



Scientific Analysis and Advice
on Gender Equality in the EU

2025 Annual Seminar report

European Semester: Supporting Negotiation for a Gender Equality Focus

Niall Crowley

ABOUT

This report summarises the SAAGE hybrid seminar held on 20 November 2025 in Brussels.



Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini S.r.l. SB (FGB SRL SB) is an Italian independent research centre inspired by the principles of labour and social inclusion, gender equality, cultural diversity and respect for fundamental human rights, welfare promotion, territorial cohesion, sustainability, and technological innovation to boost economic growth, attention to the environment, access to employment through new skills, and participation for local development.



SAAGE activities and products are financed by and prepared for the use of the European Commission, DG Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality; Unit D3 'Gender equality', in the framework of a contract managed by FGB Srl SB. It does not necessarily reflect the opinion or position of the European Commission or of the DG Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality; and nor is any person acting on their behalf responsible for the use that might be made of the information therein contained.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

BACKGROUND	4
OPENING	4
Karen Vanderkerckhove, Head of Unit, Gender Equality Unit of DG JUST, European Commission, opened the seminar.	4
FRAMING THE DEBATE	4
Anton Mangov, Deputy Head of the Employment and Social Aspects of the European Semester Unit of DGEMPL, provided an underpinning for the debates.	4
PLENARY DISCUSSION	5
Reviewing Potential: Country Specific Recommendations 2025 with a Gender Dimension	5
CLAUDIA SORGER, SAAGE EXPERT FOR AUSTRIA, PRESENTED ON THE RECOMMENDATION MADE TO AUSTRIA.....	5
ALENA KRIZKOVA, SAAGE EXPERT FOR CZECHIA, PRESENTED ON THE RECOMMENDATION MADE TO CZECHIA.	6
ALEXANDRA SCHEELE, SAAGE EXPERT FOR GERMANY, PRESENTED ON THE RECOMMENDATION MADE TO GERMANY.	7
THOMAS GEORGIADIA, SAAGE EXPERT FOR GREECE, PRESENTED ON THE RECOMMENDATION MADE TO GREECE.	7
MARA YERKES, SAAGE EXPERT FOR THE NETHERLANDS, PRESENTED ON THE RECOMMENDATION MADE TO THE NETHERLANDS.	8
RALUCA POPESCU, SAAGE EXPERT FOR ROMANIA, PRESENTED ON THE RECOMMENDATION MADE TO ROMANIA.	8
ZUZANA OCENASOVA, SAAGE EXPERT FOR SLOVAKIA, PRESENTED ON THE RECOMMENDATION MADE TO SLOVAKIA.....	9
OVERARCHING ELEMENTS.....	9
PURSUING POTENTIAL: CSRS 2026	10
Katia Lenzing, Deputy Head of Unit, Gender Equality Unit of DG JUST, European Commission, closed the seminar.	10

BACKGROUND

This annual seminar of the SAAGE network of experts focused on strengthening and further developing the evidence base, argument behind and focus for addressing gender equality within the European Semester, specifically through Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs).

OPENING

Karen Vanderkerckhove, Head of Unit, Gender Equality Unit of DG JUST, European Commission, opened the seminar.

This discussion is timely, the proposal for the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) from the Commission for the period 2028-2034, that is now debated by the European Parliament and the European Council would introduce change in the role of the European Semester and in the positioning of gender equality in the European Semester.

With the new proposal gender mainstreaming is to be more consistent with a more harmonised and simplified methodology to be applied in the budget. There will be gender equality objectives for many programmes and stronger gender tracking with many indicators disaggregated by gender.

There will be directly managed programmes with gender equality criteria, but almost half of the EU budget will be based on co-management: national and regional plans prepared in partnership by the Commission, the Member State, regional and local authorities and stakeholders. The regional dimension will be emphasised, creating room to address regional disparities. For these plans to be approved, Member States will have to assess how each activity contributes to gender equality, with a clear indicator of impact and a score attached for this.

In this context, the European Semester becomes ever more relevant as a monitoring tool. In this, there is a challenge for the Commission to step up its understanding of the particular complexities of individual Member States and their policies and how these link to gender equality. The 2026 European Semester will also, in effect, set the agenda for the negotiation of these national plans.

