delegated acts on the recovery and resilience scoreboard and common indicators[298] and on the ex post reporting on social expenditure[299] that contains several **provisions to track the gender impact of the RRF**, such as the assignment of flags to measure a focus on gender equality and the disaggregation of some indicators by sex. However, while Member States must dedicate at least 37 % and 20 % of the expenditures of their national recovery and resilience plan (RRP) to measures contributing to climate and digital objectives respectively, no such percentage has been designated to address gender equality.

The delayed incorporation of a gender perspective in the RRF, the failure to include gender-related criterion among the other 11 main criteria for assessing the national RRPs, the lack of a 'do not harm principle' to prevent the planned measures from reproducing structural gender inequalities, and the lack of a minimum threshold for gender equality–related expenditures have been seen as significant limitations, including by EIGE. The EIGE notes that gender equality as a horizontal principle or explicit commitment was present in half of the RRPs, although in most of them it had a limited scope; the impact of Covid-19 and its repercussions on gender gaps were not sufficiently addressed; and especially neglected was gender-based violence, while the crises in care, healthcare systems and labour markets were addressed to some extent.[300]

The real impact and expenditure on gender equality cannot be directly derived from the national RRPs.[301] In January 2023, the Commission published a thematic analysis of the contribution of the 27 RRPs to tackling gender inequalities and identified about 135 measures with a focus on gender equality and equal

296 E. Klatzer and A. Rinaldi (2020). Gender Impact Assessment of the European Commission Proposals for the EU Recovery Plan.

297 Article 18(4)(o) of Regulation (EU) 2021/241 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 February 2021 establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility.

298 Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2021/2106 of 28 September 2021 on supplementing Regulation (EU) 2021/241 of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021R2106.

299 Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2021/2105 of 28 September 2021 supplementing Regulation (EU) 2021/241 of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility by defining a methodology for reporting social expenditure. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021R2105.

300 EIGE (2023). Evidence to action: Gender equality and gender mainstreaming in the COVID-19 recovery.

301 European Commission (2022). Review report on the implementation of the Recovery and Resilience Facility, COM(2022) 383 final.

opportunities in general.[302] Gender equality–flagged measures vary in terms of the explicitness of their references to gender equality; similar variations are also observed in the prevalence of measures across topic areas.[303]

Regarding the objective, 'mitigating the social and economic impact of the crisis, particularly on women', 27 RRPs contain 256 milestones and targets with a focus on gender equality (out of 6 266 milestones and targets to be achieved by 2026) and 102 of them are already reported as completed or as fulfilled (indicating a 40 % progress rate and some 22 % positively assessed).[304]

Concerning the budget performance and contribution to gender equality over the period 2021–2023, the vast majority of the funding committed (EUR 627 million) was allocated to measures that do not have any impact on gender equality (score 0). In these three years, the total of investments that are directly or indirectly supporting gender equality amounted to around EUR 14 billion (score 1). EUR 8 billion were channelled to interventions, the principal objective of which is to improve gender equality (score 2).[305]

As of October 2023, data on gender-disaggregated indicators revealed that the RRF supported more men (3 429) than women (1 833) working in research facilities in full-time equivalents (common indicator 8).[306] A total of 3 730 678 women participated in RRF-supported education or training (in digital or other skills), which surpassed the number of men (3 154 756) and non-binary participants (2 687) (common indicator 10), as it did in the case of digital skills (628 376 women participants in comparison to 334 254 men). The RRF supported more women in employment or job-searching activities (409 036) than men (279 054) (common indicator 11). Among young people, the gender difference is insignificant, yet slightly more women aged 15 to 24 (2 093 722) received RRF support than men (2 021 423) (common indicator 14). The progress on common indicators 12 and 13 also has the potential to mitigate the adverse effect of the crisis on women: the RRF contributed to the increased capacity of healthcare facilities (18.6 million places of annual capacity have been either built or modernised (common indicator 12)) and of childcare and education facilities (555 062 places of capacity have been newly created or modernised (common indicator 13)).[307]

As well as the design of the RRPs, their implementation also impacts the effectiveness in meeting the objectives. Thus, it is recommended to make a continuous effort to incorporate a gender perspective into evaluation and reporting to understand the gender impact of the RRPs as well as in the implementation phases, making the necessary amendments in the measures to achieve gender

302 The number of measures identified vary slightly in European Commission (2023). RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE SCOREBOARD Thematic analysis. Equality (136 measures), in the Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the implementation of the Recovery and Resilience Facility: Moving forward. COM(2023) 545 final/2 (134 measures) and in the Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the implementation of the Recovery and Resilience Facility. COM(2024) 474 final (136 measures).

303 European Commission (2024). External supporting study – Study supporting the mid-term evaluation of the recovery and resilience facility; EIGE (2023). Evidence to action: Gender equality and gender mainstreaming in the COVID-19 recovery.

304 European Commission (2024). Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the implementation of the Recovery and Resilience Facility. COM(2024) 474 final.

305 European Commission (2024). Gender Overview 2024. Budget contribution - gender equality (commitments; million EUR) 2021–2023.

306 European Commission (2024). External supporting study – Study supporting the mid-term evaluation of the recovery and resilience facility.

307 Ibid.

objectives.[308]

It is worth noting that the digital and green pillars of almost half of the RRPs do not rely on measures developed from a gender perspective and other RRPs did so only insufficiently.[309] Similarly, the European Green Deal, which aims for a just and inclusive transition, was seen as gender-blind, given the lack of sex-disaggregated data and a lack of consideration for the diversity of the 'lived experiences' of women and girls that are required to inform transformative interventions aligned to address gender inequalities in all aspects.[310] Nevertheless, the European Parliament issued a resolution on women's poverty in Europe, recommending the incorporation of a clear gender dimension into the **Fit for 55 package** and the **Social Climate Fund** in their design and implementation to address the differential impact of the energy crisis on women, including women in energy poverty.[311] The stocktake finds that a gender dimension has been incorporated in some of the initiatives. Yet the limitations of sex-disaggregated data, for example, concerning energy policy formulation or the situation of energy poverty, also result in impeding efforts to adopt a gender-sensitive and socially inclusive approach. Likewise, gender mainstreaming is also limited when it comes to the participation of women and disadvantaged groups in the planning and decision-making process, as well as in employment, research and also as 'end-users'.[312]

The importance of reflecting gender differences in the risks of energy poverty was also accentuated in **REPowerEU** Plan which was launched as a response to the energy crisis in May 2022. It resulted in updated guidance on Recovery and Resilience Plans in a specific chapter. To enhance the gender perspective, Member States were required to explain how stakeholder views are taken into account in the REPowerEU chapter and specify how the amendments in the RRPs contribute to gender equality and create equal opportunities for all.[313]

5.3 Horizon Europe

As a key funding programme for research and innovation, **Horizon Europe (2021–2027)** aims to promote equal opportunities for all and to overcome structural barriers as well as biases, unconscious or otherwise, that prevent the equal participation of women in all aspects of research and innovation.[314] Gender equality as a cross-cutting priority is also embedded in the research and innovation content, taking into account sex and gender differences, to contribute to the production of quality research outputs and to formulate effective responses to current global challenges and EU priorities.[315]

Gender equality has been addressed by three main mechanisms that concern the selection process and the award criteria. First, beneficiaries and affiliated entities of funded projects must have a **Gender Equality Plan (GEP)** to be eli-

308 EIGE (2023). Evidence to action: Gender equality and gender mainstreaming in the COVID-19 recovery.

309 Ibid.

310 Heffernan et al. (2022). A Feminist European Green Deal: Towards an Ecological and Gender Just Transition.

311 European Parliament resolution of 5 July 2022 on women's poverty in Europe (2021/2170(INI)). https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0274_EN.html.

312 The Gender Dimension and Impact of the Fit for 55 Package. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2022/736899/IPOL_STU(2022)736899_EN.pdf.

313 Commission Notice. Guidance on recovery and resilience plans in the context of REPowerEU.

314 Regulation (EU) 2021/695 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 April 2021 establishing Horizon Europe – the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A02021R0695-20240301.

315 Horizon Europe strategic plan 2021–2024 and Horizon Europe strategic plan 2025–2027.

gible, which must meet the following requirements: (1) it should be a formal and publicly available document signed by the top management; (2) there should be a commitment of resources and expertise for the implementation of the plan, (3) there are arrangements for sex/gender-disaggregated data collection and annual reporting based on indicators; and (4) there are training and capacity-building actions to address gender equality and unconscious gender biases.[316] There has been support for the development of Gender Equality Plans[317] and for their implementation, including a call for proposals on topics such as 'Policy coordination to support all aspects of inclusive Gender Equality Plans and policies in the European Research Area (ERA)'[318] and 'Support to the implementation of inclusive gender equality plans.'[319]

As an underpinning measure, the EU Award for gender equality champions recognises the achievements of academic and research organisations in implementing Gender Equality Plans.[320] The introduction of this eligibility criterion in Horizon Europe has contributed significantly to efforts to advance gender equality in research and innovation, thereby establishing a shared definition of a GEP at the EU level, facilitating access to tools and mutual learning and thus guiding national and institutional efforts.[321] Second, **integrating a gender dimension into research and innovation content is a mandatory requirement for all research and innovation actions**, unless the request specifies otherwise. Third, **gender balance** is considered throughout the programme. There is a target of 50 % women in Horizon Europe–related boards, expert groups and evaluation committees. At the same time, gender balance is set as a ranking criterion in the case of proposals with the same score.[322]

It could be explored how these three criteria (the requirement for GEPs, the integration of a gender dimension into activities and a gender balance) could be expanded to be used by other funds, even if they are not specifically devoted to reducing gender inequalities, as a way to mainstream gender equality into projects funded by EU programmes.

Horizon Europe also promotes gender and intersectional research through specific funding. Especially under **Cluster 2 on Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society**, there have been explicit calls for proposals for gender studies and intersectional research (WP 2021–2022; WP 2023–2024), including research on gender roles in extremist movements and their impact on democracy and research which can, for example, inform the aim of addressing and mitigating gender and racial biases in AI.[323] Indeed, **Cluster 4 on digital and industrial transition** has allocated funding to projects that directly address gender equality: in 2021, four projects on gender, race and other biases in AI were funded, amounting to

316 Work Programme 2023–2025, 13. General Annexes: 16–17. wp-13-general-annexes_horizon-2023-2024_en.pdf.

317 Horizon Europe guidance on gender equality plans.

318 Horizon Europe Work Programme 2023–2025: Widening participation and strengthening the European Research Area.

319 Horizon Europe Work Programme 2021–2022: Widening participation and strengthening the European Research Area.

320 Horizon Europe Work Programmes 2021–2022 and 2023–2025 WIDERA, EU Award for Gender Equality Champions - European Commission.

