

Schuman Paper
n°824
3rd March 2026

Helen LEVY
Juliette BACHSCHMIDT

From a set of values to a normative framework: the European Union, world champion of women's rights

In 2026, Europe is set to become an even stronger bastion for women's rights. A pioneer on the world stage, the European Union is translating its values into a set of guarantees to ensure the best possible situation for women. Behind certain regulations lies a political project with a new ambition: to transform the ethical values that form the very foundations of the European project into a tangible reality. In this area, European standards, which are always the result of discussions and compromises between the co-legislators – the Parliament and the Council – are proving to be a driving force for progress where decades of recommendations and good intentions have failed.

The world order is being disrupted by Donald Trump's return to the White House and the rise to power of leaders who are far from committed to the cause of women and who are challenging the progress made over the last century in terms of gender equality. Against this backdrop, the European Union is seeking to uphold its core values by charting a new course based on its normative power. And so, in 2026, gender equality in Europe is set to take on a new dimension, no longer just an ideal to which everyone should aspire, but a legal obligation backed by performance requirements and, failing that, sanctions. Although imperfect, the European Union remains a bastion for women's rights. As we approach the celebration of Women's Rights Day on 8 March, the European Union can take pride in some of the steps forward it has made on behalf of women, particularly in the areas of economic empowerment, political participation

and leadership, health and well-being, education and skills development.

I. THE EUROPEAN UNION, THE SPEARHEAD OF THE GLOBAL REGULATORY FRAMEWORK FOR EQUALITY

Translating values into a binding legal system

Europe's ambition to lead the way globally in terms of gender equality was part of the Union's founding principles from the start: Article 119 of the 1957 Treaty of Rome already provided for equal pay for women and men, which aimed primarily to reduce the possibility of unfair competition, but nevertheless laid the foundations for protective rights for women. In December 1973, the Member States established the foundations of their "European identity" in Copenhagen, before formally laying them down in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, which was given the highest legal status by the Treaty of Lisbon (2009). These values, now established as law, have a binding force that they did not previously enjoy.

The European Union has moved from a phase of incentives to one of sanctions. From now on, failure to comply with the principle of equality is no longer just a moral failing but exposes those who deviate from it to penalties. Through mechanisms such as the conditionality of European funds and deterrent fines for companies or third countries, Europe is now equipped to impose its principles more widely. This paradigm shift tips the balance,

transforming a principle into an enforceable rule of law that ensures that the continent's fundamental values are translated into tangible change. This marks the uniqueness of the European approach, which establishes the protection of equality as a legal obligation.

The principle of integration and the 'Brussels effect'

To guarantee that this 'direct normative power' is effective, the European Union has rolled out the principle of [systematic integration \(or 'mainstreaming'\)](#). This strategy is based on including the principle of gender equality at all levels, by all actors and in all areas of public decision-making. This approach no longer confines questions of equality to social affairs, but permeates all areas, from research to digital technology, defence and the green transition. Every initiative must include an analysis of its impact on gender equality. This principle is reflected in particular in an increasingly strict budgetary conditionality mechanism. To obtain European funding, such as from the Horizon Europe programme or the Cohesion Funds, applicants must demonstrate the positive impact of their actions in terms of women's integration. This criterion is becoming a genuine *sine qua non* for access to public procurement and European funds. Therefore, without proof of the favourable impact on women that the projects submitted will have, they are, in principle, inadmissible. This represents a real shift in approach and constitutes a genuine lever for action on equality.

This mechanism is not limited to the borders of the Union and is being exported internationally *via* what some call '[the Brussels effect](#)': the European market is one of the largest consumer markets in the world, making it particularly attractive to international companies and partners. Consequently, the latter must align their standards with European requirements if they wish maintain access to EU funding and consumers. Through this mechanism, the European Union can export its values using its soft power; it influences global practices and is ultimately establishing itself as the world leader in gender equality.

The 2020-2025 Strategy

While equality is central to the European project, the [2020-2025 Strategy](#) for gender equality is its most effective operational lever. This was launched by Ursula von der Leyen, the first female President of the European Commission, who made it one of the pillars of [her political agenda](#). This strategy, which is not the first of its kind, differs in that it is binding. Several directives have been adopted within this framework: the [Women on Boards](#) Directive in 2022, the [Pay Transparency](#) Directive in 2023 and the [Combating Violence](#) against Women and Domestic Violence Directive in 2024. These texts mark a new resolve to move from recommendations to legal obligations. The Women on Boards Directive aims to break the glass ceiling in management bodies by introducing quotas. The Pay Transparency Directive tackles pay gaps by imposing transparency on payslips. Finally, the directive on combating violence against women harmonises certain standards of protection and criminalisation across the European Union for the first time. In this way, the European Union is translating its fundamental values into a binding legal system and becoming a space where women's rights are guaranteed by mandatory standards.

