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# Stronger together - democracy and gender equality in Europe

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# STRONGER TOGETHER: Democracy and gender equality in the EU

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# Editorial

Democracy and gender equality are fundamental values of the European Union. Reactionary actors, however, question those again and again – and more and more. In the European Parliament, positions hostile to democracy and gender equality will be represented even more strongly after the European elections 2024, according to current survey results.

**Feminist and democratic actors therefore need to rise to the challenge posed by anti-feminist and antidemocratic positions across Europe**. Current policies in the EU, like the Union of Equality and legislative instruments connected to it, represent important steps towards more gender equality. At the same time, a lot more is to be done, as was palpable during the difficult negotiations on the directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence.

Furthermore, **both a diverse understanding of gender**, which acknowledges non-binary, trans*, and inter* gender identities next to men and women, **and intersectional insights**, which highlight how different axes of inequality like class or sexual identity have entangled effects, **are still only starting to have an impact at EU level**. When both are implemented more systematically, it can support feminist and democratic forces in all European institutions and beyond in engaging people with a vision of an inclusive and diverse democracy in Europe in order to improve people's lives.

In an **introductory contribution**, Julia Lux, research officer at the Observatory, investigates democracy and gender equality in the European Union. Then, the author presents achievements of EU gender equality policy as well as limits and threats to these achievements. The conclusion proposes ways to advance gender equality in the EU.

In his **statement**, Robert Biedroń, chair of the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality in the European Parliament, highlights the importance of gender equality and democracy. He sketches some of the achievements of the Committee during the current mandate since 2019 and indicates areas for further improvements.

In the interview with Belinda Dear of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA-Europe) and with Julie Pascoët of the European Network against Racism (ENAR), the relationship between democracy and gender equality is addressed from a **civil society perspective**. It becomes clear that a lot more is to be done, particularly in terms of implementing an intersectional understanding of gender equality.

Gabriele Abels, professor at the University of Tübingen, underlines the achievements of the European Commission under Ursula von der Leyen in her **scientific contribution** and takes a look ahead to the upcoming European elections.

In an **outlook**, Julia Lux gives five thought-provoking impulses to home in on the complex interdependence of democracy and gender equality.

Last but not least: please vote for democracy and gender equality! The European elections are taking place from 6 to 9 June 2024 in all EU member states.

**Julia Lux, Observatory**

# Introduction: Living democracy and gender equality – How does European policy contribute?

**Julia Lux** is research officer at the **Observatory for sociopolitical developments in Europe**. She analyses sociopolitical developments in Germany and other Member States as well as at European level.

> 'Democratic life rests upon the presumption that citizens are equal. What equality means, however, varies among accounts of democratic theory.'
> Joan Tronto 2013[1]

An overwhelming majority in Europe seems to see a positive relationship between gender equality (→ Equal rights, gender equality and gender equity) and democracy: in 2017, 91 percent of surveyed Europeans agreed with the statement '**promoting gender equality is important to ensure a fair and democratic society**'.[2] At the same time, gender equality as a political goal is questioned again and again in debates at the European level, and democratic institutions are undermined and weakened by targeted attacks in some Member States.

In order to carve out the complex but interrelated relationship between democracy and gender equality and the achievements, limits, and potential further steps of European gender equality politics, democracy in general, as well as democracy and gender equality specifically in the EU, are discussed from a feminist perspective.

## What does democracy have to do with gender equality?

(Being allowed to) vote, co-deciding, delegating, agenda-setting, developing positions, negotiating, being elected, participating, implementing policies – these and other activities are fundamental parts of living democracy.

### EQUAL RIGHTS, GENDER EQUALITY AND GENDER EQUITY

**Equal rights** represents a demand for abolishing any legal restrictions that make people unequal and ensuring that people are not discriminated against. Asking for **gender equality** moves beyond those rights and includes addressing aspects like the unequal effects of gender roles and gendered divisions of labour discussed below. **Gender equity** calls for serving justice for people of historically disadvantaged genders and ensuring that the gender identity of a person does not affect their opportunities and living situation.[3]

Democracy is often distinguished from other forms of state and governing by its granting of equal rights to participation and representation in the political system, as stated in the introductory quote.[4] It follows that gender equality is both an effect *of* and a fundamental prerequisite *for* democracy because democracy should grant equal rights and enable all citizens to realise them – and in doing so, democracy fosters equality among its citizens. **In other words: without gender equality, there is no democracy; and democracy is fundamental to gender equality**.

### What is missing when it comes to realising gender equality in democratic theory and practice?

These abstract assumptions reach their limits both conceptually and empirically fairly quickly, as feminist scientists and activists criticise.[5] To illustrate, the three fundamental pillars of democracy citizenship, participation, and representation (→ Illustration) are historically skewed by inequalities. Women* (→ Gender-sensitive use of language) were denied full citizenship in manifold ways: while a majority of women* now enjoy the right to vote[6], there continue to be areas for improve-

ment when it comes to bodily and social self-determination. Examples include the principle of equal pay for equal work (see also Equal rights for women* on pg. 6) or protection against gender-specific violence (see also Abolishing violence against women* on pg. 8).

### GENDER-SENSITIVE USE OF LANGUAGE

In this dossier, the terms women* and men* are used to raise awareness for the social construction of gender. The asterisk (*) is meant to include all persons who identify as women* and men* and thus to move away from a binary language that only describes cis-hetero people. You can find more information on our use of language on our website.

As **participation** requires resources like being cared for physically and mentally, as well as time, financial, and educational resources, the invisibilised care work of mostly vulnerable groups like women* or People of Colour[7] is a hidden prerequisite for democratic participation.[8] At the same time, people taking on this care work often have fewer resources to participate politically or become burnt out when they do.[9] Therefore, gender equal divisions of labour, particularly when it comes to care, are central for gender equality (see also Valuing care work and distributing it more equally on pg. 7). Gendered violence, other forms of sexism, care responsibilities, or the financial undervaluing of so called 'women's jobs'[10] limit women*'s opportunities for participation.[11]

This also affects the **representation** of women*'s politics. The social division into a public and a private sphere not only devalues women*'s labour and makes it invisible but legitimates and materially solidifies women*'s systematic marginalisation in society and the political system. This makes the establishment of gender equality structures in democratic institutions even more important (see also Institutionalising gender equality on pg. 8). Sexist discrimination in parties, parliaments, and the political public or social media also hinder the work of female* politicians.[12]

### What could a democracy of equal citizens look like?

Feminist analyses criticise existing democracies and democratic theory and develop **visions for more inclusive democracies** and ways to realise them. Joan Tronto coined the term *caring democracy*. She frames