321 European Commission (2024), *Impact of gender equality plans across the European Research Area*. Publications Office of the European Union. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/042876.

322 Gender equality in research and innovation.

323 Evaluation support study on Horizon Europe's contribution to a resilient Europe: Final report (phase 2 study).

nearly EUR 14 million.[324]

Furthermore, topics with an 'important and deliberate' objective of gender equality received some EUR 5.6 million, more specifically, one on 'workforce skills for Industry 5.0' and another on 'the Next Generation Internet'. In 2022, EUR 35.7 million was allocated to two additional topics on education and skills in the space sector and AI for human development. **Cluster 5 (Climate, Energy and Mobility)** and **Cluster 6 (Food, Bioeconomy, Natural Resources, Agriculture and Environment)**, elaborated in conjunction with their relevance to the green transition, have also included some projects that address women as the main target group, such as three projects that aim to support women-led innovation in rural areas (Cluster 6).[325] **Cluster 3** work programmes have addressed the topics of 'combating and preventing domestic and sexual violence' and 'radicalisation and gender' and the **Cluster 1** (Health) work programme included topics that highlight the relevance of gender in health research and two projects on women's breast cancer.[326]

Other clusters and pillars of the programme also address gender equality to varying degrees. As mentioned in the Strategy, pillar 3 of the programme, **Innovative Europe and European Innovation Council,** would promote the participation of women in innovation, particularly through a pilot to support 'women-led start-ups and innovative small and medium-sized enterprises'. In the field of innovation, progress has been observed in the number of women in key research and executive roles or in the number of women-led companies.[327] For example, under the **EIC Accelerator Pilot**, 22.4 % of companies were women-led and 17.5 % of companies had women CEOs. The share of women-led companies invited to EIC jury pitches was 29 % in the last years of the EIC pilot. In a communication in 2021, the EIC underlined the need for further actions to expand this figure to 40 % and above.[328]

Other measures include the **Women Innovators Award**, the **Women TechEU** initiative and **EEN2EIC**. The EEN2EIC provides support to women entrepreneurs in widening and non-widening countries, aiming to bridge gender gaps and geographical disparities.[329] The 2022 Women TechEU call resulted in funds awarded to 134 female-led deep-tech companies in the areas of health, biotechnology and ICT.[330]

It is also worth noting that **ERA Policy Agenda Action 5** 'Promoting gender equality and foster inclusiveness' set a policy coordination mechanism – the Inclusive Gender Equality in the European Research Area subgroup[331] of the ERA Forum – to support gender equality and to promote gender mainstreaming, in close cooperation with the European Commission, Member States, associated countries and stakeholders, as well as through related projects funded under the

324 Horizon Europe and the digital & industrial transition – Interim evaluation support study: Final report ('Phase 2' study)

325 Horizon Europe and the green transition – Interim evaluation support study: final report ('Phase 2' study)

326 Evaluation support study on Horizon Europe's contribution to a resilient Europe: Final report (phase 2 study).

327 Evaluation study of the European framework programmes for research and innovation for an innovative Europe: Report phase 2 (support study for the interim evaluation of Horizon Europe).

328 Statement on Gender & Diversity in EIC.

329 https://een2eic.eu/about/.

330 Evaluation study of the European framework programmes for research and innovation for an innovative Europe Report phase 2 (support study for the interim evaluation of Horizon Europe).

331 Register of Commission expert groups and other similar entities.

Horizon Europe 'Widening participation and spreading excellence ' (WIDERA) work programme.[332] WIDERA has included various topics that address different aspects of gender equality in research. Examples are 'policy support to facilitate the implementation of a zero-tolerance approach towards gender-based violence in the ERA' (WP 2023–2024), 'Centre of excellence on inclusive gender equality in Research & Innovation' and 'Policy coordination to advance the implementation of the ERA gender equality and inclusiveness objectives within Member States' (WP 2021–2022). Also, there has been a continuous focus on addressing gender gaps in STE(A)M education and deconstructing gender stereotypes and unconscious biases through 'cultural and creative approaches for gender-responsive STEAM education,' 'developing a STE(A)M roadmap for Science Education in Horizon Europe' and 'support to the implementation of an EU Manifesto for STE(A)M education and research and innovation career paths to tackle gender inequalities in the ERA.'[333]

As of 31 December 2023, women constituted 44.5 % of 54 411 researchers involved in upskilling activities in projects funded by the Horizon Programme, while the share of men was 55.4 % and non-binary researchers represented 0.1 %.[334] Over the period 2021–2023, projects with a total of EUR 215.3 million funding (0.6 % of all funding committed in the period) were assigned Score 2, indicating the interventions had the principal objective to improve gender equality.[335] The commitments for projects assigned to Score 1 (those that have gender equality as an important and deliberate objective) amounted to almost EUR 5 billion (near 14 %). Score 0 is assigned to projects that may have a likely but not yet clear positive impact on gender equality, which amounted to EUR 30 billion and make up the largest part of the funding committed (83 %). The funding for non-targeted interventions (those projects that are expected to have no significant impact on gender equality) corresponded to EUR 1.1 billion (3 %). [336]

5.4 Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) and Justice programmes

The **Citizens, Equality, Right and Values (CERV)** programme (2021–2027) is managed by the Directorate-General of Justice and Consumers (DG JUST) in collaboration with DG EMPL (until February 2025, when the CERV's disability funding was transferred to DG JUST) and the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) in some strands. It is dedicated to fund CSOs active at the local, regional, national and transnational levels as well as other stakeholders. The programme's objective is to protect and promote rights and values as enshrined in the EU Treaties and the Charter of Fundamental Rights. The CERV programme has four pillars, two of them devoted directly to gender equality – Equality, Rights and Gender Equality (ERGE) and Daphne, to fight violence, including gender-based violence and violence against children – as well as the pillars Citizens' Engagement and Participation (CEP) and Union Values (UV).

332 European Research Area Policy Agenda: Overview of actions for the period 2022–2024.

333 Horizon Europe Work Programme 2023–2025: Widening participation and strengthening the European Research Area.

334 Horizon Europe – Performance. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/horizon-europe-performance_en.

335 Ibid.

336 European Commission (2024). Gender Overview 2024. Budget contribution - gender equality (commitments; million EUR) 2021–2023

The **Justice Programme 2021–2027** aims to support judicial cooperation in civil and criminal matters, encourage training of the judiciary and judicial staff to foster a common legal and judicial culture, and facilitate effective and non-discriminatory access to justice for all and effective remedies, supporting the rights of victims of crime. The Justice Programme is to support gender mainstreaming and the mainstreaming of non-discrimination (article 4), including in monitoring and reporting (article 13).[337] The 7-year budget to implement the programme is EUR 305 million. The commitments in 2021–2023 are EUR 130 million, out of which EUR 96.7 million (74 %) is for interventions with the potential to address gender equality (Score 0*), EUR 20.6 million (16 %) for interventions with no significant impact (Score 0) and the remaining 10 % (EUR 12.7 million) for interventions that have gender as a principal or important objective (Scores 2 and 1).[338]

The budget for CERV in the period 2021–2027 amounts to EUR 1.56 billion[339] and **it has the largest impact on gender equality among all EU funding instruments**. The two first pillars mentioned previously make up 24.45 % of the 2021–2027 budget, the CEP 25.3 % and the remaining 44.4 % is devoted to the Union Values pillar.[340] The commitments in 2021–2023 were EUR 634 million, out of which EUR 86 million (16 %) was for interventions whose principal objective is to improve gender equality (Score 2), EUR 304 million (56 %) for interventions that have gender as an important objective (Score 1), EUR 102.1 million (19 %) for interventions with a potential (Score 0*) and the remaining EUR 35.4 million (7 %) for interventions with no significant impact (Score 0).[341]

An interesting mechanism was introduced in 2022 under the Union Values strand and in 2023 under the Daphne strand of the programme, **cascading funding (or re-granting to third parties)**, by which funds are channelled through a main entity that manages the funding which is then distributed to final beneficiaries through specific calls for proposals. Through this cascading scheme, the programme allows funding to reach local and grassroots organisations so they can benefit from EU funding under a simplified framework. In 2024, from the Daphne call, 13 intermediaries were selected for EUR 29 million available in funding expected to reach out to CSOs involved in combating gender-based violence and violence against children for re-granting. In addition to re-granting, the intermediaries also support, empower and build the capacity and sustainability of these CSOs, for example through coaching, knowledge building and thematic training. They will also promote and ensure respect for EU values. With the same objective of alleviating the administrative burden for beneficiaries **in 2023, most CERV calls for proposals switched to lump sums**, instead of reimbursement of eligible costs as in the previous model. Intermediaries are also requested to integrate a gender perspective in their own calls for proposals and award criteria for financial support to third parties.[342]

337 Regulation (EU) 2021/693 establishing the justice programme.

338 European Commission (2024). Gender Overview 2024. Budget contribution - gender equality (commitments; million EUR) 2021–2023.

339 https://commission.europa.eu/funding-tenders/find-funding/eu-funding-programmes/citizens-equality-rights-and-values-programme_en.

340 https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/citizens-equality-rights-and-values-programme-performance_en.

341 Budget contribution – gender equality (commitments).

342 CERV Citizens Values. Call for proposals for civil society organisations active on protecting and promoting Union values: call to intermediaries (giving financial support to third parties) (CERV-2024-CITIZENS-VALUES).

It is also worth highlighting that the Commission started in 2023 to **introduce a gender perspective into procurement activities** in relation to selection and evaluation criteria, for example, considering the methodology for implementing the project with a gender perspective, taking into account the organisation of work, allocation of resources, and monitoring and evaluation.[343] Unfortunately, information on the results of including these criteria is not available. Nevertheless, gender-sensitive procurement could be expanded to other procurement processes, either related or not related to gender equality.