II. 2026: THE MAKING OF AN EQUALITY UNION

Wage Transparency

The origins of the European Pay Transparency Directive can be traced back to Article 157 TFEU, which established the principle of equal pay for male and female staff and strengthened existing legislation in this regard. However, due to a lack of transparency and accountability for progress made, the law has not been enforced rigorously enough over the decades.

The new directive, adopted as part of the 2020-2025 Strategy which came into force on 10 May 2023, aims to remedy this situation by closing the pay gap. Its goal is to strengthen equal treatment and promote a fairer labour market by guaranteeing the principle of '[equal work, equal pay](#)'. Member States will have had three years, i.e. until 7 June 2026, to transpose the

legislation into their own national legal systems. As a result, employers will have to indicate remuneration in job offers and will no longer be able to ask candidates for their salary history. In addition, employees will have a substantive right to information on salaries and salary progression criteria. Regular reporting obligations will apply to companies with more than 100 employees, with corrective measures if an unjustified gap exceeds 5%. In the event of a dispute, the burden of proof will lie with the employer and financial penalties are provided for in the event of non-compliance. Finally, the directive represents a challenge in terms of adaptation, but also an opportunity for companies to enhance their attractiveness and to build trust. These measures will mainly benefit women, whose average monthly salary is still [12% lower than that of men across the European Union](#).

Only a few countries (Belgium, Poland and Malta) have fully transposed this directive so far. Others are still assessing how to comply with the directive's requirements, but do not oppose its principle.

“Women on Boards”

The promotion of women on company boards is a battle that has been fought long and hard. [After ten long years of deadlock](#), the European Parliament and Member States reached an agreement on 8 August 2022 on a draft directive to increase the presence of women on the boards of listed companies. The goal is to achieve 40% women on non-executive boards or 33% of all directors. The current average is 34%, with significant disparities between countries. The legislation was adopted at the end of 2024 and Member States had two years to transpose it, with a deadline set on 30 June 2026. As this date approaches, fifteen Member States have already complied, while others, such as Germany, Italy and Portugal, are still at the draft bill stage. However, the latter were already proactively engaged in promoting women in this area and had included in their national legislation a minimum of 30% women on boards of directors. Hungary and the Czech Republic have given no indication of any plans to draft legislation to date. Others are in the process of implementation, such as Ireland, Belgium, Poland,

Austria and Cyprus. [This map illustrates the progress made until now](#).

The new legislation should finally allow women to break through the glass ceiling that has long prevented them from accessing senior positions. However, it is important to emphasise that access to senior positions is not a matter of chance. It is still too often limited by the exclusion of women from “networks” and a lack of transparency in recruitment processes. Furthermore, there is still too much inappropriate sexist criticism questioning women's skills and even their appearance, creating a hostile climate that undermines their position. [Some studies suggest that this new law should not focus solely](#) on increasing the number of women for symbolic participation, but also on their effective inclusion in decision-making processes.

The European Union's goal is to stimulate economic growth and improve the competitiveness of businesses, and it hopes to create a 'snowball effect' on women's employment as a whole. To ensure that companies effectively comply with the new rules, companies will be required to publish an annual report, followed by a report written by the country in which [the company has its registered office to illustrate the progress made](#). Once again, this directive is not new, [but reflects the implementation of one of the founding principles of the European Union](#).

Combating violence against women

In line with the 2020-2025 strategy, in 2022 the European Commission proposed a directive on combating violence against women, which was adopted by the European Parliament and the Council in May 2024. This also covers the digital sphere and criminalises cyberstalking, harassment and the dissemination of intimate images on the internet. The 27 Member States have until 14 June 2027 to transpose the legislation into their national frameworks.