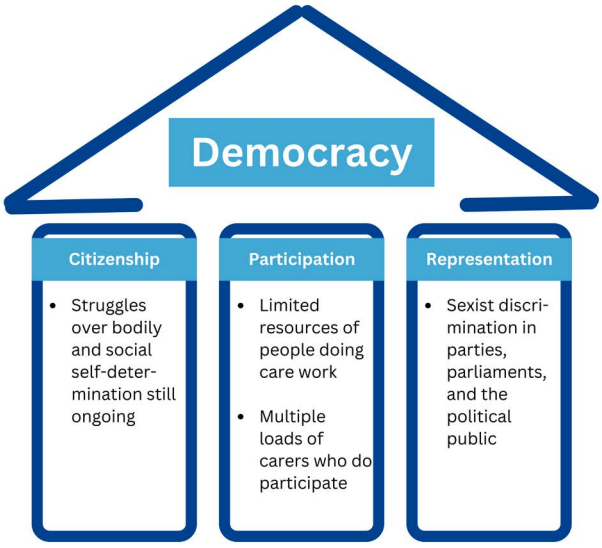


Illustration: Democracy and feminist interventions. Source: author's illustration

democratic practice itself as caring and posits, as in the opening quote, that the root of equality among democratic citizens lies in their dependence on the care of others. Tronto thus prioritises the role of care in societies and for democracy.[13]

Nancy Fraser, in turn, underlines how social inequalities taint democratic debates when many groups, e.g. impoverished people or women*, are excluded by various, sometimes subtle, ways from participating in democratic debates and decision-making. In order to realise an egalitarian and democratic society, social inequalities need to be overcome.[14] A better understanding of intersecting and mutually reinforcing inequalities are central to this aim (see also Intersectional approaches to gender equality on pg. 8).

## How does the EU contribute to promoting democracy and gender equality?

Democracy is a fundamental value of the European Union, enshrined in the Treaty on European Union and the Charter of Fundamental Rights. The EU is committed to upholding and developing democracy. It works as a representative democracy; members of the European Parliament and national government representatives in the Council of the EU decide on law proposals and other political initiatives. The president of the European Commission is elected by the Parliament; the Commission cabinet is confirmed in Parliament after the president has nominated their team.

However, the political system of the European Union is discussed as having a democratic deficit in academic political science debates: The comparatively weak position of the Parliament as compared to the other institutions, a missing EU-wide political public for joint discussions, the often low voter turnout, the lack of transparency of debates and decision-making processes of important committees, and the influence of lobbyists in Brussels are among the key points of criticism.[15] From a gender perspective, these gaps are even more pronounced due to the underrepresentation of women* and women*'s politics at European level.[16]

## GENDER EQUALITY IN THE UNITED NATIONS AND IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

The United Nations have set 'Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls' as goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals. In order to do so, the following targets have been defined: end discrimination against women and girls, end all violence against and exploitation of women and girls, eliminate forced marriage and genital mutilation, value unpaid care and promote shared domestic responsibilities, ensure full participation in leadership and decision-making, universal access to reproductive health and rights, equal rights to economic resources, property ownership and financial services, promote empowerment of women through technology, and adopt and strengthen policies and enforceable legislation for gender equality.

The EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 is set in the context of these United Nations targets. It identifies the following areas for action: ending gender-based violence, challenging gender stereotypes, closing gender gaps in the labour market, achieving equal participation across different sectors of the economy, addressing the gender pay and pension gaps, closing the gender care gap, and achieving gender balance in decision-making and in politics.

Abbildung wurde aus rechtlichen Gründen für die Zweitveröffentlichung auf Gender Open geschwärzt. Das Original ist in der Erstausgabe des Verlages zu finden.

According to Greek mythology, Europa experienced gender specific violence by Zeus in the form of a bull, sculpture in Greece. © Damann / shutterstock.com

The above arguments on democracy and the → Gender equality aims of the United Nations and in the European Union taken together underline a key point: democracy and gender equality are not completed political projects and cannot be. Rather, they are to be understood as processes and aims that have to be renegotiated and fought for again and again (see also Limits to gender equality on pg. 9 and Who poses a threat on pg. 10).[17] This is also evident in the fact that the European Commission has presented a Defence of Democracy Package in December 2023.[18]

**In the European Union, not only democracy but also gender equality is established as a core value and an aim of joint action in the Treaties. Yet, content and instruments to implement democracy and gender equality are politically and socially contested and (need to be) redefined again and again.**[19] This is illustrated by the fact that Article 7 Treaty on European Union (TEU) procedures against several Member States have been triggered for their breaching of EU values by political reforms undermining democracy at national level.[20] The issue is also highlighted in debates on which genders can and should be made equal and how.[21]

## Feminist achievements in EU gender equality policies and politics

The → legal establishment of gender equality in EU Treaties forms the basis of all gender equality measures. The Treaties define the goal of policy-making as well as the scope of EU policy competences.

### Equal rights for women*

In order to guarantee bodily and social self-determination and thus for equal citizenship in democracy, equalising rights between women* and men* is fundamental. Social policy initiatives are often built on the so-called ***adult worker model***.[22] Women* can achieve gender equality in this model by assimilating to the male* model of a full-time worker. This is not just relevant for labour market participation but also for social benefits as unemployment benefits or pension schemes often presuppose full time labour market participation without interruptions for full entitlement.[23] Therefore, policy-makers drawing on this model to achieve gender equality aim to increase female* labour market participation. The question of who performs the often unpaid but essential care work is often ignored or at least deprioritised.

### LEGAL BASIS OF GENDER EQUALITY IN EU TREATIES

Article 2 and 3 TEU as well as article 21 and 23 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union set equality and non-discrimination as fundamental values of the Union. Since the Treaty of Lisbon has entered into force in 2009, these values are legally binding. Title II Article 8 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) determines that **'in all its activities, the Union shall aim to eliminate inequalities, and to promote equality, between men and women'**. In addition to that, the EU may take action to combat discrimination on the basis of any characteristic, including sex, in line with article 19 TFEU.

Article 153 TFEU stipulates that the EU can also take action to foster 'equality between men and women with regard to labour market opportunities and treatment at work'. The principle of equal pay for equal work is enshrined in article 157 TFEU. It had already been established in 1957 in the Treaty of Rome.

To equalise rights within existing androcentric structures also characterises other important milestones. The European Court of Justice confirmed among other things the equal pay principle.[24] Key Directives aiming to achieve gender equality reflect similar liberal politics:

- Progressive implementation of the principle of equal treatment for men and women in matters of social security (1978),
- Introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health at work of pregnant workers and workers who have recently given birth or are breastfeeding (1992),
- Establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation (2000),
- Implementing the principle of equal treatment between men and women in the access to and supply of goods and services (2004),
- Implementation of the principle of equal opportunities and equal treatment of men and women in matters of employment and occupation (2006).

Decision-makers at European level still negotiate reforms in order to strengthen existing rights. In 2022 and 2023, → Directives on women on boards and pay transparency went into force. The Commission has also started a campaign aimed at overcoming gender stereotypes which restrict women* in their career choices and fathers* in their parenting responsibilities.

