

European issues

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The feminisation at the EU's top in 2019 will it have positive repercussions for gender parity in Europe in 2020?

Equality between men and women, which was originally provided for in the Treaty of Rome^[1], has developed positively in the European Union in recent years. Europe is the continent where women are treated the best in the world.

Nevertheless, although women are far better off in Europe than elsewhere, parity is not yet absolute. And there have even been recent examples of regression regarding the cause of women in some Member States.

The European political landscape is highly dynamic, and the area of gender equality is not exempt. Ursula von der Leyen, the new President of the European Commission has set the pace by declaring gender equality to be a priority on her political agenda. The recent renewal of the Union's institutions provides an opportunity to respond more fully to the principles laid down in the European Treaties.

MORE WOMEN BUT STILL MINORITY IN THE EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS

In the parliament

The percentage of women in the European Parliament has steadily increased over the years. Currently chaired by David Sassoli (S&D, IT), the newly elected European Parliament (2019-2024) comprises 39.5% female MEPs, a relatively high figure which is above the average for national parliaments (28.6%). The number of women in the European Parliament has increased significantly since 1979. It should be noted that between 1952 and 1979, before the election by universal suffrage, only 31 women sat in the European Parliament. However, since 1979, only two women have been Presidents of the European Parliament: the French women Simone Veil and Nicole Fontaine. Strict parity, 50%, is still a long way off.

Of the eight political groups in the European Parliament, three are led by women, one more than in the previous legislature: the S&D group is chaired by Spain's Iratxe Garcia Perez (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party), the Greens/EFA group is co-chaired by Germany's Ska Keller (Die Grünen), and the GUE/NGL group is co-chaired by France's Manon Aubry (La France insoumise). Once again, the goal of parity has not been achieved.

In the Bureau, the European Parliament's governing body, comprising the President, fourteen Vice-Presidents and five Quaestors, there are ten women out of twenty members (compared with five in the previous legislature). Moreover, the number of women in senior positions in Parliament has increased. Eight of the fourteen Vice-Presidents and eleven of the twenty-two committee chairpersons are women, (only five women were Vice-Presidents in the previous term of office).

In the Commission

At the European Commission, for the first time in its history, a woman was elected President, the German Ursula von der Leyen. Twelve of the 27 Commissioners are women, compared to nine in the Juncker Commission. One in three women is Executive Vice-President (Margrethe Vestager) and two out of five are Vice-Presidents (Vera Jourova and Dubravka Suica).

PARITY AMONGST EUROPE'S STAFF, A GOAL STILL NOT ACHIEVED

According to the latest data, women account for almost 60% of the staff of the European Parliament but remain under-represented in management positions. The number of women in middle management positions

1. Article 119 of the Treaty of Rome: "Each Member State shall ensure during the first stage and thereafter maintain the application of the principle of equal pay for men and women workers for equal work" (Article 157 TFEU under the current numbering).

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has increased only slightly: 15.4% of Directors-General, 30.4% of Directors and 36.2% of Heads of Unit in the Parliament[2]. The target set in 2017 to reach 30% of women at Director-General level, 35% at Director level and 40% at Head of Unit level by the end of 2019 has not been met.

In February 2018, the percentage of women in management positions in the European Commission reached 36%, 11% higher than at the beginning of Jean-Claude Juncker's mandate in November 2014. The President of the Commission originally pledged to reach 40% of women in management positions by 31 October 2019. This objective was achieved, with a total of 41% of women in management positions, 37% in senior management and 42% in middle management. Economic decision-making remains an area where women are under-represented. This is reflected in the Directorates-General of the European Commission. For example, in DG TAXUD, responsible for taxation and customs affairs, there are only eight women for 22 heads of unit, whereas the DGs responsible for less "masculine" subjects such as the environment or social affairs have a much higher proportion of women.

In the financial institutions

Christine Lagarde took over as President of the European Central Bank (ECB) on 1st November 2019 and Isabel Schnabel was appointed to the Executive Board of the ECB on 1st January 2020. Apart from these two exceptions, many of the positions of high financial responsibility that have become available in the European institutions have been filled by men. Spain's Luis de Guindos was appointed Vice-President of the ECB. Italy's Andrea Enria was appointed head of the European Banking Authority (EBA), replacing Danièle Nouy. Eurogroup finance ministers chose Ireland's Philip Lane - the sole candidate - to replace Peter Praet as Chief Economist of the ECB and Finland's Tuomas Saarenheimo as Chairman of the Eurogroup working group. Similarly, Italy's Sebastiano Laviola became a member of the Single Resolution Council (SRC), replacing his fellow countryman Mauro Grande. Another European, Bulgarian Kristalina Georgieva, succeeded Christine Lagarde as head of the IMF in

October 2019. We might also add that the post of first head of the European Public Prosecutor's Office is to be filled by a woman, Romanian Laura Codruța Kövesi, who will serve a non-renewable seven-year term. This observation also applies to the Member States, since there are many women in the civil service, but management and executive posts are still predominantly held by men.