Each gender equality call for proposals under the CERV programme focuses on different **policy priorities**.[344] The priorities for the CERV gender equality calls for proposals under the strand, Equality, Rights and Gender Equality, have evolved as follows:

- **In 2022: '**Equal participation and representation of women and men in political and economic decision making' and 'Tackling gender stereotypes' (endowed with EUR 6.8 million)
- **In 2024: '**Tackling the root causes of the gender care gap by promoting a gender-transformative approach and challenging gender stereotypes' and 'Supporting the implementation of the provisions of the (proposal for a) Pay Transparency Directive'.

The policy priorities of the Daphne strand calls for proposals were:

- **In 2021:** Early detection, prevention and protection of and/or support to women, children and young people victims or potential victims of violence, with specific attention paid to situations emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic (EUR 13.5 million); Preventing gender-based violence by addressing masculinities and the engagement of men and boys (EUR 4.2 million).
- **In 2022:** Large-scale and long-term transnational actions to tackle gender-based violence (EUR 10 million); Combating and preventing violence linked to harmful practices (EUR 6 million); Primary prevention of gender-based violence (EUR 7 million); Supporting and improving national data collection on violence against children (EUR 2 million); Strengthening responses that prevent and support child victims of violence by reinforcing child protection systems at national and local level (EUR 2 million).
- **In 2023:** Prevent and combat gender-based violence and violence against children: call to intermediaries (giving financial support to third-party CSOs).
- **In 2024:** Large-scale and long-term transnational actions on tackling gender-based violence; Targeted actions for the protection of and support for victims and survivors of gender-based violence; Targeted actions for the prevention of gender-based violence, in the domestic sphere, in intimate relationships, and online, including through targeted actions with perpetrators; Targeted actions making integrated child protection systems work in practice.
- **In 2025:** Large-scale and long-term actions on tackling gender-based violence, with re-granting (giving financial support to third party CSOs) (EUR 10 million); Targeted actions for the protection of and support for victims and

343 As in the CERV Call for proposals to promote gender equality in 2023 (CERV-2024-GE).

344 Commission Implementing Decision of 19.4.2021 on the financing of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme and the adoption of the multiannual work programme for 2021–2022 (C(2021) 2583 final) and Commission Implementing Decision on the financing of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme and the adoption of the work programme for 2023–2024 (C(2022) 8588 final).

survivors of gender-based violence and domestic violence (EUR 4 million); Targeted actions for the prevention of gender-based violence, including cyber violence (EUR 4 million); Targeted actions making integrated child protection systems work in practice (EUR 5 million).

Data collected for the period 2021–2023 shows that over 3 000 CSOs have been supported by CERV and 31 million persons have participated in activities carried out by CERV-funded projects. A share of 93 % of participants assessed the event in which they participated as good or very good because of increased awareness and knowledge after their participation. Projects selected for funding in 2023 involved and targeted more women than men (52 % v 45 %, while around 3 % of participants were non-binary).[345] An interim evaluation of the CERV programme 2021–2023 is ongoing.

Many relevant projects have been funded since 2021. As mentioned in section 4.2.1.1, in 2022, the Commission put in place the **awareness-raising campaign 'Keep Your Eyes Open' on victim's rights** about professional support services available and their right to report a crime being guaranteed no matter where in the EU they are living. The **Town Twinning for gender equality** project has set up a lab on 'Sister cities for gender equality', aimed to facilitate exchanges of good practices that could be an inspiration for other towns in areas such as the political representation of women, work against gender-related violence, and gender equality in the cultural sector. The **End FGM European Network** drives impactful activities, including knowledge-sharing, data visualisation, education and capacity-building in close collaboration with grassroots communities, health-care professionals and other stakeholders to halt female genital mutilation.

5.5 Asylum Migration and Integration Fund

The Asylum Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) was set up for the period 2021–2027 with a total endowment of EUR 9.88 billion. The Fund's main objectives are to strengthen the common asylum system, to support legal migration to the Member States while countering irregular migration, and to enhance solidarity and responsibility sharing between Member States, especially through emergency assistance and the relocation mechanism.[346] All actions funded by the AMIF should comply with the principles of gender equality, non-discrimination and the best interest of the child. In addition to ensuring the integration of a gender perspective, gender equality and gender mainstreaming should be considered and promoted throughout the preparation, implementation, monitoring, reporting and evaluation of programmes and projects supported under the Fund (Article 6).

The AMIF dedicated part of the funding to a Thematic Facility, which offers flexibility in responding to emerging needs and changing EU priorities. In relation to the components of the Thematic Facility, the Work Programmes (WP) 2021–2022[347] and 2023–2025[348] include topics that specifically address women and children. In both Work Programmes, the call for proposals for the assistance, support and integration of third country national victims place emphasis on women and children, considering the gender-specific nature of trafficking in human beings and

345 Reported at: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/citizens-equality-rights-and-values-programme-performance_en.

346 Regulation (EU) 2021/1147 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 July 2021 establishing the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund.

347 Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund Work Programme for 2021 and 2022.

348 Asylum, Migration Work and Integration Fund Work Programme for 2023, 2024 and 2025.

child victims,[349] in line with the EU Strategy on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings 2021–2025.

Similarly, resettlement and humanitarian admission also concentrates on vulnerable groups, with special further funding of EUR 8 000 for each woman and child, among other vulnerable persons, admitted through humanitarian action. WP 2023–2025 also contains multi-stakeholder initiatives for migrant integration into the labour market (topic 4) and supports measures for migrant women's integration (topic 6). The specific difficulties of women in accessing healthcare were also underlined (topic 5). These topics reflect the key principle: 'the mainstreaming of gender and anti-discrimination policies' of the EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027. There have also been projects with the objectives of improving rights-based approaches to gender equality and promoting migrant women's entrepreneurship.[350]

The interim evaluation has not been published yet. Nor has the contribution of the AMIF budget to gender equality been assessed yet. There are grounds to expect that all actions supported by the AMIF may have a potential to contribute to gender equality, thus the whole amount of the initially voted budget was assigned the score of 0.[351] While the share of women is slightly higher than men in terms of applications for long-term residence status and applications for the recognition of skills and qualifications, their share is very similar concerning the indicators of resettlement and improved language skills. Non-binary participants accounted for 5 % of those admitted through humanitarian admission, while their share on other indicators was below 1 %.[352]

5.6 Other programmes: InvestEU Programme, Creative Europe and Erasmus

The **InvestEU Programme**[353] should be used to 'support projects that generate positive social impacts and … to improve the situation with regard to gender equality' (recital 22) and has one policy window out of four devoted to social investment and skills which includes measures to promote gender equality. In the period 2021–2023, interventions worth EUR 2.4 billion (100 % of all commitments) were assessed as 'with a likely but not yet clear positive impact on gender equality' (Score 0*). Examples of these interventions are the **gender-smart advisory initiative**, which aims to provide tailored advice and capacity-building to improve access to financing for female-founded and female-led companies, and European Investment Fund equity financing, where **gender-smart financing** is one of the horizontal topics implemented across the different thematic policy areas.[354] The intermediate evaluation of InvestEU, which covers data and results from the start of the programme through to 31 December 2023, does not assess

349 Regulation (EU) 2021/1147 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 July 2021 establishing the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund.

350 https://cdn.ceps.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/ITFLOWS_Report-on-gendered-migrant-integration-and-outcomes.pdf.

351 Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund – Performance. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/asylum-migration-and-integration-fund-performance_en.

352 Ibid.

353 Regulation (EU) 2021/523 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 March 2021 establishing the InvestEU Programme and amending Regulation (EU) 2015/1017.

354 https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/investeu-performance_en.

any gender-related aspect.[355]

Further, the **regulation of Creative Europe**[356] foresees that all activities of the programme should support gender mainstreaming, promote female talent in order to support women's artistic and professional careers (recital 26) and foster gender equality, in particular as a driver of creativity, economic growth and innovation (article 5(b)). The monitoring indicators are disaggregated by sex when appropriate. In 2021–2023, 94 % of the committed funding was assessed as not having a significant bearing on gender equality, and EUR 62 million (6 %) had as a principal objective to improve gender equality (Score 2). Indeed, the programme is aligned with the political priority of the European Commission: 'An economy that works for people', striving for greater equality, whether between women and men, old and young, east and west, or north and south. As an example, the project **TransFemina – Intersectional Landscapes** aims to promote and strengthen the visibility of feminist narratives in the public space and within the cultural heritage of three cities in southern Europe: Barcelona, Modena and Porto.

Erasmus+, the EU programme for education and training, youth and sport[357] does not include any gender equality–related objectives or measures. Yet gender analysis of the budgetary allocation in 2021–2023 reveals that close to 10 % of the budget was devoted to measures having as a principal objective to improve gender equality (Score 2); 20 % to measures with gender equality as an important but not the main objective; and the remaining 70 % of the budget to measures with a potential to contribute to gender equality (Score 0*).

355 European Commission (2024). InvestEU interim evaluation, SWD(2024) 228 final.

356 Regulation (EU) 2021/818 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 establishing the Creative Europe Programme (2021 to 2027) and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1295/2013.

357 Regulated by REGULATION (EU) 2021/817 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 20 May 2021 establishing Erasmus+: the Union Programme for education and training, youth and sport and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013.

6. Conclusions

The conclusions on the relevance, coherence, effectiveness and added value of the Strategy and on the role of EU funding are as follows.

6.1 Concluding remarks on relevance

The five priority areas with their subsets of intermediate objectives, specific objectives and planned actions are highly relevant for achieving gender equality in the EU and in the world, in light of the situation at the time of adopting the Strategy and at present. The statistical evidence at the time of the adoption of the Strategy and at present underscore the persistence of gender-based violence and domestic violence, the gendered division of unpaid care work, and gender gaps in employment, economic participation and leadership representation. While some progress has been achieved, systemic inequalities persist across various sectors of the EU, and thus the priority areas are relevant.

The statistics, literature and stakeholders' opinions find that the planned actions are generally relevant for the respective specific objectives and that they are coherent. However, some aspects could have been stronger in the Strategy.

