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# Women's Europe

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Equality between men and women in the European Union is provided for in Article 119 of the Treaty of Rome. While substantial progress has been made since 1957, making Europe the continent where women live best and where their numbers in the institutions are among the highest in the world, significant disparities persist between Member States. Further steps still need to be taken, especially as the pandemic has accentuated inequalities and differences, illustrating the efforts that still need to be made to achieve true equality between men and women.

## EUROPE, WOMEN'S CONTINENT

### The European Institutions

Whilst in January 2021, 25.5% of MPs in the world were women, the percentage of female members of the European Parliament totalled [37.98%](#), slightly down in comparison with 2019, at the beginning of this term in office ([41%](#)). The eight political group chairpersons include one woman, Iratxe García (S&D), and two female co-chairs, Ska Keller (Greens/EFA) and Manon Aubry (GUE/NGL).

In 2019, for the first time in history, two women were appointed to head European institutions: Christine Lagarde as President of the European Central Bank and Ursula von der Leyen as President of the European Commission.

At the start of its mandate in December 2019, of its twenty-seven members, the Commission had twelve women. Following the appointment in October 2020 of Ireland's Mairead McGuinness as Commissioner for Financial Services, the College now has thirteen women (48.1%) to fourteen men. One of the three Executive Vice-Presidents is a woman: Margrethe

Vestager, as well as two of the six Vice-Presidents, Věra Jourová and Dubravka Šuica.

### The Member States

In the Member States the European average in the national parliaments lies at 32.7% (in contrast to [25.5%](#) at world level). However, considerable disparities exist between countries. The Nordic States are a world benchmark, with shares of women in national parliaments at 49.6% in Sweden, 46% in Finland and 39.7% in Denmark. There is still a long way to go in countries of the South and East: there are only 12.6% women parliamentarians in Hungary, 13.4% in Malta, 20% in Romania, 21.42% in Cyprus and 22.7% in Slovakia[1].

In the Member State governments, the average number of women members is 31.85%. The Scandinavian countries are still at the top of the ranking: 54.5% in Finland, 52.2% in Sweden, 48% in the Netherlands. Other countries are well placed such as France with 47% of women in government, or Spain with 46.9%. On the other hand, there is only one woman in government in Romania, Hungary and Poland.

At global level, there are 26 Heads of State or Government, almost a third of whom are in the EU, with three heads of State (Estonia, Slovakia, Greece) and five heads of Government (Denmark, Finland, Germany, Lithuania and Estonia). The two most recent women to take the position as head of government are Ingrida Šimonytė in Lithuania since November 2020, and Kaja Kallas in Estonia since January 2021. Note that the governments of Norway and Iceland are also led by a woman.

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[1] Data [ELGE](#)

## Europe, a lever

Europe emerges as a lever for its immediate neighbourhood: at the end of 2020, Maia Sandu became the first woman head of State in Moldova. Georgia elected Salome Zurbishvili as president in 2018. In the Balkans, Serbia appointed Ana Brnabić as Prime Minister in 2017. In fact, the Serbian government has 11 women ministers out of 21, in other words, 45.8%. In Kosovo, Vjosa Osmani became President (interim) on November 5 2020, following the resignation of Hashim Thaçi.

## Women, victims of the pandemic

Despite these important steps forward, the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the gaps that persist and that have crept into the expert and decision-making groups created to manage the health situation: a study published by [BMJ Global Health](#) stresses the fact that of the 115 national expert and decision-making groups studied, 85.2% are predominantly male: the proportion of women in European countries varies from 0% in Lithuania to 6.7% in Hungary, 40.6% in Ireland and 60% in Austria.

According to the same study, the situation is no different at global task force level: the share of women in the WHO's first, second and third *Emergency Committee for International Health Regulations* was 23.8%, 23.8% and 37.5% respectively. Despite government commitments, parity still appears as a goal to be achieved in practice.

A year after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we can simply state that women are emerging weaker after this period than their male counterparts, as revealed by a study by the [Boston Consulting Group](#) (BCG) undertaken at the end of January and beginning of February 2021. We should note however that in most countries and for reasons that still have to be studied, women are succumbing less to COVID than men.