EUROPE, THE WORLD CHAMPION IN TERMS OF WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION

While it is clear that a great deal of progress still needs to be made in terms of equality between men and women, it can nevertheless be said that Europe is probably the woman's continent.

From an international point of view, the latest figures published by the Inter-Parliamentary Union show that in 2019, 24.6% of the world's parliamentarians are women, as against 11.7% in 1995. Thus, at world level, the representation of women has more than doubled, but the goal of parity is still a long way off. At regional level, the Nordic countries account for 44% of women parliamentarians and Europe, excluding the Nordic countries, 28.1%.

As far as the functions of head of State or government are concerned, changes are to be noted in particular at European level. However, there is still a long way to go towards strict parity. Twenty-one women are heads of State or government, eleven of them in Europe, four in Asia, two in Australasia, two in Africa and two in the Caribbean. In the European Union, there are three Heads of State (Estonia, Slovakia, Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal[3]) and four heads of government (Germany, Belgium, Denmark, Finland).

Europe also boasts the two youngest prime ministers in the world: Sebastian Kurz (33) in Austria and Sanna Marin (34) in Finland.

But things are not really changing. Theresa May has been replaced by Boris Johnson, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, President of Croatia until 18 February 2020, was replaced by Zoran Milanovic. And there is every reason to believe that veteran, Angela Merkel, German Chancellor since 2005, who will not be standing for re-election, will be replaced by a man!

2. End of 2017 data.

3. In office since 13 March

While the number of women leaders may have increased in some countries, this is not necessarily a long-term trend. Sustainable development and the commitment of a particular government are not to be confused. The initiative for a 50/50 world in 2030, desired by the United Nations, does not appear very feasible in practice.

LABOUR MARKET: PROGRESS STILL TO BE MADE

Across the world, women find it more difficult to access the labour market than men. The situation varies according to the level of a country's development. The gap between male and female work force participation rates is narrowing in developing and developed countries but continues to widen in emerging countries.

At European level, women have difficulty in accessing senior positions: only one in three management positions is held by a woman and, in no Member State, does the proportion of women managers exceed 50%. Corporate governance is still predominantly male: women account for only 6.3% of CEOs, 16.6% of executive managers and 29.3% of non-executive positions. The recent dismissal of Isabelle Kocher from Engie, the only woman manager of a CAC 40 company in France, shows that progress is still very fragile.

Legislative measures have often been taken to increase the number of women in listed companies. The result has been a feminisation rate of, for example, 40% in France. But we should not just focus on these companies and continue our efforts in mid-sized companies or small and medium-sized enterprises

(SMEs), nor should we stop at the governance of Boards alone, but we should also look at other decision-making structures (executive committees, audit and compensation committees, etc.).

The causes of this stagnation are multiple: the level of wealth and development, women's access to education, religious culture or traditions.

Nevertheless, beyond social-cultural factors, the accelerating factor seems to come above all from specific measures in favour of women's representation: a more equitable representation of the sexes is therefore, first and foremost, the result of political will.

In the European Union, the under-representation of women can be explained by the slow and insufficient implementation of legislation. Lack of coordination between the different institutions, as well as a low awareness of gender equality among the governing bodies of political parties also contribute to this.

Thus, it is recommended that the Parliament's Directorate General for Communication include a stronger and more active gender perspective in its reports on political decisions and, in particular, in the preparation of the campaign for the European elections.

The gender wage gap also persists: in 2017, in the Member States and despite existing laws, women's salaries are on average 16% lower than men. Rates vary between countries, ranging from 25.6% in Estonia, 21% in Germany, 15.4% in France to 5% in Italy or 3.5% in Romania. For OECD countries as a whole, the average in 2016 was 13.8%.