The directive elevates the following to the status of 'Eurocrimes', i.e. crimes of particular seriousness which, according to Article 83.1 TFEU, allow the Union to *'establish minimum rules concerning the*

definition of criminal offences and sanctions in areas of particularly serious crime' and which have 'a cross-border dimension': female genital mutilation, forced marriage, the non-consensual sharing of intimate or manipulated material, cyberbullying and incitement to hatred or violence. [Indeed, gender-based violence can take many forms](#), but on average, 30% of women in the European Union report having experienced violence during their lifetime. Assaults can occur at home, at work, in the street, they can be physical or psychological, and most often the perpetrators are spouses or close family members. Between 2012 and 2022, more than 14,000 femicides were committed in the European Union, in other words, nearly four women per day. These figures should be treated with caution, as not all such assaults are reported or recognised. With [the advent of the internet and social media](#), this type of crime, which is more subtle and invisible, has increased significantly. Critics might suggest that the directive does not go far enough to cover all types of gender-related crimes; for example, rape, and other types of violence have been excluded because Member States could not agree on definitions. In addition, the question has been raised as to whether it is within the competence of the European Union to legislate in this area, given that national criminal laws vary widely. However, [the new directive should be welcomed as a first step towards harmonising criminal law on cybercrime](#). Work will certainly continue as part of the next strategy for 2026-2030.

III. OVERVIEW OF CONTRASTING SITUATIONS BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES, CHINA AND EUROPE

The European Union is spearheading efforts to validate and defend women's rights. Elsewhere in the world, the situation is neither as clear nor as positive. In the United States, laws that generations of women have fought for are being rolled back and programmes suspended. The Trump administration is withdrawing from treaties that the United States historically drafted and signed, encouraging other countries to follow suit. In China, the picture is mixed when it comes to women's rights, which often seem to be shaped by the government's political agenda, whether in the

workplace or in the domestic sphere, [with no tolerance for critical female voices at the grassroots](#) level.

In the USA

Career and political prospects

In the United States, [fewer than 30%](#) of the members of the 119th Congress are women. Admittedly, their numbers grew exponentially during the 20th century, have continued to rise since the 1990s. However, on a global scale, the United States does not rank among the top fifty countries in terms of female representation in parliament (77/183), which may seem surprising given its position as a superpower and leading Western nation that aspires to be a role model.

A similar situation can be seen in the corporate world: according to *Fortune* magazine, the share of women on the boards of directors of companies in the [Russell 3000 and S&P 500 indices is 30.3% and 34.3%](#), respectively. As with the number of female members of Congress and senators in the United States, the number of women on boards of directors and at the head of companies has increased significantly over the last thirty years, but in a context of great economic uncertainty, the appointment of women to senior positions seems to have slowed down. In line with Donald Trump's goal of moving away from positive discrimination in favour of women, [companies are turning to other priorities and divesting from specific management training programmes](#). More generally, in December 2025, only 56.5% of the female population in the United States was in work, compared to 62.4% of men. However, [the gender pay gap is narrowing there, particularly among younger people, where it stands at 5% for 25-34 year olds, compared to a global average of 15-17%](#).

Women's Reproductive Rights

Since the return of the Trump administration, the United States has seen a sharp decline in historic decisions on women's rights. This trend began during Trump's first term (2016-2020) and has accelerated. Gains were lost as early as 2022 with the overturning

of the *Wade v. Roe* ruling; dating back to 1973 it established a strict timeline for access to safe abortion for all women in the United States. [During the first 100 days of Trump's second term](#), a full-scale attack was launched on affordable healthcare, women's reproductive rights and their inclusion in society. Since February 2026, women living in many states across the [United States no longer have access to safe abortion facilities](#), even if the mother's life is in danger.

Gender Equality

Finally, the Trump administration's attacks on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) are an example of how opportunities for women could now be compromised in the United States, as policies like this were originally designed to [help ensure balance in terms of recruitment and treatment in the workplace](#). His administration has gone so far as to [ask United Nations programmes to align with this policy](#).

On another note, [the SAVE Act of February 2026](#) requires individuals wishing to register to vote to present a passport or birth certificate reflecting their current legal status. This provision could deprive millions of women of the right to vote, leading to a decrease in the electorate, as failure to update their identity documents after marriage results in inconsistencies between their original documents and their current situation, which could have consequences for future elections.

Women are therefore organising at state level to protect their rights. [Grassroots movements are gaining momentum to fight back](#). In addition, some think-tanks continue to fight for women's rights and lobby politicians as well as decision-makers — they indicate that the period ahead could be difficult as they wait for better days.

On a separate note, according to a report by the World Economic Forum published in 2023, women in [only fourteen countries enjoyed full](#) parity, and the United States was not and still is not one of them. With the current administration, it appears that the trend is towards inequality rather than the opposite.