## THE LABOUR MARKET AND CORPORATE MANAGEMENT

According to [Eurostat](#), at Union level, 68.2% of women

aged 20 to 64 were in employment against 79.6% of men prior to the pandemic. Although women account for less than half of all those employed in the EU, (46%), [they form the majority in knowledge intensive services \(59%\)](#). While the gap has systematically narrowed in recent decades, there is still a long way to go, especially when it comes to positions of responsibility in Europe. According to a study by the [World Economic Forum](#), women represent one third (33%) of the members of the boards of directors of publicly listed companies and only just over a quarter (27%) hold executive positions. Disparities persist between Member States: Latvia has the highest proportion of women in managerial positions (53%), while France has the highest proportion of women administrators (45%). But the percentage of women executives stalls at a third and drops to [18% as far as top executives are concerned](#).

While the principle of equal pay is enshrined in the European treaties (Article 157 of the TFEU), pay gaps persist: a greater share of women work in low-paid sectors; in search of a work-life balance, they work fewer hours than men and, in too many cases, earn less than their male counterparts for equal work. In 2018 the wage gap at European level lay at 14.1%, with significant differences between the Member States, whilst [the wage gap](#) lies at 3% in Romania, 27.3% in Estonia, 20.9% in Germany and 20.1% in the Czech Republic. In France women have to work six days more than men to reach an equivalent salary.

To remedy this many initiatives have been taken: in France in virtue of [article 104](#) of the "Professional Future" law, companies must aim to eliminate the pay gap between women and men. In the [Union](#), twelve Member States have introduced measures regarding wage transparency. In March 2020, the European Commission revised its [strategy](#) and opened a consultation on wage transparency; [the proposals](#) that followed, presented on 4 March 2021 aimed to force businesses employing more than 250 people in the EU to provide information on wage gaps. 10 November was designated [wage equality day](#).

In the scientific field, 2020 saw the award of the Nobel Prize in Chemistry to two women, Frenchwoman

Emmanuelle Charpentier and American Jennifer Doudna. It was also a woman, Katalin Kariko, who developed the ARN messenger technology used by Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna for the development of the COVID-19 mRNA vaccine. Yet only 33.3% of researchers internationally are women, and they are in the minority in the digital sector according to [UNESCO](#), which is an enormous challenge in terms of entering the labour market in the future.

### THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON MALE-FEMALE EQUALITY

Women are more vulnerable to the economic effects of crises due to structural gender inequalities. The pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities. According to a UN [report](#) published in 2020, "*in all areas, from health to the economy, from security to social protection, the effects of the pandemic are being exacerbated for women and girls simply because of their gender*". To understand how women are more exposed to the Covid-19 pandemic, it is important to note that employment structure and perceived roles remain strongly influenced by gender.

#### An employment structure unfavourable to women in times of crisis

Despite steady improvement, the employment rate for women, which was 67.3% for 20–64-year-olds in the Union in 2019 (up from 65 percent in 1999), is still lower than the employment rate for men in the same age group, which stands at 79 percent. In particular this difference can be explained by the influence of gender role stereotypes, with the "single breadwinner" model<sup>[2]</sup> in which the man is responsible for financially supporting the family, while the woman assumes responsibility for household chores and child rearing. A Eurobarometer survey of June 2017<sup>[3]</sup> showed the persistence of these ideas in the Union.

This model has almost disappeared in several northern European countries: in Lithuania, the employment rate for women is 77.4% compared to 79% for men (a gap of -1.6). A higher figure is found in Finland (-2.7), Latvia (-3.8) and Sweden (-4.7). In Southern Europe,

the gaps persist: in Greece and Malta (-20 each) as well as in Italy (-19.6) and Romania (-19).

Other inequalities persist in the world of work, notably the difference in wages between men and women (14% gap in the Union). This difference often creates imbalances within households: in 2018, in 37% of European households, women's income represented less than 40% of total household income. This trend is underpinned by the fact that women represent most part-time work in the Union with 31.3% of wage earning women working part time against 8.7% of men in 2019, representing an average of [six hours fewer in paid work per week for women](#). Finally, women are more affected by the risk of job insecurity during an economic crisis for two reasons: the fact that they hold unstable jobs (27% of women against 15% of men) and their over-representation in single-parent families (of the 7.5 million single-parent families in the Union in 2016, 85% of them comprised mothers and their children). Thus, the structure of employment, families and the perception of gender roles create unfavourable conditions for women which can be exacerbated in times of crisis: women in unstable employment or as heads of single-parent families may be pushed into poverty, while women in two-parent families may be encouraged, by the distribution of income within the household, to reduce their working hours or quit their job, which ultimately can lead to greater inequalities in the world of work.