- For the priority area 'Being free from violence and stereotypes', while the Strategy focuses on criminalisation and accountability, additional primary preventive measures (such as educational campaigns to shift attitudes, especially among boys, men and young people) are insufficiently detailed.
- The Strategy does not offer concrete measures for engaging boys and men or sufficiently countering the gender backlash through a human rights approach. Healthcare, in particular, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) is absent from the discussion.
- For 'Thriving in a gender equal economy', the ambition of the Work-Life Balance Directive, while being highly relevant in the context of large gender disparities in care and employment, and in particular the duration of non-transferable months and level of payment of the parental leave, and that of the Barcelona target (45 % of children below 3 years of age in formal childcare); this is not coherent with the ambition of closing the gender gaps in employment, income and care. Moreover, the objective aiming to achieve equal participation across sectors (including ICT, STEM and sports leadership) could expand the scope to other crucial sectors like care and green jobs. It should also focus on employment and not only on education and training.
- In the priority area 'Leading equally through society', the planned actions could have been extended to include diverse groups of women from different backgrounds. This could have been done across all priority areas.
- For 'Gender mainstreaming and an intersectional perspective in EU policies', the operationalisation of the two concepts is seen as lacking, particularly regarding the systematic application of intersectionality and the explicit inclusion of men, boys and encouraging new forms of masculinity.

- Finally, in addressing gender equality and women's empowerment in the world, some stakeholders suggest that a broader, more global perspective would strengthen the foreseen actions.

6.2 Concluding remarks on effectiveness

The effectiveness of the Strategy at the level of the five priority areas and the nine intermediate objectives, as presented in Figure 1, is summarised in Table 1 below. It presents how the intermediate objectives have been addressed, highlighting the main outputs and the extent to which the outputs committed in the Strategy have been realised, and the main results. The table also comments on the strengths and weaknesses identified and the results and intermediate impacts, according to the available indicators, which are always limited. Given the wide variety of actions and outputs and given the frequent lack of information on results and impacts, comparing the effectiveness of the five priority areas is not easy, but expectations about forthcoming results are presented in the table. The right-hand column of the table includes the assessment made by the SAAGE experts, as described in section 4.2.6, on the effectiveness of the Strategy and its contribution to advancements in each priority area. This also facilitates comparison between priority areas.

It should also be taken into account that some of the potentially most impactful outputs are the directives adopted, in particular, the Directive on combating violence against women, Pay Transparency Directive, Directive on adequate minimum wages and Directive on gender balance in corporate boards. However, these will take time to be fully transposed by the Member States and to deliver visible and measurable outcomes and impacts. In contrast, some outcomes and impacts have been already observed regarding the Work-Life Balance Directive and the Directive on improving gender balance on corporate boards, as they have been transposed to a large extent over the Strategy period.

Implementation and outputs of the Strategy

As acknowledged by stakeholders and SAAGE experts consulted and as evidenced in this report, the **European Commission has been very active in the period 2020 to early 2025,** bringing forward many actions at the EU level and also promoting and supporting the alignment and contribution of Member States to the objectives of the Strategy.

Important advancements have been recorded through the almost complete realisation of committed outputs across the five priority areas. Only one measure in the first priority area, 'Being free from gender-based violence and stereotypes', has not yet passed in 2024, but it is expected to be adopted in 2025 (the Commission's Recommendation on preventing and combating harmful practices against women and girls) along with two measures in the priority area, 'Leading equally through society' that have not been adopted– the Regulation on the statute and funding of European political parties and the Council Regulation on the election of the members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage. The main outputs committed in the other priority areas were realised. Relevant advancements not included in the Strategy were produced in the period with important outputs such as the European Care Strategy and the new Monitoring Portal of the Strategy.

This has resulted in the Strategy achieving notable advancements in all five priority areas, particularly in strengthening the legal frameworks for addressing gender inequality, gender-based violence, employment and care gaps, and unbalanced representation in politics and economy. The EU accession to the Istanbul Convention, the adoption of the Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence, and digital regulations such as the Digital Services Act (DSA) and AI Act are crucial milestones in preventing and addressing gender-based violence, including its online dimensions. Likewise, the implementation of the Work-Life Balance Directive, the Pay Transparency Directive, the Directive on adequate minimum wages and the European Care Strategy have laid the groundwork for closing gender gaps in employment, care and pay. The implementation of the Directive on improving gender balance on corporate boards has contributed and may further contribute to improvement in this field. In areas such as gender mainstreaming and intersectionality, there have been significant advances in the development of governance tools, including the Task Force for Equality and gender budgeting mechanisms.

Advancement by type of measure and output

As assessed by the SAAGE experts, the level of advancement towards the intermediate and specific objectives has been highest in the priority areas 'Thriving in an equal economy' and 'Being free from gender-based violence and stereotypes'. **This may relate to the type of actions** undertaken in these priority areas, **which are mostly legally binding, and thus impactful and measurable**. Stakeholders interviewed have assessed these legal measures very positively. The measures implemented within the priority area 'Leading Equally' in economic decision making are also mostly legally binding (e.g. the Directive on women on boards) and have also been impactful.

The provision of funding for actions related to the Strategy is possibly as impactful as the legally binding measures. It is, however, not possible to assess whether the funding has been fully allocated nor its effectiveness, because the Strategy does not have a budget on its own and monitoring of the money spent has not been done. This said, the expenditure of some specific EU funding programmes, namely Horizon Europe and Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV), has been key for important outputs such as projects and programmes to support victims of gender-based and domestic violence (priority area 'Free'). The European Structural and Investment Funds and the Recovery and Resilience Facility have supported actions on achieving equal participation across sectors in the economy and closing the gender care gap (priority area 'Thrive') and addressing gender equality and women's empowerment across the world ('World').

Gender mainstreaming tools, such as gender mainstreaming plans, gender mainstreaming in the budget, gender impact assessments and gender equality action plans, are key to ensure that gender equality is considered across policy areas, policy and legal documents, analyses and reports. While these tools are logically present in all priority areas, the main advancements in 'Gender mainstreaming and intersectionality' derive from three key outputs: the work of the Task Force on Equality and the equality mainstreaming work plans; the gender assessment of the EU budget; and the Monitoring Portal of the Strategy. **Knowledge development, peer support, cooperation** and **mutual learning** are also integrated into all policy areas. **Awareness actions** are less common, although potentially impactful.

Results and intermediate impacts

As previously stated, in many cases it is too soon to assess the results and impacts of the measures implemented, since more time is needed for the transposition of directives, adoption of recommendations and deployment of strategies. Relevant information is still lacking, making an assessment not yet possible. However, **some relevant available indicators show improvements**, for instance, in the gender gap in employment, self-employment, poverty and social exclusion; in childcare access; and in women's representation in corporate boards. While the Strategy has not yet led to significant visible progress in gender-based violence and the gender gap in pay, pensions and care, stakeholders' **expectations** for the forthcoming results and impacts **are mainly positive**.

While the Strategy has been instrumental in setting ambitious objectives and providing legal tools, funding and support to Member States and stakeholders and in strengthening governance, the future effectiveness of these measures depends largely on national implementation, enforcement, reinforced coordination and sustained political will in the coming years. The European Semester, a key monitoring and coordination process, while paying attention to gender-related topics such as early childhood education and care and long-term care, does not recognise gender equality as an area on its own in the Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) database; meanwhile, national headline targets for countries, employment, education and poverty reduction are not disaggregated by sex.

Additional challenges may limit the impact of the Strategy, including insufficient coherence between care and labour policies or insufficient gender integration in digital and green policies. Horizontal segregation has been addressed in the Strategy mostly for male-dominated sectors through educational and training policies; an approach to employment policies and for female-dominated sectors, such as the care sector, is weak, in spite of explicit mention in the European Care Strategy.

Further efforts are needed to enhance monitoring mechanisms, increase engagement with CSOs, and ensure the effective implementation and monitoring of EU directives at the national level to drive real, measurable progress toward gender equality.

SAAGE experts and other stakeholders consulted have also pointed to some external factors during the Strategy period, such as the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown measures and the energy crisis resulting from the war in Ukraine, that have exacerbated gender inequalities. The rise of populist right-wing parties and accompanying public discussions about the so-called 'gender ideology' are also identified as a challenge, negatively affecting public discourse and political support for gender equality.

Table 1. Summary of concluding remarks on effectiveness

Priority area	Intermediate objective	Outputs and results	Strengths and weaknesses	Indicators for results and intermediate Impacts	SAAGE experts' rating: advancement / contribution
Being free from gender-based violence and stereotypes	Ending gender-based violence	Almost all actions foreseen realised significant legal and policy advances including the Istanbul Convention ratification, EU Directive on violence against women, and digital regulation (DSA, AI Act). Actions to increase EU-level data availability were all successfully implemented. No information is readily available on results yet, but positive results are expected.	**Strengths**: Strong legally binding frameworks **Weaknesses**: Limited engagement with CSOs and women's organisations, lack of structured prevention approaches, and unclear objectives for key initiatives, such as the Network on the prevention of gender-based and domestic violence. Need to work with men and boys and with perpetrators.	Data gaps limit monitoring of progress, but no significant improvement observed in the period (not attributed to the outputs, since actions will take time to deliver results)	3.1 / 3.4
	Challenging gender stereotypes	All actions foreseen, such as the #EndGenderStereotypes campaign and AI Act, aiming to combat gender stereotypes were launched. Knowledge base created.	**Strengths**: The awareness-raising campaign has had a broad reach. **Weaknesses**: Engagement with CSOs could be improved. Stereotype-challenging initiatives lack further intersectional perspectives .	Eurobarometer data shows persistence of gender stereotypes, with significant variation across Member States. No information available yet on the results of the AI Act.	
Thriving in a gender-equal economy	Closing gender gaps in the labour market	All committed actions have been implemented, even additional actions not foreseen in the Strategy (e.g. the Care Strategy). Implementation of the Work-Life Balance (WLB) Directive and European Care Strategy address barriers in care and gender gaps in employment, thus recognising their interlinkages. The Work-Life Balance Directive was transposed in Member States, though to varied degrees. Further monitoring and evaluation needed.	**Strengths**: Legally binding Directive, positive advancements and positive results expected. **Weaknesses**: Limited ambition of the WBL Directive which does not allow a coherent tackling of the care division between women and men and child and long-term care service provision. The measures implemented do not fully integrate the role of men in care, and care policies are not sufficiently linked with labour objectives.	Positive results of the Work-Life Balance Directive. Gender gaps in employment and self-employment have decreased. No information available about uptake of parental leave by fathers or time devoted to care.	3.4 / 3.7
	Achieving equal participation across different sectors	All committed actions realised. Educational initiatives and targets set in the Digital Decade policy programme.	**Strengths**: Mainstreaming of gender equality in some initiatives. Funding initiatives for girls and women in STEM and innovation. **Weaknesses:** Lack of systematic integration of gender into other sectors, such as green or care economy, limits impact on gender segregation. Focus on education and training, not on employment.	Gender segregation in education and employment remains stable, with no significant improvement. More evidence needed to assess the results of measures put in place.	
	Addressing the gender pay and pension gap, poverty, social protection and social inclusion	Pay Transparency Directive and Minimum Wage Directive expected to reduce pay gaps, but gender perspective in wage policies is not fully integrated. ESF+ funding to reduce the gendered poverty risk. All committed actions implemented (the Minimum Wage Directive was not foreseen in the Strategy). Results not yet seen.	**Strengths:** First EU-level legally binding pay transparency action with positive results expected. **Weaknesses:** Implementation gaps of the Directive exist, particularly in small companies. Gender gap in pensions not addressed.	Pay and pension gaps persist; the poverty and exclusion gap slightly reduced but poverty and exclusion risk for lone mothers and elder women is increasing (not fully attributable to the outputs, since deadline of transposition is January 2026).	
	Closing the gender care gap	All committed actions implemented. The Barcelona target has been revised and the European Care Strategy launched in 2022 with ECEC and LTC recommendations. Results not yet seen.	**Strengths:** Clear policy direction towards childcare and long-term care related to closing the gender employment gap. **Weaknesses:** Coherence with labour market objectives remains weak. Childcare policies and paid leave systems are not well integrated, creating gaps that limit labour force participation for women.	Care responsibilities remain highly gendered; minor improvements in childcare access but long-term care remains underdeveloped. The gender care gap has not reduced.	