The gender pay gap, unadjusted, 2017

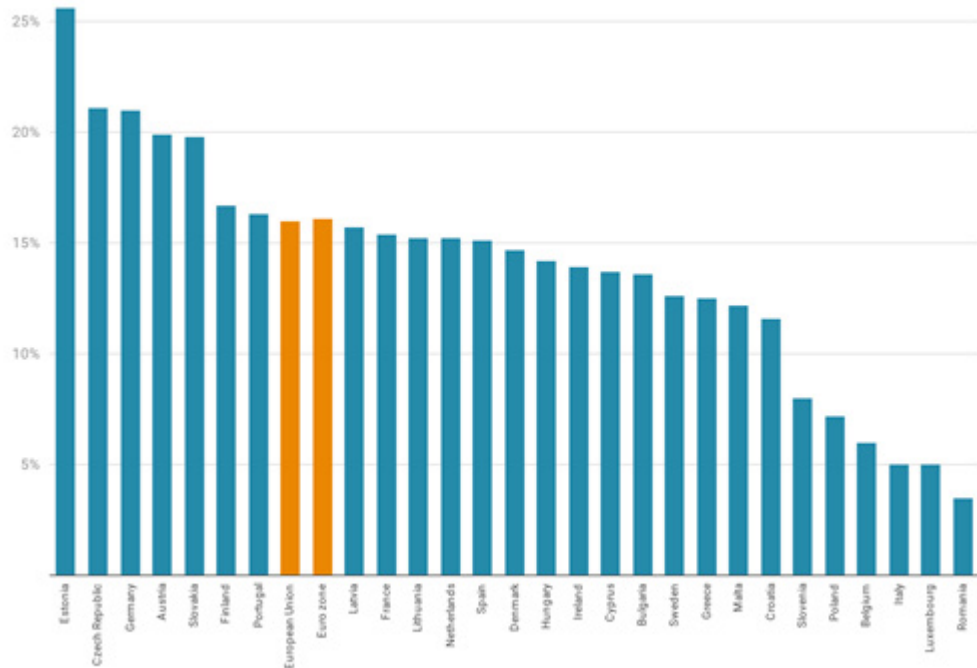


Chart: Robert Schuman Foundation • Source: Eurostat

THE EMERGENCE OF PRO-BIRTH POLICIES, A THREAT TO WOMEN'S RIGHTS?

Are the emerging pro-birth policies in many of the Member States (particularly in Central and Eastern Europe) hindering the development of women's rights? Many experts have already warned against the measures taken in Poland and Hungary; according to Annika Strandhall, Swedish Minister for Social Security, the measures taken in Hungary "run counter to women's independence".

Indeed, since entering office in 2010, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has taken a series of measures to address the country's demographic crisis: any woman under 40 years of age who enters into her first marriage will be eligible for an interest-free loan of 10

million forints i.e. 31,500€ for the start of her life as a couple; from the birth of the first child, repayment of the loan will be suspended for three years, and for a further three years from the birth of the second child, with cancellation of one third of the capital; at the third child's birth, the remaining capital due will be cancelled. From then on, a married Hungarian woman who gives birth to three children would have nothing to repay. Families who undertake to have two children will benefit from a loan of €69,300 for the purchase of a home. The amount is €110,300 for those who commit to having three children. Since 2010, the birth rate in Hungary has risen from 1.25 to 1.49 (the European average is 1.6).

Poland, on the other hand, has implemented a pro-birth policy (allowance which is unconditioned by

income - 500 zlotys/115 € per month from the first child onwards, the "Mama 4+", for women with at least four children, tax benefits for families) which is said to have led to women being pushed out of the labour market: around 100,000 women are said to have given up their jobs).

The agenda is therefore a heavy one for Dubravka Šuica, Vice-President of the European Commission responsible for Democracy and Demography.

Regarding the right to abortion in Europe, the situation differs greatly from country to country: in Ireland, despite the liberalisation of abortion in 2019, the law remains difficult to implement. Abortion is still prohibited in Malta and there are major constraints in Hungary, where the 2011 Constitution notes in Article II that "the life of the embryo from its conception should be defended". The Venice Commission of the Council of Europe considered that the wording "could under certain conditions be incompatible with Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights." In Poland, abortion is permitted in only three cases: for rape, incest, or when the mother's life is in danger or in the case of foetal malformation. In Germany, the legislation remains very complex: although abortion is permitted, under a law dating from 1933, doctors are forbidden to communicate the fact that they are performing it.

WHAT IS THE OUTLOOK FOR 2020 ?

While the appointment of Ursula von der Leyen as head of the European Commission and Christine Lagarde as President of the European Central Bank are significant steps forward, a great deal still has to be done to encourage and facilitate women's access to management positions, especially in the private sector and especially in medium-sized companies.

Binding measures to counter gender pay inequalities would be beneficial to ensure parity. As part of the law on freedom to choose one's professional future (2018), France already provides for a fine to be imposed on companies with more than 50 employees if wage inequality persists.

For Europe to remain the women's continent, we must also ensure that the emerging pro-birth policies in European countries are not to the detriment of women's rights.

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