### DIRECTIVES ON WOMEN ON BOARDS AND PAY TRANSPARENCY

In November 2022, the European Union passed the Directive on improving the gender balance among directors of listed companies and related measures – ten years after the first draft of its proposal. It aims to establish transparent recruitment processes in companies. Until the end of June 2026, at least 40 percent of non-executive board members or 33 percent among all directors should be of the under-represented sex.

In June 2023, the Directive 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 entered into force. Following this, EU companies need to publish information about the salaries they pay and take measures to reduce the gender pay gap if it exceeds five percent. The aim is to combat pay discrimination and reduce the gender pay gap in the EU.

In order to effectively accompany the implementation of anti-discrimination principles in the Member States, the Commission has proposed two Directives to **standardise the work of equality bodies**.[25] These seek to, among other things, provide a clearer definition of the remit and responsibilities of equality bodies.[26] The proposed Directive on standards for equality bodies in the field of equal treatment and equal opportunities between women and men in matters of employment and occupation further defines gender equality as including people who had gender confirmation, i.e. trans* people (more on the frictions between binary and diverse understandings of gender Intersectional approaches on pg. 8). In May 2024, both Directives were approved by the Council of the EU.

## Valuing care work and distributing it more equally

Fundamental to the social self-determination of women* is the question of societal division of labour. A contrasting vision to the liberal feminist *adult worker model* is the ***universal carer model***.[27] The latter does not prioritise labour market participation of adult people but highlights the care they provide. As a result, traits and activities traditionally seen as female*, like emotional labour[28], are not just acknowledged and valued, but universalised. Key political initiatives in line with this model are radical working time reduction for everyone, flexible work and an increase in public childcare and other care provisions.[29] Ultimately, these initiatives fit in with a fundamental transformation of economic and political systems in which decisions are taken collectively and economic concerns rank below social and ecological criteria.[30]

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Carework is traditionally seen as a female activity, sculpture in Norway. © Yelo Jura / shutterstock.com

### WORK-LIFE BALANCE DIRECTIVE

On 1 August 2019, the Directive on work-life balance for parents and carers entered into force. It sets EU-wide minimum standards for care leave as well as flexible working times and better protection against dismissals. The Observatory's Dossier on Equal Care focusses on the work-life balance Directive and investigates its national implementations.

One step towards a *universal carer model* is to divide care more equally. At European level, the → work-life balance Directive is meant to enable parents and caring relatives to do so.[31] The framing as work-life balance implies, however, the continued prioritisation of labour market participation. The → European Care Strategy complements the Directive by seeking to improve the accessibility to care and pedagogical services, but it is legally less binding for Member States.

In comparing policies drawing on both models, it becomes clear that the EU has taken on more liberal feminist demands in line with an *adult worker model* and advanced equal rights for women*. More transformative, feminist demands like the *universal carer model* or caring democracy that prioritise care work and restructure societal and private divisions of labour are only implemented in stunted attempts.

## Abolishing violence against women*

Violence against women* harms fundamental human rights of the person affected and limits their democratic participation.[32] The Istanbul Convention adopted in 2011 states that gendered violence is indeed structural. Solutions to the issue therefore cannot be found in targeting the perpetrators, but rely on systemic change as well.[33]

Measures like the → Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence or the EU Strategy on victims' rights (2020–2025) can only be a first step when it comes to combating the roots of male* violence. In November 2023, the Commission initiated a Network on prevention of gender-based and domestic violence, which focusses on instruments addressing men* and boys*.

## Institutionalising gender equality

In order to achieve representation of feminist topics and politics, the establishment and work of institutions seeking gender equality is crucial.[34] Therefore, initiatives of the Union of Equality (see also scientific contribution on pg. 19) like the appointment of a Commissioner for Equality and a Taskforce for Equality are important feminist achievements. Gender mainstreaming, i.e. the principle to consider the gendered implication of all policies and thus advance gender equality, has been practiced in the EU since the end of the 1990s and is equally important. Committees on women*s politics in the different institutions also open up spaces for gender political progress → Gender equality structures in the European institutions (see also Statement by Robert Biedroń on pg. 14). In 2010, the Commission established the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), which produces statistical data on gender inequality.

### EUROPEAN CARE STRATEGY

On 7 September 2022, the European Commission presented its European Care Strategy. It aims to ensure quality, affordable and accessible care services across the European Union and improve the situation for both care receivers and the people caring for them, professionally or informally. It is accompanied by two Council Recommendations for Member States, one on the revision of the Barcelona targets on early childhood education and care and one on access to affordable, high-quality care.

## Intersectional approaches to gender equality

The representation of women*'s politics not only relies on an institutionalisation of equality work, but it also profits from extending the understanding of equality. In the EU policies discussed so far, gender equality is mostly understood from a binary viewpoint.[35] That is, a hierarchy between only two genders is assumed, in which women need to be lifted up in order to enjoy equal status, rights and opportunities as men. Some governmental representatives in the Council of the EU as well as some members of the European Parliament share this binary understanding. Some members of the Commission, governmental representatives in the Council, and progressive members of the European Parliament are open to a diverse understanding of gender and to intersectionality.

## GENDER EQUALITY STRUCTURES IN THE EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS

**European Commission**: A commitment to gender mainstreaming in all policies of the EU has been in place since 1997. Its implementation, however, is incomplete.[36] Part of the gender mainstreaming process has been the appointment of an Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Men and Women since 2008, in which representatives of the European Women's Lobby have observer status (opinions of the Committee can be found here). A High-level group on gender mainstreaming also supports the gender mainstreaming efforts of the Commission. The Commission further coordinates the High-level group on non-discrimination, equality and diversity, which has a subgroup on LGBTIQ* issues.

In the political guidelines for her Commission 2019–2024, Commission president Ursula von der Leyen coined the term 'Union of Equality' in November 2019. This vision seeks to integrate several equality strategies for disadvantaged groups by applying an intersectional approach. Helena Dalli was appointed as the first European Commissioner for Equality.

**European Parliament**: In 1979, an ad-hoc Committee for the rights of women and equal opportunities formed, which was made permanent in 1984 as Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM). Since then, it is one of the 20 permanent committees in the European Parliament. The current chair of the Committee is Robert Biedroń.

Since 2014, the LGBTI Intergroup represents an informal forum for members of the European Parliament which seeks to advance and protect the fundamental rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, and inter* people.

The European Parliament is also one of the few parliaments in the world which has committed to gender mainstreaming since 2003.

**Council of the European Union**: The Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council configuration (EPSCO) is the meeting of Member State ministers for labour, social and equality policies. The EPSCO meets four times a year and deals among other topics with questions of equality and LGBTIQ* rights.

Depending on who assumes the rotating Council presidency, informal meetings of Member State equality ministers are organised, latest examples being meetings under the Spanish Presidency on 24 November 2023 and under the current Belgian Presidency on 26/27 February 2024.