Priority area	Intermediate objective	Outputs and results	Strengths and weaknesses	Indicators for results and intermediate Impacts	SAAGE experts' rating: advancement / contribution
Leading equally through society	Achieving gender balance in decision-making and politics	Two expected outputs related to gender balance in political decision making could not be realised. The adoption of the Directive on gender balance in corporate boards is a major step. Significant advancement towards 50 % gender balance target in all levels of management within Commission, but not reached. Close monitoring of transposition of the Directive needed, but promising results in some Member States.	**Strengths:** Legally binding directive and positive results in economic decision making. **Weaknesses:** Delays in adopting political measures like the Regulation on the statute and funding of European political parties and of the Council Regulation on the election of the members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage reduce impact.	Significant increase in women's representation in corporate boards linked to the transposition of the Directive, but stagnation or decline in political representation at the EU level.	2.7 / 2.9
Gender mainstreaming and an intersectional perspective	Gender mainstreaming and integrating an intersectional perspective in EU policies	All foreseen actions and relevant additional ones implemented. The Task Force for Equality, EIGE tools, gender mainstreaming in budgets and a new monitoring portal of the Strategy are important outputs. Intersectionality has been defined in several legal documents and strategies for persons with disabilities, Roma people and migrant persons to include (to varied degrees) a gender perspective. Some progress in gender mainstreaming into relevant policy areas (CAP, AI, transport, EGD)	**Strengths:** Important support for this priority area, clear message conveyed and useful tools produced. **Weaknesses:** Weak coordination, cooperation and communication instrument among the policy areas within the European Commission. Gender mainstreaming is still inconsistently applied across policy areas, and intersectionality needs stronger operationalisation in all strategies. The tracking methodology needs refinement and has been applied primarily as a tracking mechanism, which limits its transformative potential. Data for monitoring the Strategy should expand to specifically cover the priority areas, the intermediate and specific objectives.		2.7 / 2.8
Gender equality in the world	Addressing gender equality and women's empowerment across the world	All foreseen actions addressed. GAP III and related initiatives have strengthened gender equality in EU external action. EU trade policy has experienced significant progress in mainstreaming gender equality. The number of new external actions with gender equality as a principal or significant objective increased to 72 % in 2022.	**Strengths:** Strong commitment to gender equality in GAP III. **Weaknesses:** Challenges exist in involving WROs and CSOs in GAP III and ensuring funding accessibility. Capacity of involved staff is sometimes weak and monitoring efforts limited.		2.5 / 2.2

6.3 Concluding remarks on added value of the Strategy

The Strategy has provided substantial added value at both the EU and Member State levels, particularly in terms of volume, scope, role and process effects. Stakeholders have identified the main added value of the Strategy at the Member State level as its binding measures that have prompted relevant and effective actions at the national level towards common goals. They also valued its agenda-setting role, which has deepened the actions adopted in key areas for gender equality. The Strategy is considered by stakeholders and SAAGE experts as an initiator and supporter of policy changes at the EU and Member State level for the benefit of gender equality, and as a resistance against the gender equality backlash.

The development of a monitoring system of the Strategy at the EU and Member State level and the analyses of the EU budget according to its gender impact has added considerable value to the limited amount of information that is available. The Strategy has had an added value at the EU level through the European Semester, as some Member States have received Country-Specific Recommendations related to female employment, encouraging actions in gender-related policy areas, such as childcare and long-term care.

6.4 Concluding remarks on the role of EU funding for gender equality

The regulation of **the current Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2021–2027** has been gender mainstreamed to a much greater extent than the previous MFF through the Regulation laying down Common Provisions (CPR) for the ERDF, ESF+, CF, EAFRD and EMFAF. In particular, the second enabling condition for the ERDF, ESF+ and Cohesion Fund obliges Member States to have national strategic frameworks for gender equality in place that include evidence-based identification of challenges to gender equality and measures to address them (Article 15 and Annex III of CPR). This requirement helps to visualise gender inequalities that can be addressed through the ESI funds and to integrate gender considerations into policies and funding decisions. The regulations of the specific funds (ESF+, ERDF and CF) have also reinforced the gender equality approach, but to varied degrees. However, the specific regulations of other programmes still lack a gender equality approach. As a consequence, gender equality in the actual implementation varies greatly across funds, as revealed by the new tracking system.

Gender equality has also been reinforced in **Horizon Europe,** mainly through three mechanisms that concern the selection process and the award criteria: the requirement of a Gender Equality Plan (GEP), the **integration of a gender dimension into research and innovation content**, unless there is a justification for the contrary, and the consideration of **gender balance** throughout the programme. In relation to **CERV**, it is also worth highlighting that the Commission started in 2023 to **introduce a gender perspective into procurement activities** through several criteria in the calls for proposals. Unfortunately, there is no information available to assess the results.

The new tracking methodology has significantly improved the monitoring of the gender impact of EU funding in the current 2021–2027 MFF compared to the former one. This is a very relevant and useful tool, although the methodology of the gender tracking system, as well as the availability and quality of data, need further improvement and fine tuning, if it is to become part of the budget and

programming cycle from planning to evaluation.[358] A positive outcome is that the 'programme performance statements' of the EU budget programmes, which provide detailed performance information at the programme level, have been enhanced to include the relevant gender-disaggregated information available for each programme. This includes a wide array of gender-disaggregated data aimed at improving the monitoring of the performance of the programme in relation to gender equality. For some programmes, particularly those under shared and indirect management, the availability of gender-disaggregated data is constrained by the programme regulations and the implementation agreements.

This new system has shown that **within the ESI Funds**, the ESF+ is still the most prominent actor in fighting gender inequalities in relative terms, with 85 % of the 2021–2023 commitments scoring 2 or 1, adding up to EUR 28.5 billion. The role played by the other funds (ERDF, EARD, CF and Just Transition Fund), being much better endowed than the ESF+, is relevant but lower (EUR 13 billion scoring 2 and 1), and currently much lower in relative terms.[359]

The 2020–2024 period was marked by the Covid-19 pandemic, the accompanying lockdowns and the measures to address their severe impact, which has been more acute on women; by the Russian war against Ukraine and the subsequent economic and energy crisis; and by efforts to address climate change. The budget allocated to the **Recovery and Resilience Facility** is unprecedented, and, after an initial gender-blind approach, significant efforts have been made to provide special attention to women and to track the gender impact of the RRF. Yet only about 3 % of the budget committed in 2021–2023 is estimated to have gender equality as a primary or important objective and the rest is estimated to not have a significant impact. In particular, the digital and green transition sections do not rely on measures developed from a gender perspective. While Member States must dedicate 37 % and 20 % of the expenditures of their national recovery and resilience plan (RRP) to measures contributing to climate and digital objectives respectively, no such percentage has been designated to address gender equality.

Horizon Europe, the CERV and Justice programmes, AMIF, Erasmus, InvestEU and **Creative Europe** score relatively high in terms of their gendered objectives and impact, but their endowment is much lower than other funds. Simplification of the administrative burden and cascade funding implemented in the CERV programme, to better reach out to smaller CSOs, is a valuable practice. It is worthwhile exploring expansion of this model to other instruments.

358 European Parliament (2024). European Union gender budgeting – state of play 2024. Briefing.

359 European Commission (2024). Gender Overview 2024. Budget contribution - gender equality (commitments; million EUR) 2021–2023.

6.5. Strengths and weaknesses

6.5.1. Strengths

- The EU Strategy for Gender Equality is **very comprehensive.** It focuses on **priorities, intermediate and specific objectives** with **actions that are highly relevant** for achieving gender equality in the EU and in the world. The priority areas and objectives are complementary and highly coherent with each other. The five priority areas reflect the dual approach adopted in the Strategy that combines specific measures with gender mainstreaming measures. Both the wide scope and the dual approach have been highly praised by all stakeholders consulted.
- **The European Commission has been very active in the period**, advancing many actions at the EU level and also promoting and supporting the cooperation and contribution of Member States to the objectives of the Strategy. Therefore, almost all outputs foreseen in the Strategy have been realised and even additional highly relevant actions not included in the Strategy have been developed. As a result, the Strategy has achieved notable advancements in all five priority areas, and together they create a stronger legal, policy and governance framework for gender equality. In particular, legally binding measures entail ambitious objectives and a high potential for transformative impact both at the EU and Member State level.
- **Relevant available indicators show certain improvements**, for instance, the gender gap in employment, self-employment, poverty and social exclusion, and indicators for childcare access and women's representation in corporate boards. Moreover, stakeholders have mainly positive expectations for the forthcoming results and impacts, once the directives are transposed, the recommendations adopted and the strategies deployed.
- The Strategy **has provided clear added value at the EU and Member State level**. It has reinforced the EU's role as a leader in setting the agenda for promoting gender equality, establishing clear frameworks and guidelines that assist Member States in implementing gender mainstreaming and equality measures within their national contexts. One important added value of the Strategy at the Member State level is its binding measures that have prompted relevant and effective actions at the national level towards common goals. The development of a monitoring system of the Strategy at the EU and Member State level and the analyses of the EU budget according to its gender impact have both added considerable value to the previously limited information.
- The **gender mainstreaming of EU funding has been strengthened** in the current 2021–2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MMF) through the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR) and the regulations of specific funds. Gender equality has been reinforced in selection processes, award criteria and procurement activities in Horizon Europe and CERV, thereby laying the ground for expanding such activities and criteria to other funds. Simplification of the administrative burden and cascading funding implemented in the CERV programme to better reach out to smaller CSOs is a valuable practice, which is worthwhile exploring to expand to other instruments. The **new tracking system** has improved understanding and monitoring of the gender impact of EU funding, which is a first valuable step towards gender budgeting.