#### Lead indicators

It is still difficult to take full measure of the economic impact of the pandemic because the crisis is not yet over. However, by using some lead indicators it is possible to draw up an [initial review](#). According to Eurostat, [unemployment](#) amongst women rose from 6.8% to 7.9% between January and December 2020 in the Union and from 6.2% to 7.1% as far as men were concerned over the same period. According to OECD estimates, the employment rate of both men and women has followed a similar pattern in the OECD zone, with a male employment rate of 70.8% in Q4 2019 compared to 67.8% in Q2 2020 and a female employment rate of 54.2% in Q4 2019 compared

<sup>[2]</sup> One support to the family.  
<sup>[3]</sup> Special Eurobarometer 465, June 2017.

to 51.2% in Q2 2020. These similar trends can be explained by the implementation of job retention mechanisms by the States, which have helped limit the destruction of jobs.

But there are also disparities between sectors and jobs that are predominantly held by women and those predominantly held by men. Women are over-represented in "essential" jobs, for example, they account for 95% of cleaning and domestic help staff, 76% of care aides, 86% of social workers in health services and 82% of cashiers. These are sectors that have been heavily called upon during the pandemic, and therefore have not experienced any workforce reductions. But women are also over-represented in services.

According to an estimate made by the [World Bank](#) and the ILO, 84% of wage earning women, against 59% of men were working in the services sector in the Union in 2020. They are notably concentrated in the hospitality (hotels and restaurants) sector (30% more women employed than men in these sectors) which have been severely affected by the pandemic and which may find it more difficult than others to recover. There are more men in the non-essential sectors which have been negatively impacted by the restrictions that have been introduced, such as the building sector where they represent 97% of the labour force and the manufacturing sector where they represent 73%. At the same time men are more present in the services that have been less affected by the crisis such as administration (51%) or research and engineering (74%). According to [Eurostat](#), maintenance workers, assistants, construction and manufacturing workers recorded the largest decrease in the number of people employed, -9%, between the Q3 of 2019 and the Q3 of 2020 in the Union. These occupations are held by both women and men. This distribution of men and women in sectors differently affected by the crisis may explain the slight difference observed in the development of unemployment.

#### Women on the front

Women can be vulnerable or at risk due to their [over representation in the healthcare sector or services to](#)

[people](#). According to the OECD, globally, women make up 70% of the healthcare workforce and are more likely to work on the front lines (nurses, midwives and community health workers). They also comprise most staff providing services in health facilities, accounting for 90% of staff in institutions for the elderly and 97% of home care workers. The same applies to female teachers who are on the front line. In 2019, the share of female teachers in primary education was 85%, according to the [World Bank](#). Remember that the wearing of masks for children under the age of 11 was not mandatory before September 2020 but it is now for children over 6 years old in France, Belgium, Spain and Italy.

#### Countering domestic violence

[Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic](#), one in five women in Europe suffered domestic violence. The pandemic, and in particular lockdown measures, have led to an [increase](#) in domestic and sexual violence.

According to the WHO, emergency services across Europe recorded a 60% increase in calls from women victims of domestic violence during lockdown compared to the previous year. Online inquiries regarding violence prevention support services increased fivefold.

In France, during the first lockdown alone, from March 17 to May 11, 2020, the number of reported domestic violence cases increased by 30%. In Cyprus, over the same period, calls to report domestic violence also increased by 30%.

In [September 2020](#), Forty-eight countries had integrated prevention and response to violence measures against women and girls into their plans to combat the spread of the virus, and another 121 countries had adopted measures to strengthen services for victims of violence.

In the European Union, many shelters for victims have opened. The majority of European countries have also set up telephone helplines for victims of domestic violence (in Spain, an instant messaging service with a geolocation function that offers immediate psychological support to victims). In France, Italy, Spain, Norway, Belgium and Germany, women who

seek aid in the face of domestic violence can [ask](#) directly for help in pharmacies.

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In March 2020, the Commission presented the [strategy](#) for Gender Equality 2020-2025, which highlighted three objectives: "*to end violence and gender stereotypes, to ensure equal participation and opportunities in the labour market, including equal pay, and to achieve gender balance in decision-making and politics*". The lessons of the pandemic should be incorporated into the report, to take better account of women's experiences and consolidate the progress made. The [proposal](#) presented by the European Commission on

March 4 on wage transparency is an important step in the right direction. Recognizing that the future of Europe depends on women, Europe's recovery should also promote equality between women and men, which could be a criterion in the evaluation of national recovery plans. Investing in the education of girls, facilitating their access to scientific fields, will be essential to ensure their access to tomorrow's labour market. And why not re-elect a woman as head of the European Parliament in January 2022?

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