FRAMING THE DEBATE

Anton Mangov, Deputy Head of the Employment and Social Aspects of the European Semester Unit of DGEMPL, provided an underpinning for the debates.

The European Semester Cycle is the key policy framework for the coordination of economic, budgetary, employment and social policies in the EU. The European Commission will present the European Semester autumn package in November, marking the start of the semester and setting out strategic priorities for the year ahead. This will involve a range of documentation including the Joint Employment Report as a Commission proposal for adoption, and a Commission proposal for a human capital recommendation.

After this the Member State level work begins in drafting country reports and analyses, which take stock of their budgetary situation and assess progress made in their implementation of the previous years' Country-Specific Recommendations. The European Semester Spring package is then presented which includes Country-Specific Recommendations for discussion and adoption by the European Council.

The Joint Employment Report monitors implementation of the employment guidelines and progress on the 2030 targets. There is to be an increased emphasis in this, and in the country reports, on job quality. Work is ongoing on developing specific indicators to assess job quality, which include a focus on gender equality and

equal opportunities.

The human capital recommendation of the Commission stems from the Union of Skills, with a focus on skill shortages and an aim to move towards actionable measures. This will be addressed generally to all Member States and would focus on specific sectors and specific dimensions with specific measures.

The 2026 cycle will serve as a bridge to the new Multiannual Financial Framework. The European Semester provides the key framework to progress the next MFF, and will thus have a stronger regional dimension, including in relation to labour market participation. In 2026 there will again be comprehensive set of Country-Specific Recommendations covering the key issues.

Recommendations made in 2025 will only be dropped if real progress in addressing the issue is evident. New priorities can be addressed where there is evidence of the need for action. About one third of the Country-Specific Recommendations are in the domain of employment, skills, and social issues. Gender equality in the labour market is understood as both a social fairness issue and as a factor in macro-economic competitiveness.

PLENARY DISCUSSION

The plenary discussion raised issues of:

- Job quality that is decreasing in both the private sector and the public sector. The topicality of this was noted with the focus on job quality in the Joint Employment Report and the grid of indicators being developed.
- Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the gender effects of this as it is increasingly deployed to alleviate skills shortages. It was noted that the human capital recommendation does address AI and that, while skills shortages might be addressed in some areas with AI, they emerge in other areas in technology fields as a result.
- The need to evolve the evidence base for regional disparities if a clear understanding is to emerge. The Commission is working to strengthen analysis of issues where these are not seen at the country aggregate level.
- Job quality indicators and the importance of care in the development of the gender dimension. It was noted that these are a focus for the EPSCO and an indicators group is progressing this work.

Reviewing Potential: Country Specific Recommendations 2025 with a Gender Dimension

CLAUDIA SORGER, SAAGE EXPERT FOR AUSTRIA, PRESENTED ON THE RECOMMENDATION MADE TO AUSTRIA.

Recommendation to Austria

Create incentives to boost the numbers of hours worked overall and the full-time labour market participation of women, including by improving quality and availability of childcare services. Improve labour market outcomes for older workers and for disadvantaged groups, such as low-skilled job seekers and people with a migrant background, and raise the levels of basic skills, starting from an early age, notably at school level. Step up policy efforts aimed at the provision and acquisition of skills and competences needed for the green transition.

There is a strong rationale for this recommendation given the higher full-time employment rate and working time of men, with a gender pay gap, poverty, and gender segregation in the labour market sitting behind this issue.

There are issues with the adequacy of the recommendation in that the problematic behind the issues identified is not addressed, in particular: the unequal distribution of care responsibilities. Women perform about two-thirds of all unpaid work at significant cost in terms of loss of income.

In terms of the impact of the recommendation, there have been improvements over time in childcare provision across all regions. However, there are challenges in securing staff and there are issues with opening hours not allowing many parents, usually women, to work full-time.

Improvements that could be made to the recommendation would be to prioritise a focus on equal distribution of paid and unpaid work, and to improve the quality of part-time work.