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Different currents meet in the European Parliament – not just in this sculpture, indoor art in Belgium. © Emine Kamaci / shutterstock.com

In order to acknowledge an intersectional understanding of gender equality and multiple structures of inequalities, the LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020–2025 is relevant: Key steps at European level in this regard are the application of anti-discrimination Directives to LGBTIQ* people's rights, or the recognition of parenthood in rainbow families[37]. A proposal for a Directive recognising parenthood across Europe is currently discussed and negotiated.[38]

At the same time, these measures show that gender equality policy and politics reflect intersectional insights inadequately. Racist inequality[39] or the discrimination of people with disabilities[40] are addressed scarcely (see also Interview on pg. 15). Further gaps are tackling inequalities in systematic, intersectionally combined ways.

## What limits EU gender equality policy and politics?

Despite the gender equality policies and structures discussed above, gender equality efforts often meet their limits in the EU:

- First of all, being a supranational institution, the European Union has **limited legislative competences** in many policy areas. This restricts the EU's ability to initiate change and explains some of the gaps criticised above.

- **Lacking competences of European institutions and a sketchy commitment by Member States to realise sexual and reproductive health and rights** prevent bodily self-determination and therefore full citizenship for all, including legal restrictions of the access to abortions. The Parliament criticises this situation and demands to include the right to abortion in the Charter of Fundamental Rights.[41]

- The **direction of fiscal policy** exacerbates negative equality effects.[42] This is illustrated by the effects of austerity policy which reinforces women* being worse off.[43] This is because one, public spending cuts often entail freezing or reducing public employment where women* represent a majority of the workforce. Two, women* are more reliant on social benefits which are also being reduced under austerity. On top of that, women*'s unpaid care work buffers some of the negative social repercussions that social cuts induce.[44]

- **Narrowing economic policy aims and debates** more generally is problematic. Indicators and sanction mechanisms in European economic governance aim for labour market participation, competitiveness and limiting public debt. Criteria like care work, benefit to public or social justice are subordinate or ignored. To put a finer point on it: Anticapitalistic positions on reforming gender equality policy and democratising politics and economy are almost unthinkable and unsayable in the EU institutions.[45] As a result, the initiatives on valuing care work mentioned above fall short. Moreover, gender mainstreaming has little effect on the mechanisms to harmonise economic, labour and social policy.[46]

## Who poses a threat to democracy and gender equality in the EU?

Additionally, right-wing extremist parties and movements in Europe seek to abolish or at least weaken democratic processes and feminist achievements.[47] Plenary debates in the European Parliament feature narratives of reactionary politicians.[48] In the upcoming European elections in June, the proportion of reactionary members of Parliament is expected to increase.[49]

In the Council of the EU, reactionary viewpoints also form part of any debate and are voiced, for example, by the governments under Viktor Orbán (Hungary) or Giorgia Meloni (Italy). At Member State level, a similar picture has emerged where right-wing extremist parties have grown strong and gained parliamentary seats and sometimes disproportionate media representation. Examples include the French Rassemblement National, the Hungarian Fidesz, the Italian Lega, the Polish PiS, the Dutch Party for Freedom, the German Alternative for Germany or the Sweden Democrats. These parties are connected across Europe and beyond, and share a worldview as well as many political positions and strategies.

Contrasting feminist and reactionary positions (→ Overview) highlights the extent to which **reactionary movements are antifeminist and oppose democratic institutions, processes and core values**. A multitude of feminist groups of thoughts and arguments challenge and reject this worldview.

### DIRECTIVE ON COMBATING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The Directive is the first to regulate misogynistic cyber violence, set EU standards for the punishment of genital mutilation and forced marriage, and improve access to justice for affected persons. It also contains an article on better prevention of rape. However, an EU-wide definition of rape was not adopted. The Council rejected this due to lacking EU competencies in this policy field. Civil society organisations criticise that the amendment proposed by the European Parliament to account for persons without identification papers experiencing violence was not adopted, either.[50]

## Overview feminist positions and reactionary counter-positions

| Feminist positions | Reactionary counter-positions |
|---|---|
| **Liberal feminists** defend the rule of law and existing democratic institutions as they see those as key mechanisms for gender equality.[51] | **Antidemocratic**: Right-wing extremist and inhumane attitudes are closely linked with antidemocratic ones.[52] Right-wing extremists oppose established interpretations of international human rights law and undermine the rule of law. |
| **Queer feminists**[53] underline how gender and sexual identities are complex and not easily classified. According to this line of thought, subjects reproduce gender roles and hierarchies through different practices but can also resist them, as gender roles are social constructed and therefore changeable instead of 'naturally' given.[54]<br><br>**Intersectional**[55] **feminists** analyse how different categories of inequality intersect: For example, how Women of Colour with a disability experience discrimination differently to white, lesbian, rich women. At the same time, people solidarise themselves with one another via the acknowledgement of their specific experience of discrimination across those categories.<br><br>**Care feminists**[56] und **social reproduction theorists**[57] highlight how mainly female* care work holds society and families together. | **Anti-Gender**: By building up the straw (wo)man of a so-called gender ideology, a binary understanding of gender and connected gender roles and hierarchies are defended.[58]<br><br>A binary understanding of gender is essentialised as biologically determined.<br><br>Existing inequalities between men* and women* are justified. Perpetration in abusive relationship is reversed, for example when it comes to legal struggles over custody.<br><br>LGBTIQ*[59] people also come in the firing line as their sexuality or gender identity is described as imagined, an illness or a crime.<br><br>Female* care work is seen as 'natural'. |
| Feminists for **reproductive justice** demand far-reaching reproductive rights, including free access to abortion, contraception, but also reproductive technologies. In doing so, they are particularly attuned to the specific situations of vulnerable groups like People of Colour, LGBTIQ* persons or young people.[60] | **Anti-abortion**: Right-wing extremists completely reject abortion. They actively fight against and defame most questions of sexual and reproductive health and rights like LGBTIQ* inclusive sex education or the access to reproductive technologies for LGBTIQ* people. |
| ***Black Feminists***[61]**, decolonial feminists**[62]**, intersectional feminists**[63] and **activists for reproductive justice**[64] point to the gaps in white middle class feminism of the Global North, which fails to reflect the unequal power relations, discrimination and devaluing of women* based on geographical and racist attributions. | **Anti-Migration**: Right-wing extremists see supposedly rampant migration as threatening to the reproduction of a 'national people'. Therefore, they seek to limit migrant birth rates. Non-migrant persons are pressured and sometimes coerced to have (more) children. |

Source: own depiction

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Gazing towards the future together, statue in China. © Urban Napflin / shutterstock.com

## What now for more democracy and gender equality?

In order to promote gender equality and a fair and democratic society – as the majority of Europeans in the Eurobarometer survey cited above in this contribution wishes – further progress is needed. The following does not focus on content requirements of the issues discussed above and others, but seeks to highlight means to create and embed **stable structures for democratic exchanges on the most effective instruments for gender equality**. That way, not only can threats to gender equality and democracy by reactionary forces be fended off, but feminist and democratic visions can be pushed beyond a status quo of already existing achievements (see also Interview on pg. 15).