- **Significant efforts have been devoted to developing and adopting gender mainstreaming tools and governance processes** that support the mainstreaming of gender equality across different policy areas within the European Commission and the Member States. The Task Force for Equality, EIGE's mainstreaming platform and the new Portal for Monitoring the Strategy are positive advancements.

6.5.2. Weaknesses

- **The definition of the objectives of the Strategy is too broad**, the actions are in some cases not concrete and the responsible units or stakeholder(s), both within the European Commission, and in the Member States, are not always clear enough. This makes follow-up, monitoring and evaluating the Strategy challenging. Monitoring the Strategy is not the same as monitoring the situation of gender equality in the EU and such monitoring, as presented in annual gender equality reports, could be reinforced. A system of indicators for monitoring the Strategy, based on the intermediate and specific objectives and the measures, clearly measuring the outputs, results and impacts, is missing. Adequate statistical information to monitor results and impacts is also often missing.
- In spite of advancements, **coordination, cooperation and communication** among policy areas within the European Commission in relation to gender mainstreaming and the adoption of targeted gender measures is **still weak**, which limits effectiveness. Weak coordination with other stakeholders, such as social partners, CSOs and WROs, may limit reach and impact.
- The relationship of the Strategy with the **European Semester** is also weak. While specific gender-related topics such as early childhood education and care and long-term care are included as policy areas in the **Country-Specific Recommendations** (CSRs) **database,**[360] gender equality has not been recognised as a stand-alone area and national headline targets for countries for employment, education and poverty reduction are not disaggregated by sex.
- **Some specific issues relevant for gender equality are not sufficiently addressed in the Strategy**, such as **intersectionality**, with women with different vulnerabilities not systematically addressed in each priority area. The primary prevention of gender-based violence is weakly addressed. Other issues such as sex work and sexual and reproductive rights, as well as applying a gender lens to healthcare and access to housing, have not been touched upon in the Strategy. Across the Strategy and the five priority areas, the **inclusion of men and boys** and **proposing new forms of masculinity are missing**. Weak coherence exists between actions included in the Strategy which address leave and care policies with those which address employment targets.
- **Several challenges may have limited the effectiveness of the Strategy**, including insufficient coherence between care and labour policies, insufficient gender integration in digital and green policies, and delays in the implementation of key measures, such as the amendment of the Regulation on the statute and funding of European political parties, aimed at promoting gender balance in political decision-making. While horizontal segregation

360 https://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/country-specific-recommendations-database/.

has been addressed in the Strategy, it has mostly been for male-dominated sectors through educational and training policies and an approach to employment policies and for female-dominated sectors, such as the care sector, is missing.

- **Only a limited share of EU funding is devoted to specific gender equality objectives**, as now visible due to the new tracking system. There is no obligation for Member States to dedicate a share of budgets to gender equality objectives, compared to the obligation of devoting a share of RRP to climate and digital objectives. Smaller NGOs and WROs that work on gender equality issues face difficulties in accessing funding.

7. Recommendations for future Strategy

Drawing on the findings in previous chapters, in particular the Chapter 6 conclusions and summary of strengths and weaknesses, and drawing also on the sections in Chapter 4 devoted to effectiveness at the priority-area levels (sections 4.2.1.3, 4.2.2.5, 4.2.3.3, 4.2.4.3 and 4.2.5.4), this final section makes recommendations for a future strategy that advances towards full equality between women and men.

These recommendations refer to the design and governance of a future strategy, that should understand and address the interconnectedness of the manifold root causes behind gender inequalities. For this, the new strategy will also need to address the powerful anti-gender narratives linked to the trend of anti-democratic discourse and disinformation in many countries of the EU as well as in EU institutions.

Recommendations are also presented related to the specific current priority areas, whereby a general focus of the new strategy should be devoted to the correct implementation of the many binding legal measures adopted by the Strategy and their impact.

7.1. Recommendations on the design and governance of a new strategy

Keep and reinforce the political will and commitment of the Commission to gender equality and playing a leading role to support it.

In face of the **rise of populist right-wing parties** and accompanying public discussions about the so-called 'gender ideology', maintain and reinforce the political will and commitment of the European Commission to gender equality and its encouragement and support to other institutions to strengthen their commitment to gender equality.

Reinforce coordination, cooperation and communication across policy areas in the European Commission

Reinforce internal communication, cooperation and coordination with the different policy areas within the European Commission, to ensure proper gender mainstreaming across policy areas. The Task Force on Equality should keep on revising gender mainstreaming of relevant policy documents of each policy area, renewing and updating the equality mainstreaming work plans, so that they are aligned with the new strategy and cover the next period. The new strategy should achieve coherence in terms of gender equality objectives among other EU strategies, in particular, employment, economic and care policies, accompanied with adequate EU funding.

Consider more specific objectives and measures in the next strategy and monitor them

Identify clear intermediate and specific objectives within broader policy priorities in the next strategy. Consider establishing at least one specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound (SMART) objective in each policy priority and establishing more gendered quantitative targets (for example, the target of the European Social Pillar – halving the employment gender gap – or the new Barcelona target) to clarify the ambition and timeline of the new strategy. Identify clear indicators to monitor the objectives, measures and impact of the measures on progress. For this, keep the Monitoring Portal of the EU Gender Equality Strategy updated and expand it to cover additional indicators, in particular intersectional variables. The Portal should aim to provide adequate and complete information about all priority areas of the Strategy. More efforts should be made to make it better known and widely used.

Reinforce links between the next strategy and the European Semester

A closer linking of the next strategy with the European Semester would increase its effectiveness through the adoption of specific indicators for monitoring and evaluation and through the Country Specific Recommendations. The CSR database should include a specific area devoted to gender equality on its own (as is done for early childhood education and care and long-term care, that are relevant dimensions of the database), so as to better monitor and visualise progress in Member States.[361] More specifically, Country Specific CSRs should address gender gaps where they persist – particularly in employment, care, and pay – and should build on indicators disaggregated by sex.

Reinforce links between the next strategy and the Multiannual Financial Frameworks

Include gender equality as a new reinforced priority of the MFF, similar to the green and digital transitions, so the next MFF 2028–2034 explicitly includes gender equality objectives and in a significant way.

Work on collaboration agreements with Eurostat on further relevant data

Engage and work with Eurostat to produce more and better data to adequately monitor the recently adopted binding legislation on gender-based violence, pay transparency, company boards and care policies, including the Work-Life Balance Directive.

Specifically, statistics on time use are relevant to monitoring the impact of care policies. EU-SILC also includes questions about paid and unpaid parental leave in relation to labour market participation at the EU level and in Member States, which can be improved with wider samples for households with children under 3.

Reinforce communication with stakeholders towards more structured dialogue

Establish clear objectives and structured pathways for dialogue and cooperation with social partners, CSOs and WROs, ensuring transparent, continuous and predictable multistakeholder and multidisciplinary work. A more structured dialogue could contribute to increasing the effectiveness of policies and measures by im-

361 https://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/country-specific-recommendations-database/.

proving their design, expanding outreach and awareness-raising.

Maintain the period of six years for the next Strategy 2026–2031 with monitoring through the current annual reports on gender equality, which should add the above-mentioned system of indicators for proper assessment of the measures.

A political framework must be stable but adaptable and of a sufficient length in order to effectively be used to address complex issues. As the current Strategy has shown, reaching agreements and implementation takes time. A mid-term review at the end of 2028 to adapt the new strategy to the next MFF and new conditions is recommended.

7.2. Recommendations on the strategic priorities for a future framework

Give continuity to the current priority areas, with one change

The five current priority areas should continue, together with the dual approach of mainstreaming gender equality and intersectionality across all policy areas and implementing targeted policies and measures. In this context, the priority area devoted to gender mainstreaming and intersectionality needs further reinforcement. **Gender stereotypes** are both the cause and consequence of gender inequalities and should not only be linked to gender-based violence, as they are now as embedded in the 'Being free' priority area. Addressing gender stereotypes should be transversal in all priority areas and could be included in the priority area devoted to gender mainstreaming and intersectionality. This could contribute to better acknowledging gender stereotypes and their impact. The specific measures developed in the Strategy, such as the awareness-raising campaign or the regulation of Artificial Intelligence to address the challenge of gender stereotypes, among others (as described in section 4.2.1), could be placed in this priority area.

7.3. Recommendations regarding actions and activities to be included in a future strategy

7.3.1. Being free from violence and stereotypes

Focus on the implementation of the Istanbul Convention and the transposition of the Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence

During the next strategy, focus on the implementation of the Istanbul Convention and on the transposition of the Directive, supporting Member States to find the most appropriate and effective mechanisms to implement the Convention and to fulfil the Directive and going beyond the standards set in the Convention and the Directive, through guidelines and training, exchange of knowledge and good practices, also focusing on women facing intersectional discrimination. Closely monitor and evaluate their effectiveness, identifying what is working and what is not working.

Continue and strengthen action to prevent and combat gender-based cyber violence

Ensure that the different definitions of the offences related to gender-based cyber violence included in the Directive on combating violence against women and

domestic violence is used consistently in the DSA application and promote joint training and guidance for national Digital Services Coordinators on gender-based cyber violence.