There are risks in the management of fiscal constraints and budget deficits in a manner that fails to assess and address the impact of decisions on gender equality. Further, a recurring political discourse has been problematic with statements made that people need to increase their work hours and that part-time work is a 'life-style choice'. Political discourse would better focus on improving working standards and the balance between flexibility, productivity and worker wellbeing.

ALENA KRIZKOVA, SAAGE EXPERT FOR CZECHIA, PRESENTED ON THE RECOMMENDATION MADE TO CZECHIA.

Recommendation to Czechia

Lower the tax and benefit disincentives for parents to return to work and improve the supply of childcare and care services to encourage more women to enter the labour market. Strengthen the competitiveness of the economy and reduce labour shortages by addressing skills mismatches, simplifying the recognition of foreign qualifications and increasing the labour market participation of underrepresented groups. Boost educational outcomes by increasing participation in tertiary education, reducing dropout rates and providing more student support. Increase the number of students and graduates in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, especially women. Expand access to general secondary education, enable students to transition between general and vocational education, and provide more support for disadvantaged schools and pupils, including Roma.

This recommendation is appropriate in a context of poor availability of childcare services; long parental leave with no motivation for fathers to take this up and a failure to fully implement the Work Life Balance Directive; lack of long-term care facilities; tax credits for non-working spouses that impact negatively on labour market participation of women; and an unequal sharing of caring responsibilities. This leads to a high impact of parenthood on employment for women, a high gender employment gap, a high motherhood wage penalty, and mothers returning from long periods of parental leave to precarious jobs.

In terms of adequacy there needs to be recognition of barriers for mothers in the limited availability of part-time work and from the impact of gender stereotyping.

In terms of the impact of the recommendation, there has been some recent policy changes including incentives for employers to use part-time work. Telework and home working have been introduced. A right to childcare for children from three years of age has been introduced. The Labour Code was amended to introduce a guarantee of return to the original job and the same workplace for employees who return from parental leave before the child reaches the age of two. However, this amendment is inadequate in a context of low wages, gendered part-time work, insufficient childcare services and lack of stimulus for fathers to take on caring responsibilities.

Improvements that could be made to the recommendation would be to ensure implementation of the Work Life Balance Directive, address the availability and affordability of childcare for children under three years of age, and challenge gender stereotypes around care and paid work.

ALEXANDRA SCHEELE, SAAGE EXPERT FOR GERMANY, PRESENTED ON THE RECOMMENDATION MADE TO GERMANY.

Recommendation to Germany

Increase labour supply and tackle the shortage of skilled workers, notably by increasing hours worked, strengthening basic, green and digital skills and better attracting and retaining talent from non-EU countries. Improve education outcomes, including by promoting excellence and providing targeted support to disadvantaged groups. *Improve the availability and quality of early childhood education and care and whole-day schools to encourage carers, often women, to work and to promote equal opportunities for all children.*

This recommendation is appropriate in the context of high levels of part-time work evident in what is a context of high female employment rate, especially after the birth of their first child, and the context of the lack of adequate childcare provision. There is, further, a situation of mini-jobs being taken up by women whereas such initiative was originally only meant for students and pensioners.

There are issues with adequacy of the recommendation where: ambition meets the persistence of the male breadwinner model and the gender-stereotypical division of care work; a situation of lack of quality of public childcare provision resulting in needs not being met; and a situation of cost of public childcare limiting opportunities to access this. There are also significant regional disparities in the scale of childcare provision and the opening hours of childcare provision, alongside issues of staff shortages and lack of infrastructure.

In terms of the impact of the recommendation, there have been ongoing improvements in the availability of childcare over the past decades, with some legal entitlements put in place. Coverage is quite high, but demand increases and places available remain insufficient. There is a need for more clarity as to funding sources.

Improvements that could be made to the recommendation would be to: ensure jobs in the childcare sector are more attractive and better paid; address gender segregation in this sector; and respond to gender stereotyping. Gender inequalities in employment must be addressed including gender segregation, horizontal and vertical, and the gender pay gap.

THOMAS GEORGIADIA, SAAGE EXPERT FOR GREECE, PRESENTED ON THE RECOMMENDATION MADE TO GREECE.