### Embedding an intersectional understanding of gender equality

The meaning of gender equality is changing from a binary understanding (women and men) to an intersectional conception encompassing different vulnerable groups and forms of discrimination and moving beyond binary genders. This is essential as conceiving of overlapping and therefore reinforcing inequalities, policy-makers are better equipped to address them. It is also important from a democratic point of view as processes of democratisation entail the dissolution of existing exclusions from democratic and societal participation (see also Outlook on pg. 22).

Therefore, it is a welcome development that the Union of Equality has declared intersectionality a guiding principle of policy-making. However, further implementation of this is not definite for the time after the upcoming European elections. Feminist initiatives advocate for a continuation of the Union of Equality (see also Interview on pg. 15).[65] Additionally, they support the further development of an intersectional understanding of gender equality in the European Union. One idea is an effective *Intersectionality Mainstreaming*: shaping political processes with intersectional insights, and under-

standing and responding to the effects of political measures on vulnerable groups. Staff and financial resources as well as effective opportunities to influence political process in the EU need to be strong to do so.

The same is needed for the work of the European Institute for Gender Equality[66] which is defined and financed by the Commission. Feminist organisations demand that financial and personal resources of EIGE are strengthened and the remit of its data collection broadened with regards to both topics and groups of people covered.[67]

In all EU institutions, existing gender mainstreaming structures, a broad understanding and systematic implementation of gender budgeting, that is, incorporating a gender perspective at all levels of the budgetary process and restructuring revenues and expenditures in order to promote gender equality, need to be extended.[68] Representation and participation of underrepresented groups like women, young people, people of ethnic and religious minorities and LGBTIQ* people also needs to be promoted in all institutions,[69] and their integration into gender mainstreaming and gender budgeting processes is crucial.

## Upgrading gender equality structures in EU institutions

Gender equality political structures also need to be advanced in the **European Parliament**. Internal, sexist structures like sexual harassment which negatively affects participation and representation of women* have to be tackled more effectively.[70] Additionally, there are demands to introduce obligatory parity for candidate lists,[71] equip gender equality structures in Parliament with better resources and strengthen inter-institutional cooperation on gender equality issues.[72]

The **Council of the EU** could confirm its commitment to gender equality by complementing or extending existing Council configurations. Including gender equality in the name of a Council configuration would signal to national equality ministers that they have a European mandate, too.[73] The Belgian Council Presidency has pledged to advance this project. At an informal meeting of equality ministers in February 2024, Member States have expressed their support for the Belgian engagement on the matter.[74]

'Gender equality in the EU must be made a reality for all, including those who are not the white able-bodied women at the centre of the Commission policy-making vision. This is the crucial contribution made by the European Parliaement Resolution on Intersectional Discrimination in the EU (April 2022). It offers a decolonial apaproach to gender equality by centring those at the margins of gender equality policy – Black women in all their diversity – for whom the EU has as yet done little. This Resolution is also an example of how a decolonial approach can re-invigorate democracy in the EU by making visible the living and working experiences of women in racialised[86] and minoritised communities. Pursuit of a decolonial agenda is therefore key to a stronger European democracy – we decolonise our approach to EU law because we care about equality, democracy and social justice in Europe. Given recent challenges around the world, it is important to stress this explicitly.'

Iyiola Solanke 2024

## Enabling and promoting democratic debates

Changes in institutional structures and other gender equality goals should go hand in hand with a reflection about which political positions are given how much space. Democratic processes should be able to marginalise inhumane and antidemocratic positions, while opening discursive space for exchange and confrontation between different democratic perspectives. One step in this direction could be to strengthen the conversation with diverse civil society organisations through a civil society strategy and a civic dialogue similar to social dialogue.[75]

**For feminists and democrats, there is a lot to do both before and after the European elections. It will be worth the effort not only because defending feminist achievements is necessary but because another, more democratic and more equal Europe is possible.**

# Statement: There is no democracy without gender equality

Robert Biedroń is member of the European Parliament and Chair of the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM). You can follow the work of the Committee **here**.

**There is no democracy without gender equality.** What's more, we see that where undemocratic forces flourish, the status of women's rights deteriorates. The most undemocratic countries, like Russia, Hungary, Turkey, or Poland, score the lowest on gender sensitive policies like access to contraception or abortion.[76] That is also true when it comes to the rights of minorities, including LGBTQI+ people.

This term we have done a lot in the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality in the Parliament to advance and protect women's rights and bring us closer to achieving gender equality. It is a long and necessary process, because unfortunately we still live in a Union of inequalities. It is not only a fact that European women cannot fully enjoy their fundamental rights, but also that in our Union we still have double standards. **It is unacceptable that women in Poland have fewer rights than women in France or Belgium.** The EU is a global leader when it comes to setting legal standards; we have one standardized charger, standards for data processing, bananas and all other consumer goods, but we do not have a standard when it comes to women's rights. This must change.

Gender equality has many aspects. One of them is surely parity when it comes to political and economic decision making. **Underrepresentation of women in politics is a serious issue that poses an obstacle for fair democratic representation**. On the other hand, economic decision-making is also a crucial aspect of our societies, and one in which women are also treated unequally. We managed to address this issue during this Parliamentary term by adopting the 'Women on Board Directive'; a piece of legislation introducing gender quotas on company boards. Economic empowerment of women was one of the key aspects of our work, as we have also finalized the works on the 'Pay Transparency Directive', which shall ensure transparent and gender-neutral company policies when it comes to employees' salaries as well as recruitment. Enhancing women's financial independence is a key factor of gender equality.

What is more, we have managed to negotiate the Directive on Combatting Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence; a first ever European legislation on this topic which is a means to follow up on the recent accession of the EU to the Istanbul Convention. **Recognising that women are stripped of their rights and freedoms, also in everyday life, due to perpetuated patriarchal customs, is key when creating policies aimed at advancing gender equality.** Another effort of ours to protect women's fundamental and human rights are the multiple reports that we have adopted on sexual and reproductive health and rights. Access to the full range of medical procedures, including contraception and abortion services, is another issue that needs to be better addressed by the EU. Women cannot be deprived of their fundamental rights in some of the Member States of our Union, which is still the case. Only after ensuring full protection and realisation of human rights of all women, we will be able to see that women can fully and freely participate in the political and economic life.