Continue requiring and monitoring risk assessment reports elaborated by VLOPs and VLOSEs, specifically the risks of gender-based violence, and their measures to mitigate systemic risks. Consider cooperation with gender and digital rights CSOs to jointly analyse and obtain advice, within the cooperation framework under the DSA and with the national Digital Services Coordinators, on platform risk and mitigation. Develop indicators for monitoring gender-based cyber violence across platforms and Member States.

Ensure that the revised Code of Conduct+ on countering illegal hate speech online is effective in addressing all gender-based hate speech, thereby involving gender equality experts and women's rights organisations. Also, promote within the framework for cooperation with online platforms to ensure women's safety online, the adoption of a Code of Conduct on gender-based cyberviolence, integrated under the DSA.

Address gender inequalities in AI governance

Address the limitations of the AI Act in preventing and mitigating gender-specific harms by AI providers and strive for gender mainstreaming in AI governance tools, including the Risk Management System (RMS) and Fundamental Rights Impact Assessment (FRIA), also adding specific gender impact assessments as part of AI system evaluations. Require AI providers do explicit, gender-sensitive reporting and public documentation of mitigation efforts, including gender-relevant data and findings. Apply an intersectional lens, recognising the compounded risks faced by women of vulnerable groups.

Require that Equality Bodies and National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) are formally included among the national authorities responsible for monitoring AI systems under Article 77 of the AI Act and grant that them the power to monitor all AI systems, not just high-risk ones, to ensure the early detection of harmful gender impacts.

Ensure accessible judicial and administrative avenues for redress when individuals experience gender-based discrimination or stereotyping due to AI systems. Fund research and innovation projects under Horizon Europe and Digital Europe focused on fairness and gender-inclusive AI design.

Develop a dedicated, gender-sensitive monitoring and evaluation framework, that includes clear, gender-disaggregated indicators and metrics to assess how AI systems impact gender equality and perpetuate or mitigate gender stereotypes.

Reinforce prevention of gender-based violence

Focus on prevention in addressing violence against women, highlighting its effectiveness and cost-effectiveness, thereby considering groups of women facing a higher risk of violence, such as women with disabilities or Roma women, and also considering work with perpetrators to prevent recurrence of violence. Design and implement prevention programmes in schools across Member States, and **engage men and boys** in the prevention of violence. Develop guidelines or a Recommendation on primary prevention, including at schools, possibly within the European Education Area and the Youth Strategy. Facilitate knowledge sharing and benchmarking, including the development and monitoring of relevant indi-

cators, and awareness raising. Reinforce the role of the **EU network on the prevention of gender-based violence and domestic violence**, clarifying its objectives, roadmap and the commitments of all stakeholders.

Better recognise and value women-specialised services

Better recognise and value women-specialised services implemented by knowledgeable, highly specialised entities and institutions, thereby reinforcing institutional structured dialogue with them, supporting and making adequate resources available to institutions and organisations that provide such specialised accessible services to victims and that embed a solid multidisciplinary feminist and gender equality approach.

Protect and promote sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) in the future strategy

Adopt measures to remove existing legal, financial, social and practical barriers and restrictions on safe and legal abortion, including those disproportionately affecting women in poverty, young women, women with disabilities, racialised women, including black women and ethnic minority women, (undocumented) migrant women and women of single-parent households, as demanded by the European Parliament.[362] Organise knowledge and practice exchange with Member States and stakeholders on SRHR, including gynaecological and obstetric violence, and develop guidelines or a Recommendation to strengthen SRHR protection. Promote comprehensive sexuality education in Member States as a prevention measure and widespread access to evidence-based information on women's health and sexuality, SRHR and related services. Protect, support and fund women's rights organisations and CSOs. Collect adequate data at the EU level and monitor effective access to SRHR.

In this context, the Recommendation on preventing and combating harmful practices against women and girls should be adopted, thereby including all forms of obstetric and gynaecological violence, mistreatment and abuse.

Design and implement more regular awareness-raising and information campaigns on gender-based and domestic violence

Strive for more and deeper engagement with all stakeholders, included CSOs, in the design and delivery of such campaigns, in order to enhance their impact and reach. Undertake analysis of the systematic impact of the campaigns.

Continue EU action to tackle gender stereotypes and attitudes across all priority areas

Adopt a more systemic approach to addressing gender stereotypes across all priority areas of the Strategy. To build on the progress achieved through initiatives such as the #EndGenderStereotypes campaign, engage youth, civil society and public–private partnerships to scale up effective practices and foster cultural change across the EU. Keep on monitoring, promoting and enforcing gender-neutral practices in AI providers and platforms to eliminate harmful stereotypes and invest in evidence-based, behaviourally informed interventions to shift public attitudes. Develop and disseminate further gender stereotype indicators and perception surveys (e.g. through Eurobarometer or EIGE) and support longitudinal

362 European Parliament resolution of 11 April 2024 on including the right to abortion in the EU Fundamental Rights Charter (2024/2655(RSP)).

research into the persistence and effects of gender stereotypes, including specific intersectional analysis.

7.3.2. Thriving in a gender-equal economy

Better link the four sub-objectives of the priority area

Reinforce coherence between the current four intermediate objectives and the respective specific objectives of the priority, acknowledging their intrinsic relation to each other. Better link the intermediate objective of equal participation in the labour market with the intermediate ones related to the gender care gap, the gender pay and pension gap, and to equal participation across sectors.

Set coherent SMART objectives for the four specific objectives. For example, the European Social Pillar employment targets should be compatible with non-transferable parental leave paid at least at the same level as sick leave, higher and more intense childcare participation, and the expected levels of poverty reduction. An improved monitoring system including specific indicators which quantify the different objectives would be helpful for the four sub-objectives.

Strengthen the relationship between labour participation and care, including by men

Better connect childcare participation and parental leave policies with the employment gap objectives and targets. The renewed Barcelona target (45 % of children under age 3 in formal care) does not seem compatible with the European Social Pillar target of halving the gender employment gap or with women reaching 78 % of employment rate. Reinforce the link to the participation of men in care.

Complement the impact of the Directive on transparency through linking the reduction of the gender pay gap to encouraging men to work in female-dominated activities

Similar to the previous recommendation, the objective of reducing the gender pay gap could also be better linked to encouraging men to work in currently female-dominated activities, such as care activities, which could also lead to the improvement of labour conditions in these sectors.

7.3.2.1. Closing the gender gaps in the labour market

Improve the design of the measures under the Work-Life Balance directive and address the current gendered design of leave.

Improve the design of the measures under the Work-Life Balance Directive to better support its declared objective of promoting equal sharing of caring responsibilities between parents by aiming for men as well as women to access the same paid leave system, including maternity, paternity, parental and carer's leave. Review the Work-Life Balance Directive so leave is equal for men and women, non-transferable and with a maintenance and/or entitlement to an adequate allowance, as in maternity leave, with encouragement of leave use independently for each parent. This would mean making paternity leave equivalent to maternity leave, while advancing the design of parental leave to promote male use, including through payment replacement and non-transferability. By doing this, it may better contribute to effectively halving the gender employment gap, as stated in the European Social Pillar.

7.3.2.2. Achieving equal participation across different sectors of the economy

Strengthen efforts to mainstream gender across all sectors (both female and male dominated) and establish specific targets

Set up specific targets, for example for the ICT and STEM sectors and the green and care economy, for employment outcomes and not only education outcomes. Accordingly, design specific actions aimed at increasing participation in employment of men in female-dominated sectors as well as increasing women's employment participation in male-dominated sectors, addressing labour shortages in both male and female dominated sectors to get closer to equal participation and labour conditions. Currently, ICT and STEM sectors are better paid sectors, so care sectors need to improve their labour conditions to attract more workers, including men. EU actions to encourage this could help.

7.3.2.3. Addressing the gender pay gap and pension gap, poverty, social protection and social inclusion

Assist Member States further in the transposition of the Pay Transparency Directive and support companies in addressing new requirements before the deadline for the transposition of the Directive so as to ensure buy-in by both Member States and companies.

Strengthen actions to transpose and monitor the Directive on minimum wages

Improving minimum wages and labour conditions in female-dominated sectors contribute to reducing the gender pay gap. Thus, the next strategy should strengthen actions related to transposing the Directive on minimum wages and encourage actions to improve labour conditions in sectors such as the care sector and domestic workers.

Ensure a gender perspective is applied to ongoing reforms of pension systems in Member States

Pension gaps are not only related to the gender pay gap and different labour market conditions over life, but also to how current gendered differences between men's and women's social security contributions are considered. Thus, more coordinated actions to view pension systems through a gender lens are needed, taking special consideration of care breaks and labour market conditions (e.g. fixed-term contracts, part-time, self-employment and migrant status) and addressing both the private and public sectors. Migrant women, especially those with vulnerability factors, could be negatively impacted by certain pension system designs. An intersectional perspective is necessary, so gender pension gaps are not magnified.

Improve measurement of poverty and social exclusion risks with a gender perspective

Adopt an individual approach to measuring poverty and social exclusion that complements the current household approach and that correctly visualises internal income gaps within households and the underlying factors and consequences of feminised poverty.

7.3.2.4. Closing the gender care gap

Evaluate the transposition of the Work-Life Balance Directive and improve the design of maternity, paternity and parental leave so the design doesn´t bring towards a gendered use.

Evaluate the transposition of the Work-Life Balance Directive and improve as needed the design of maternity, paternity and parental leave, thereby also addressing in a consistent manner care and employment targets, drawing possibly on the two recommendations on early childhood education and care and long-term care services, establishing more ambitious and coherent objectives. Work on raising awareness of the benefits of equal care sharing, together with reinforced flexible working arrangements for both men and women, to contribute to closing the gender care gap.

Monitor the European Care Strategy and the two recommendations

Monitor the European Care Strategy and the two recommendations on early childhood education and care and long-term care, adding quantitative targets for LTC, similar to the Barcelona targets, regarding the level of need (population in need by different degrees of need) and people covered. Consider the ongoing deinstitutionalisation policies and the potential impact on female employment if women leave the labour market due to care responsibilities at home.

7.3.3. Leading equally through society

Monitor and advocate on the relevant directives and regulations for encouraging female leadership

Support the transposition of the Directive on improving gender balance on corporate boards, encouraging its national implementation beyond the minimum requirements, and monitor and assess its impact. To do this, provide implementation guidance for Member States and for companies, facilitate peer learning and exchange of good practices, and ensure adequate data collection and comparability, thereby engaging social partners. Continue to work for the adoption of the Regulation on the statute and funding of European political parties and of the Council Regulation on the election of Members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage.