Recommendation to Greece

Increase the rate of women and vulnerable groups in work or looking for work, and help more young people find work by promoting more flexible work arrangements, expanding formal early childhood care and education and long-term care, reinforcing active labour market policies, and tackling skill mismatches. Improve educational outcomes by enhancing continuous professional development for teachers focused on competence-based approaches and aligning student assessment to these approaches, improving school autonomy, and expanding teacher evaluation. Address poverty and social exclusion by further increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of the social protection system.

There is a strong rationale behind this recommendation given: low employment rate of women; gender gaps in employment rates for the foreign-born population; and high youth unemployment rates. The recommendation usefully looks beyond labour demand to labour supply, the factor most responsible for women's low participation rate.

In terms of the impact of the recommendation, there has been: legislation (Law No. 5239/2025) introduced to facilitate flexible working arrangements; and initiatives such as 'Neighbourhood Nannies' (to support in-home childcare services) and the Personal Assistant for People with Disabilities' Initiative.

Improvements that could be made to the recommendation would be to respond to a changing landscape, to: support active ageing and combat ageism in the labour market; further expand the upper household

income threshold for childcare subsidy eligibility; reintegrate those returning from parental leave and career breaks; and expand public long-term care provision.

MARA YERKES, SAAGE EXPERT FOR THE NETHERLANDS, PRESENTED ON THE RECOMMENDATION MADE TO THE NETHERLANDS.

Recommendation to the Netherlands

Adopt and implement measures to reduce incentives to use flexible or temporary contracts. Implement comprehensive measures to address labour and skills shortages, including by tapping into underused labour potential, by strengthening upskilling and reskilling opportunities for all through targeted and tailored active labour market policies, and by encouraging mobility to high-productivity sectors and sectors related to societal challenges. *Improve basic skills, including by addressing teacher shortages and tailored support to disadvantaged schools, and boost participation in STEM programmes by targeted educational support and career advice, especially for women and students with a migrant background.*

The recommendation is appropriate given the high part-time work rate and given company difficulties in hiring workers, though there are shifts in labour market shortages and a rise in unemployment. While there is a high representation of women in tertiary education, girls are less likely to choose technical school paths. There are issues of adequacy in the need for the recommendation to recognise and address structural factors such as work and care policy and its reinforcement of gendered norms and expectation. In the field of skills shortages there are regional disparities to be addressed, and in the area of high-tech employment, there are issues of retention to be addressed.

In terms of the impact of the recommendation, there has been: investment in research providing insights into particular subgroups - women not currently working, women in small part-time jobs; investment in societal alliances to address STEM shortages; links made between the sustainability agenda and girls in STEM; and attention to diversity of teaching staff to increase the presence of men.

Improvements that could be made to the recommendation would be to include a focus on structural barriers linked to educational outcomes such as working conditions, societal norms and stereotypes; to progress structural improvements in the working conditions in sectors with skill shortages; and to address work and care policy more effectively. There are also risks to be faced with increased spending on defence accompanied by cutbacks in key public services.

RALUCA POPESCU, SAAGE EXPERT FOR ROMANIA, PRESENTED ON THE RECOMMENDATION MADE TO ROMANIA.

Recommendation to Romania

Strengthen labour market participation of women and young people through improving effectiveness of active labour market policies and participation in early childhood education and care. Tackle skills shortages by boosting basic skills and labour market relevant skills of the workforce, as well as improving stakeholder engagement and making best use of skills intelligence in education and skills policies.

There is a strong rationale behind this recommendation in a context of a low employment rate of women and a high gender employment gap; high levels of early school leaving, low levels of tertiary attainment and high levels of NEET for girls and women; and low levels of participation in childcare provision and high levels of impact of parenthood on women.

In terms of the impact of the recommendation, there have been steps taken by the recently elected Government of a general nature that should impact on women, including: modernising public employment services; increasing youth employment initiatives; ensuring fair access of young people to education and entrepreneurial initiatives; and supporting families through work-life balance measures.

More broadly there have been; adoption of Law 45/2025 on the unemployment system to include victims of domestic violence and human trafficking as unemployed people; programmes addressing young people, labour force reskilling, and working mothers/parents; and steps taken to increase the early childhood care and education infrastructure

There is a need to address regional disparities, both in terms of the situation prevalent for gender equality and in terms of the level of resources available to regional authorities.