All our efforts are met with opposition from the radical, conservative, anti-gender far-right movements. Whether it is in this House, in the Member States or the media, we can hear the narrative that denies women their basic rights and fails to recognize the structural inequalities present in out societies. Nevertheless, gender equality is a political, moral and legal principle enshrined in the European Treaties. **Thus, one is certain, we will continue the fight for gender equality in Europe and worldwide.**

# Interview: How European organisations fight for democracy and intersectional equality

**Julie Pascoët** is Policy and Advocacy coordinator at the European Network against Racism (ENAR). ENAR works to achieve racial equality in Europe by connecting its grassroots members with key decision-makers in the EU. Julie leads the policy and advocacy team at ENAR. Since 2012, she has developed expertise on racial equality legislation and policies. She has also coordinated European coalitions and led key advocacy initiatives, such as for the adoption of the EU anti-racism action plan. You can follow ENAR on X/Twitter @ENAREurope and read more at **https://www.enar-eu.org/**

**Belinda Dear** is a Senior Advocacy Officer at ILGA-Europe, focussing on rule of law, civic space, rainbow families and the EU's enlargement process. ILGA-Europe is an independent, international, nongovernmental umbrella organisation that advocates for the interests of LGBTI+ people in Europe. She conducts advocacy towards EU institutions, national governments and European political parties to achieve legal and policy changes for LGBTI people, often working in alliance with other human rights and democracy civil society organisations at the European level.

### How does your work contribute to gender equality and democracy?

**Julie Pascoët**: ENAR is a network of anti-racist organisations advocating for racial equality in the European Union (EU). **We believe that democracy can only thrive through full equality, or rather equity, where everyone has the possibility to participate meaningfully in society without obstacles put in place by interconnected systems of oppressions (patriarchy, racism, class, et cetera)**. ENAR has historically been working with other EU equality networks specialising on other grounds of discrimination, such as age, disability, gender, sexual orientation, and other characteristics in order to ensure that racialised people at the intersections of discrimination based on different grounds have their needs taken into account.

As a result, we increasingly developed **gender equality through an intersectional lens** and have been at the forefront of promoting intersectionality in EU policy circles, including through key publications such as Forgotten women: the impact of islamophobia on Muslim women, Women of Colour at the workplace, and Intersectional discrimination in Europe written by the Center for Intersectional Justice for ENAR.

Throughout the years, we have pushed for an intersectional approach in key EU policy and initiatives, such as the Gender Equality Strategy and the EU Anti-racism Action plan. However, we have often deplored the **lack of concrete measures to operationalise it and to truly address the needs of the most marginalised, at the intersections of inequalities**. This has been best illustrated by the general reluctance of Member States to collect data disaggregated by race[77], which has seriously hampered any efforts to build intersectional policy-making.

**Belinda Dear:** ILGA-Europe works to ensure that policy-making on gender equality is inclusive and LGBTI-aware, and that efforts to protect democracy are informed by a thorough understanding of how anti-LGBTI sentiments are instrumentalised by forces attacking democracy. In both cases, an understanding of the varying faces of anti-rights narratives and actors is strengthened by incorporating an LGBTI frame of reference into analyses and planning of responses.

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Many right extremist world views naturalise violence, hierarchies, and dominance, fountain sculpture in Norway. © Helena Jankovičová Kováčová / pexels.com

For example, in recent years, the EU has seen various rollbacks of rights for LGBTI people within its Member States; in many cases, these also amounted to rule of law violations. As ILGA-Europe, our role is to make this connection – that **attacks on the rights of LGBTI people are not simply about LGBTI people, but often also about the integrity of democracy and democratic institutions** – so that all actors working to protect democracy are attuned to the risks.

Similarly, in the context of gender equality, LGBTI people, particularly LBTI women and non-binary people, experience intersectional marginalisation. **Efforts to ensure gender equality in the EU are only successful when everyone, regardless of their personal characteristics, is afforded the same rights**. This means that it is vital for institutions and policy-makers to understand the barriers faced by LGBTI people and address these barriers in policy-making to advance gender equality.

### What challenges and opportunities do you envision for a democratic and gender equal Europe in the upcoming European elections in June 2024?

**Belinda Dear**: This mandate has seen big steps in favour of gender equality and democracy – the first Commissioner for Equality, the equality strategies and explicit commitments to intersectionality in policy-making. The upcoming elections are an important opportunity for the EU to reaffirm these commitments and show that institutional actors truly understand that a healthy democracy cannot function without an equal society. Moreover, the elections are a chance to evaluate the real progress that has been made and the roadblocks that remain. **The institutional structures that have been created to work on gender mainstreaming and equality must not be lost in the change of mandate.**

Increased public attention to the EU during the election period is also a chance to engage people on the gender equality and democracy work the EU does, how this affects national policies and people's daily lives. However, this period will also bring **campaigns by far right groups working to undermine gender equality and democracy**. This is a chance to build alliances among those who believe in gender equality and democracy, to stand up against hate speech and anti-rights messaging and to counter false and divisive narratives.

**Julie Pascoët**: Over the last years, we have seen increasing numbers of restrictions to the civic space, with anti-racist activists being at risk and being less able to support those at the margins. Recently, one of

our members, KISA in Cyprus, has had its office bombed. **With far-right ideas and parties gaining grounds, the future of democracy in the EU is even more at risk**. The far-right first targets minorities in the EU, including (racialised) LGBTIQ* and women, those who can be easily scapegoated because they do not fit the imaginary of who belongs to Europe.

**However, democracy cannot thrive without strong civil society and the upholding of minorities' rights**. Mainstream parties have a major responsibility to stand up against these narratives and policies and review their approaches to intersectional discrimination and historical systems of oppression in the EU.

### What can the EU do to effectively promote gender equality and democracy in Europe?

**Julie Pascoët:** In order to have a truly intersectional approach and protect and include ALL women and LGBTIQ* people, EU institutions and Member States need to centre the needs of those at the margins. So far, gender equality policy has tended to address the needs of some women at the expense of others. The only way to ensure gender equality policies have a positive impact on ALL, is to start by adopting policies for those who struggle because of their race, gender, gender identity, age, sexual orientation, disability, class and migration status.

The EU needs to support civil society organisations that support the most marginalised and value strong participation to ensure they have a say in policies that affect them. Current inequalities are also illustrated by the lack of representation of racialised groups, especially women*, in EU institutions and power structures. **This democratic deficit needs to be intentionally addressed through stronger participatory mechanisms and stronger internal diversity strategies,** that also address racial discrimination. EU policies and legislation need to be further reviewed to ensure they address structural harms affecting women* at the intersections of discrimination.

**Belinda Dear:** In terms of advancing gender equality, the EU should continue to strengthen its work in this area going forward. This includes **ensuring the continuation of the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality in the European Parliament, a renewal of the Commissioner for Equality mandate with appropriate resources and civil servant support, and new versions of the equality strategies** – including the Gender Equality and LGBTIQ Equality Strategies – when they expire. It is absolutely vital that in these new iterations, the cross-cutting nature of equality files be addressed with coordination and action across the Directorates of the Commission, and for this we encourage the creation of an LGBTI Coordinator position.