7.3.4. Gender mainstreaming and an intersectional perspective in EU policies

Reinforce the Task Force for Equality, EIGE and the Monitoring Portal

Support the role of the Task Force for Equality, including in terms of human resources , so it is better able to support the alignment of all policy areas with the Strategy objectives through the Equality Coordinators being better able to ensure gender mainstreaming of relevant documents in each policy area, and improve and update the equality mainstreaming work plans. Continue and reinforce cooperation with EIGE, in the support it has developed to EU institutions and EU Member States with relevant analyses, information and tools. Keep the Monitoring Portal of the EU Gender Equality Strategy updated and expand it to cover additional indicators, thereby considering intersectional variables.

Develop a definition of intersectionality and focus on women that face intersectional discrimination

Continue developing an operational definition of intersectionality, such as that included in the Directive on pay transparency, the Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence and the Directive on standards for equality bodies, so it is adequately understood by all stakeholders. Systematically focus on groups of women with intersectional vulnerabilities across all priority areas, including those with migrant backgrounds, belonging to racial and ethnic minorities, women with disabilities, Roma women, victims of gender-based violence, and women with low qualifications and family responsibilities, to increase the effectiveness of actions by targeting intersectional and specific needs.

Support the collection of relevant data disaggregated by intersectional characteristics

Reinforce the work of Eurostat so all relevant statistics include samples which allow systematic intersectional analysis, especially in the domains of time and health. Mainstream gender in some key statistics, such as EU-LFS and EU-SILC, by including questions related to the number of hours of non-paid work as a key gender factor, and wider samples for households with children under 3 and 6 years old, so the renewed Barcelona targets can be properly analysed. Moreover, it would be relevant to conduct periodic waves of harmonised European time use surveys every two or three years, which include all Member States and EU gender-based violence surveys. Develop new surveys combining several priority areas to better understand intergenerational and multidimensional links among violence, gender inequality, gender stereotypes, gender care gaps, and economic and leadership gender gaps.

7.3.5. Addressing gender equality and women's empowerment across the world

Do capacity building with EU delegations

Improve internal expertise and capacity in EU delegations in gender mainstreaming across all sectors, in particular, in non-traditional gender equality sectors like the green and digital transition, security and trade. This should also include improved capacity for gender analysis and collection of data disaggregated by sex to better monitor and assess progress. Engage in training and exchange of best practices, including on refining the gender-marker system.

Engage with social partners, CSOs and WROs

Reinforce involvement and structured dialogue with social partners, local WROs and smaller CSOs, for better feedback and engagement, including improving their access to funding.

Focus on EU trade agreements as a tool for improving gender equality

Continue efforts to make EU trade agreements with third countries more gender-responsive.

7.4. Recommendations on funding gender equality

Strengthen gender budgeting across all EU funding instruments

Strengthen gender budgeting across all EU funding instruments through methodological refinements, improved data and systematic integration into the full budget cycle, from planning and implementation to monitoring and evaluation. EU institutions should ensure harmonised gender-sensitive indicators across all funds and promote the application of gender impact assessments before and after funding allocations. Special attention should be given to ESI Funds that currently lack robust gender-sensitive indicators: ERDF, CF, EMFAF and EAFRD.

Increase funding for projects and programmes with direct gender equality objectives

Strive to increase the currently small share of funding with a direct gender equality objective (Score 2), in particular in relation to the digital and green transition investments. The inclusion of gender impact assessments in all digital and climate-related funding streams could be required, ensuring that these transitions do not exacerbate existing gender inequalities. Minimum thresholds could be set for gender-related expenditures and investments, ensuring that gender equality is not treated as an optional consideration but a core funding criterion.

Apply the inclusion of gender equality in selection processes, award criteria and procurement activities.

Apply the inclusion of gender equality in selection processes, award criteria and procurement activities, as they have been implemented in Horizon Europe and CERV, to other funds, adapting them as needed.

Expand funding mechanisms for Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and women's rights organisations (WROs)

Expand funding mechanisms for CSOs and WROs, which often lack the resources to navigate complex EU funding structures. The cascading funding mechanism introduced in the CERV programme should be expanded to other funds, particularly ESF+, AMIF and Horizon Europe, to better reach smaller organisations working directly on gender equality. Moreover, administrative simplifications, such as lump-sum funding instead of cost reimbursement, should be adopted across more funding instruments.

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Annex I: Fieldwork

1. List of interviewees

1. Business Europe
2. COFACE Families Europe
3. Eurofound
4. European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)
5. European Equality Law Network
6. European Family Justice Centre Alliance
7. European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE)
8. European Network for the Work With Perpetrators Of Domestic Violence
9. European Network of Equality Bodies (EQUINET)
10. European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)
11. International Network on Leave Policies & Research
12. International Planned Parenthood Federation, European Network
13. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)
14. SME United
15. Women Against Violence Europe
16. Women Engage for a Common Future

2. Guiding questions for stakeholder interviews

Evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025

Guiding questions for interviews with key stakeholders

The European Commission, under the lead of the Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers (DG JUST), is conducting a study to **support the evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of *A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025*** (until October 2024).

The study aims at reviewing the implementation of the *Gender Equality Strategy (*the Strategy*)* in order to draw **lessons for a possible new policy framework**. The study foresees interviews with EU organisations, equality bodies and national authorities, as well as independent experts.

In this context, the Commission appreciates your feedback on the *Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025* in order to design a better future strategy at the EU level. The following questions are then suggested, structured into five parts. These are the guideline questions for the interview.

CONFIDENTIALITY

We want to know **your opinion and views,** beyond what is written in formal documents, given your experiences, professional practices and approach. Your point of view on the following questions is very relevant for us.

Individual answers will be kept by the team of researchers to fulfil the evaluation. Individual answers mentioned in the evaluation will be appropriately anonymised to preserved confidentiality, except if you want to be mentioned. We really appreciate your honesty, reflection and time.

Part 1. Overall assessment of the Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025

The first set of questions focuses on the assessment of whether the Gender Equality Strategy's initiatives have been relevant and coherent and have responded to the main expectations of key stakeholders.

1. Have the Strategy objectives and actions implemented during the implementation period been **relevant**? Are the actions included in the Strategy appropriate/sufficient to attain the objectives intended? Why (not)?
2. Has the Strategy been a **coherent** EU framework? To what extent has the Strategy been able to prompt actions at the Member State level? Why? Is there any relevant example from your perspective?
3. To what extent have the Strategy's **objectives been fulfilled**? Which objectives have been attained and which ones have not? What **external factors** have influenced the observed achievements?

Part 2. Detailed evolution by priority areas

In more detail, please, for each of the priority areas of the Strategy, please report information regarding:

- Which have been the **most relevant actions** implemented? Are these actions appropriate/sufficient to address the objectives they intend to reach? Has the Strategy prompted actions at the Member State level?
- Which have been the most relevant funding instruments?
- Were the **objectives fulfilled**? To what extent did the situation improve **because of the Strategy?**

    1. **Being free from violence and stereotypes**
    2. **Thriving in a gender-equal economy** (closing gender gaps in the labour market, achieving equal participation across different sectors, addressing the gender pay and pension gap, closing the gender care gap)
    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.**

Part 3. EU added value of the Strategy

In your opinion, which has been **the main added value of** the Strategy?

Moreover, in more detail, which have been the main effects of the EU added value of the Strategy, in terms of:

1. **Volume effects**: the Strategy adds to existing action, either by supporting national action in general ('mirroring') or in specific areas of national policy ('boosting').
2. **Scope effects:** the Strategy broadens existing action by supporting groups or policy areas that would not otherwise have received support.
3. **Role effects:** the Strategy supports policies that are taken up at other administrative levels or are mainstreamed.
4. **Process effects:** the Strategy influences Member State administrations and organisations involved in the programmes.
5. The Gender Equality Strategy's **agenda-setting role.**

Part 4. Strengths and weaknesses of the Strategy

This part of the interview focuses on the strengths and weaknesses of the Strategy. These can refer to the Strategy stakeholders' involvement in the design, implementation or evaluation.

1. What have been the Gender Equality Strategy's main **strengths**?
2. What have been the Gender Equality Strategy's main **weaknesses**?
3. Were you working in aspects for gender equality when the Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality (SEGE) 2016–2019 was being implemented? Have you read or are you aware of the evaluation of strengths and weaknesses of the SEGE? If so:
    - » What are the **main differences** of the current Strategy (2020–2025) with respect to the previous Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality 2016–2019? What has changed or not? For better or worse?
    - » Have the weaknesses identified in 2020 been addressed? How? How well?

Part 5. Lessons learned and recommendations for a future policy framework

This final part of the interview aims to contribute to the **design of a possible new gender equality framework** for the EU over the forthcoming years.

- In your opinion, what are the main **lessons learned from the Strategy?**
- Regarding the design of a new framework:
    1. To what extent do the original **objectives** of the Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 still correspond to the needs of the EU? Should the new policy framework change the previous objectives, or add new ones? Why?
    2. How should a new framework consider the **current backlash** against gender equality, led by several political parties across the EU?
    3. How could the next framework be **better designed** in terms of governance, implementation, institutional coordination, funding, monitoring or evaluation? Please comment upon the capacity of the Strategy to prompt actions in Member States.
    4. Are there new **activities** that should be included to better address the objectives? Are there already existing activities that should be strengthened? For example, new legislative measures, better implementation of existing legislation, awareness raising, programmes for employment, education, etc.
    5. To conclude, is there **anything else** you would like to add that should be taken into account?

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR COOPERATION.

Annex II: Contribution of SAAGE

Questions to SAAGE experts on advancements and shortcomings in the implementation of the European Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025

- What were the main advancements in each priority area in the respective Member State in the 2020–2024 period (for example, laws, strategies, programmes, etc.) and level of advancement (score from 1 to 5, ascending level of advancement)?
- What were the external factors that have furthered or hampered the achievements observed, for example, economic trends or political changes?
- What was the contribution of the Strategy for Gender Equality to the achievement of the objectives in your country and the level of contribution of the Strategy to the achievement of the objectives in your country (score from 1 to 5, ascending levels)?

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