Improvements that could be made to the recommendation would be to secure: an expansion of childcare infrastructure, including in company settings and in services for school children; a better focusing of active labour market measures on upskilling rather than employment subsidies; a better monitoring of programmes with gender desegregated data; and collection of gender disaggregated data on parental leave take-up and return to work after parental leave.

ZUZANA OCENASOVA, SAAGE EXPERT FOR SLOVAKIA, PRESENTED ON THE RECOMMENDATION MADE TO SLOVAKIA.

Recommendation to Slovakia

Strengthen the labour market participation of underrepresented groups, and introduce more flexible work arrangements for parents with children. Increase the availability and use of affordable high-quality early childhood education and care for children under the age of 3. Strengthen the teaching of basic skills, including for children from disadvantaged backgrounds notably in marginalised Roma communities, while ensuring equal and inclusive access to quality education at all levels. Step up policy efforts aimed at the provision and acquisition of skills and competences, by providing reskilling and upskilling opportunities for adults, investing in teacher training, and increasing enrolment in STEM education programmes. Improve primary care provision, especially for vulnerable people, and expand preventive healthcare measures. Strengthen the resilience of the health system in the areas of critical medical products, infrastructure, and healthcare workforce by retaining and attracting skilled workers, while ensuring the fiscal sustainability of the healthcare system. Ensure affordable and quality long-term care.

There is a strong rationale behind this recommendation in the high levels of unemployment for disadvantaged groups, a gender employment gap, and low levels of provision of childcare services. There is no published strategy for childcare and there is the challenge of dominant societal norms that emphasise childcare by parents.

In terms of the impact of the recommendation, there has been an ongoing ESF funded programme of financial stimuli for employment of disadvantaged groups with several projects supported; and a completed ESF funded programme of support to care facilities for children up to the age of three.

There is some progress in decreasing trends of unemployment among certain vulnerable groups. The lack of gender disaggregated data makes evaluation difficult. There has been no change in the number of childcare facilities available, there are regional disparities in the number of places available, and the lack of availability of places hinders the impact of measures taken to allow children aged two into kindergartens

Improvements that could be made to the recommendation would be to promote flexible working arrangements, and target employment programmes on Roma women, introduce flexibility into childcare provision; and to move responsibility for childcare provision to the Ministry of Education.

Overarching elements

A number of overarching elements could be identified from the seven inputs:

- The rationale for such recommendations is clear and urgent, and the recommendations do have an impact, though there is an importance in ensuring continuity of the recommendations over a period of years given the scale of the issues.

- There is a need for recommendations made to look behind the specific issue to address the causal structural problematics, such as the persistence of the breadwinner model, the unequal sharing of caring responsibilities, and gender stereotypes.
- The importance of the current policy shift at EU level to focus on regional disparities, job quality and gender-mainstreaming would usefully be reflected in gender-focused recommendations.
- There is a need for a greater focus in the recommendations on the equal distribution of opportunities, poverty, long-term care, the need for jobs in childcare to be made more attractive, and segregation in the tech sector.
- It would be important to build on the focus on intersectionality in the recommendations, in particular for young women, minority ethnic women, including Roma, and women with disabilities.
- The challenge of implementation needs to be addressed: moving from commitment to implementation; moving from projects to ongoing policy; and ensuring access to gender disaggregated data for effective monitoring.

PURSUING POTENTIAL: CSRs 2026

EU Commission desk officers facilitated discussion at separate tables with the SAAGE expert from the Member States that they cover in their brief.

The SAAGE experts presented on: the priority gender equality issue that would be appropriate to have a Country Specific Recommendation on; the key evidence-base for this issue in the Member State; the argument to be made for including this issue, in particular the economic argument; and the action that needs to be progressed by a Country Specific Recommendation, an action that would be achievable over the coming year.

These presentations were subject to further discussion at each table. The table discussions were recorded by the EU Commission desk officers for their own use.

Katia Lenzing, Deputy Head of Unit, Gender Equality Unit of DG JUST, European Commission, closed the seminar.