**In order to strengthen democracy, the EU should continue to focus on ensuring that all Member States comply with EU law and international human rights standards.** This means that an increased focus should be given to both rule of law and civic space in the new Commission, with stronger recommendations given to Member States, as well as the proper use of implementation and conditionality mechanisms. This includes ensuring that there is a dedicated team within Directorate-General Justice and Consumers in the Commission focussed on the implementation of Court of Justice of the EU judgments.

### How does your work seek to influence equality policies and democratic developments in the EU?

**Belinda Dear:** ILGA-Europe works to include LGBTI people in policies and legislation both at the level of the EU and the Council of Europe, through helping with the drafting of laws designed to enhance equality and democracy, as well as through working with other civil society organisations at the European level to mutually inform each other's work.

For example, ILGA-Europe are part of a number of coalitions at EU level, such as the Coalition Against Strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs)[78] in Europe (CASE), which function to mutually support each other and our member organisations. With CASE as an example, we work on specific EU legislation (e.g. the EU anti-SLAPP directive) and raise awareness of SLAPPs against LGBTI activists, link activists to lawyers, and link national level organisations to each other in the form of national working groups.

We also work on equality and democracy at the national level by supporting the advocacy efforts of our

member organisations (we have over 700 member organisations in 54 countries in Europe and Central Asia), and we provide support to LGBTI organisations for strategizing and programmatic work that helps LGBTI communities endure under anti-democratic regimes and direct attacks on their rights.

**Julie Pascoët:** At ENAR, we support our 160+ members to carry out sustainable work for racial justice. Together, we work on capacity building and co-create advocacy campaigns to be heard and to influence EU and national policies.

Moreover, in 2022, together with 105 civil society organisations we released a manifesto highlighting key points to be included in the Directive on gender-based violence. We specifically raised concerns on the fact that 'increasing criminalisation, policing and incarceration can make many people and communities more vulnerable, reproducing structural, institutional and interpersonal discrimination and violence'. Two years later, we welcome the adoption of the Directive while warning against the lack of protection for undocumented women from deportation if they try to file a complaint.

Finally, the systemic discrimination against Muslim women wearing the headscarf in employment and education prevails in the EU, with the Court of Justice of the EU failing to provide full protection.

**We aim to bridge the gaps in power that tend to maintain the historical domination over racialised groups and invisibilise their needs and concerns.**

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Activists demand equality for diverse groups, protesters on a memorial in France. © Norbu Gyachung / unsplash.com

# For a 'Union of Equality' – Current status and perspectives of a vision

**Gabriele Abels** is **professor of German and European politics** at the Institute of Political Science at the University of Tübingen. She focuses on issues of gender equality policy, the role of parliaments, and perspectives on democratic governance in the EU. She is currently working on a book evaluating gender equality policy successes of the European Commission under president Ursula von der Leyen.

In her candidacy speech in the European Parliament for the office of (first female) President of the EU Commission in July 2019, Ursula von der Leyen referred, among other things, to her progressive gender equality policy agenda. She held out the prospect of a 'Union of Equality', to which she as a woman felt particularly committed.[79] Critics considered this to be a strategic campaign manoeuvre. Others, however, praised it as a long-awaited emergence with regards to gender equality policy.[80]

Such an emergence is indeed urgently needed. Data from the European Institute for Gender Equality shows that de facto equality has only made slow progress recently, and that it may take decades before actual democratic gender equality is achieved.[81] As the first term of office of von der Leyen as Commission President draws to a close, it is time to take stock and look ahead towards the June 2024 European elections.

## Highlighting gender equality within the Commission

Von der Leyen urged the EU Member States to nominate female candidates for the Commission. She was quite successful, as there is almost gender parity in the current cabinet of commissioners (13 women versus 14 men).

In addition, a Commissioner for Gender Equality was appointed for the first time. Helena Dalli who already had a very successful track record in Malta took up the position. Several other Commissioners (especially those from Scandinavia) are also declared women's rights activists and highly supportive of gender equality policies.

### EUROPEAN PILLAR OF SOCIAL RIGHTS AND UNION OF EQUALITY

The European Pillar of Social Rights was proclaimed on 17 November 2017 by then Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker at the Social Summit in Gothenburg. It is based on 20 principles aimed at guaranteeing European Union citizens their social rights. These principles are divided into three areas: equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions as well as social protection and inclusion.

The successor Commission under Ursula von der Leyen published a European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan on 4 March 2021. This plan contains concrete measures to implement the principles of the pillar jointly with the EU Member States. The Observatory has taken a look at both instruments in its Newsletter 1/2022.

In November 2019, President von der Leyen coined the term 'Union of Equality' in her Commission's political guidelines. In order to achieve this Union, specific mechanisms, guidelines and measures are to be introduced, aimed at reducing structural discrimination and social stereotypes. In more concrete terms, the Commission adopted various strategies, including the Strategy for Gender Equality, the Strategy for LGBTIQ Equality, the Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Strategy on the Rights of the Child, and the EU Strategy on Combating Antisemitism and Fostering Jewish Life.

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In a detail of the Akropolis, women* are crucial to supporting the structure, temple ruin in Greece. © Nick N A / shutterstock.com

Furthermore, a cross-departmental task force for equality policy was set up in order to achieve coherent gender mainstreaming of the policies proposed by the Commission.

## Gender equality policies in the EU Parliament and Council

All of this created great expectations, which encountered major obstacles, however.[82] Although the Commission has the right to initiate legislation, legislation is discussed and passed by the European Parliament and the Council of the EU. Both institutions are facing growing political polarisation internally.

After the 2019 elections, the European Parliament had almost 40 percent female* MEPs for the first time. Despite the high proportion of reactionary forces among parliamentarians, centre-left majorities are common in gender equality policy.[83]

In the Council of the EU, in contrast, right-wing populist, right-wing conservative, or even far-right parties that are sceptical about the concept of gender and far-reaching equality policies (with regard to gender and sexual minorities) are in power in some national governments. This is or was the case, for example, in Hungary since 2014, in Poland under the Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) government (2015–2023) and in Italy since 2022. However, the EU Treaties grant far-reaching protection in the form of human and minority rights.

## Priorities in the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025

The Commission presented its Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 in March 2020. The strategy announced a number of legislative initiatives, such as combating gender-based violence and improving work-life balance policy.

### Tackling gender-related violence

A particular focus of the Commission's work has been and continues to be the fight against gender-based violence, labelled as 'the other pandemic'. Corresponding proposals have been made throughout the Commission's term of office, and legislation has 'taken an extraordinary step forward'.[84]

Specifically, the EU's accession to the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention, which had been blocked in the Council until 2023, was completed, gender-based violence was included in the catalogue of EU criminal offences, and gender-based cyber violence was included in the Digital Services Act.

At the beginning of February 2024, a Directive to combat violence against women and domestic violence as well as to strengthen prevention was adopted for the first time However, a legal harmonisation of rape and an 'upgrading' of its definition towards the principle of 'only yes means yes' failed as it was opposed by the German Federal Minister of Justice Marco Buschmann of the German Liberal Party FDP, among others.[85]

### Labour market and reconciliation policies

In labour market policy, a comprehensive European Care Strategy was adopted in 2022. After being blocked for ten years, a Directive on a more balanced representation of women and men in listed companies was adopted in 2022. This was followed in 2023 by a Directive on pay transparency.

## Strategies for equality of other groups

In addition, further 'twin strategies' were adopted to protect vulnerable groups: the LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020–2025, the strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities 2021–2030, and a strategic framework for the inclusion of Roma 2020–2030, an EU action plan against racism 2020–2025, and an EU strategy on combating antisemitism and fostering Jewish life 2021–2030. All these groups are included in the 'Union of Equality for All'. A Directive on setting standards for equality bodies is currently being negotiated. This is intended to strengthen the work of national authorities in the field of anti-discrimination.

However, the implementation of these strategies must be analysed in a differentiated manner. Overall, there has to date been a lack of intersectional integration. In addition, there is no consistent integration of a gender equality perspective in key policy projects, for instance in the areas of migration and asylum, climate policy, or digitalisation.

## What's next?

The norm of gender equality is enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union and in the Charter of Fundamental Rights. Corresponding policies have been further developed during von der Leyen's term of office under the guiding principle of a 'Union of Equality'. What can be done beyond this?

### Representation of equality issues in the next European Parliament

Forecasts for the European elections in June 2024 predict a significant increase in right-wing populist, in some cases far-right extremist, and Eurosceptic parties – not only in Germany.

This does not imply good conditions for future gender equality policy, as these parties are conservative in their socio-political programmes and advocate traditional, allegedly 'natural' role models. Gender is rejected as a 'woke' concept of identity politics. Both the electorates as well as the members of parliament are mostly male-dominated.

The percentage of female MEPs could thus fall as these parties gain strength. This would widen the gender-democratic representation gap further. On the other hand, numerous EU states now have strong quota laws in force that apply to European elections – and also to populist and radical right-wing parties. However, a high proportion of women does not automatically translate into support for progressive gender equality policies.

### Potential second term for von der Leyen

Von der Leyen will stand as the *Spitzenkandidat* for the European People's Party, which has a good chance of becoming the strongest force in the European Parliament again. A second von der Leyen term is thus generally possible. At the same time, the structural hurdles for gender equality
policy will probably be even higher in a second term – and resistance to progress greater.

The current successes must be consolidated and the implementation of the adopted guidelines and various strategies monitored. Last but not least, it is important to examine the extent to which funds from the Recovery and Resilience Facility are utilised for gender equality policy measures.

Democracy requires equality among citizens. In this respect, the vision of a 'Union of Equality' is deeply rooted in and connected to a democratic ideal. Promoting equality substantially through EU policy is thus an important goal.

'Despite the significant efforts by policy-makers to adapt the EU equality machinery for the purpose of mainstreaming equality through an intersectional perspective, current EU equality policies have not yet achieved true intersectionality. On the contrary, the operationalization of intersectionality in the Union of Equality is, so far, mostly a cosmetic exercise. The perseverance of an additive approach and the dominance of gender, for instance, disempower and depoliticize intersectionality, reducing its transformative potential and risking to turn it into an empty signifier.'

Serena D'Agostino 2024

# Five thought-provoking impulses on the relationship between democracy and gender equality in the EU

## Democracy needs gender equality.

Democracy promises equal participation for all. When democracy excludes people on the basis of their gender from political participation, this promise is broken. Democracy thus loses legitimacy.

In the European Union, democracy and gender equality are defined as fundamental values in the Treaties. To live these values, to realise, and to protect them is an ongoing and incomplete process.

## Gender equality needs democracy.

Democracies are obliged to equality: Everyone should be equally able to participate. Gender equality aims at overcoming the historically developed disadvantages of a majority of the human population (women* and people of gender minorities). Feminist politicians and activists have more opportunities to influence politics in democratic systems than in undemocratic ones.

The European Union after its commitment to equality at the founding of the European Economic Community in 1957 has shown itself open to feminist topics. At the same time, many feminist demands remain unaccomplished, including the one for a **right to abortion.**

## Gender equality based on a diverse understanding of gender is more democratic than aiming for equality between men and women.

When people with gender identities beyond the binary categories men and women are included in equality politics, it promotes equality between all genders and keeps the equality promise of democracy. Furthermore, a diverse understanding of gender moves along the overcoming of gender roles and hierarchies und thus strengthens gender equality politics.

In the European Union, attempts to understand gender in a diverse way are visible in the **Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025** and the **LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020–2025**. But reforms of existing legislation as well as a more systematic integration into all policy-making is needed.

## An approach to equality that applies intersectionality is more democratic than focussing on gender equality.

Thinking through and understanding the intersections of further axes of inequality like racism, homo- and transphobia, ableism, or ageism, enables a more inclusive and expansive equality politics. Excluding people on the basis of their varied identities undermines the democratic equality principle.

In the European Union, the Union of Equality has declared intersectionality its guiding principle. It is now time to implement and embed intersectional insights on inequality and discrimination more effectively and systematically.

## Organising the economy democratically leads to more gender equality and more democracy.

Feminists have demonstrated that capitalist economies exploit the disadvantage and power imbalances of women* with regards to men*. Care work that reproduces and upholds the economy remains unpaid and thus make higher profits possible than if companies or the state had to invest fully into the maintenance of the labour force.

On top of that, a capitalist organisation of work undermines fundamental democratic principles: for one, it invisibilises women*'s labour or devalues it. Two, it is undemocratic and hierarchical. A democratic organisation of the economy in which all co-decide who does what, when, and how vital resources are distributed and shared is therefore indispensable for gender equality and for more democracy.

In the European Union, anti-capitalist positions are rarely heard. To open political institutions for debates about a future beyond capitalisms, promises more democracy and better chances of realising gender equality.

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Gender equality and democracy are life-sustaining, plant sculpture in the USA. © Nicholas Lamontanaro / shutterstock.com

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## About the Observatory

The Observatory for Sociopolitical Developments in Europe is a project by the Institute for Social Work and Social Education (ISS). The team of the Observatory analyses sociopolitical developments in Europe and their potential impact on Germany. We publish working papers on relevant sociopolitical topics, monitor European social policies and organise European Expert Meetings. The aim of our work is to connect key sociopolitical actors across Europe, promote the exchange of expertise and foster mutual learning. The Observatory is funded by the German Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth.

### OTHER PUBLICATIONS

Sprang, Friederike (2023): Equal Care – How the EU supports a gender-equal division of care work. Dossier 2/2023.

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