In China

Career and political prospects

Mao Zedong said that '*women hold up half the sky*,' and although the 1954 Chinese Constitution guarantees equal rights for men and women in all areas of life, there is a severe lack of women in positions of power in the political sphere. For example, only 27% of seats in the [Chinese National People's Assembly are held by women](#). In the National Council, [only three women hold seats](#) out of a possible thirty-five. And at the top, in the governing bodies, there are no women.

Until the 1980s, around 80% of women formed part of the labour market. When China opened up to the world in the 1990s, the restructuring of state-owned enterprises led to the elimination of many low-skilled jobs held by women. Today, only 59.6% of women are part of the Chinese workforce, compared to 71.1% of men, with an average gender pay gap of 12%, similar to that observed in Europe. However, [of the 1,071 management positions available in China, only 85 were held by women in 2025](#), or 8%, and only 3.1% were chairwomen of boards of directors. Despite efforts to reduce these disparities, there is still a long way to go before the Chinese business world fully opens up to women.

Women's Reproductive Rights

With the introduction of the One-Child Policy strictly enforced between 1979 to 2015, China sought to curb the rapid growth of its population in the late 20th century and established [widespread access to abortion for Chinese women](#), in some cases going as far as forcibly terminating pregnancies deemed 'illegal'. Girls were the first victims of this policy, as families preferred to have boys, who were considered more useful for work and less costly for parents. Women therefore had abortions more frequently when they were expecting girls, and even if the pregnancy was carried to term, there were many cases of abandonment, particularly in rural provinces. The country is now facing an ageing population and an imbalance in the [ratio of women to men, with men outnumbering women](#) (ratio of [111 to](#)

100). In this patriarchal society, decades of negative prejudice against girls have led to a generation of missing women and a surplus of [25 million men \(2024\)](#). As China's birth rate continues to decline, the government has stepped up its efforts [to encourage its population to have more children, while placing greater emphasis on traditional values](#). For the time being, Xi Jinping's government has not banned abortion.

Gender Equality

Since the 1954 Constitution and the adoption of more than 100 laws aimed at better protecting women's rights, as well as the signing of the [Beijing Declaration in 1995](#), China has been committed to improving education and healthcare (life expectancy) for women. However, over the past decade, it would appear that, despite Beijing's official rhetoric, independent – and more critical – female voices have been silenced. [Legislation prohibiting gender-based violence exists](#), but in practice, perpetrators of such violence are rarely prosecuted in court. Any movement perceived as being influenced by the West, such as the #MeToo movement, is quickly censored. The government boasts of having implemented progressive laws in favour of equality, but fails for example to implement UN recommendations to promote gender equality in the workplace, within the government and also within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). [Critical voices are silenced and many activists are behind bars](#), since the only way forward it seems is the one dictated by those in power.

In Europe

Career and political prospects

In Europe, women enjoy privileges unlike anywhere else in the world, holding positions of responsibility in national parliaments, the European Parliament and other EU institutions. Nearly 39% of seats in the European Parliament in the wake of the 2024 elections are held by women, a slight decrease from the 2019-2024 term (40.7%); but women now head three European institutions, with Ursula von der Leyen at the Commission, Roberta Metsola at the European Parliament and Christine Lagarde at the European

Central Bank. However, the overall representation of women at European level tends to mask the disparate situations in different Member States: in Finland, more than 60% of ministerial posts are held by women, but in Hungary there are no female ministers. In the Finnish Parliament, 44.5% of seats are held by women, while in Cyprus, the figure is only 10%. This data shows that, despite a generally positive picture, some European countries still have a long way to go to achieve gender parity in their political institutions.

With regard to the place of women in the workforce, the average for the 27 Member States of the European Union [is 67.7% \(2024 figures\)](#), and the gender pay gap again varies from country to country, ranging from -0.9% in Luxembourg to 19% in Latvia. In 2026, around 34% of women are members of the boards of directors of listed companies. The new legislation aims to reach 40% by 2030.

Women's Reproductive Rights

In Europe, women took a historic step forward in December 2025 when the citizens' initiative *MyVoiceMyChoice*, after collating over a million signatures, won a [vote in the European Parliament](#). It planned to set up a solidarity mechanism to cover the costs of abortion for women who do not have access to safe and legal abortion services in their own countries. Indeed, women's rights are not uniform across Europe, and [in several countries, such as Malta and Poland, these rights are still restricted](#). After the positive vote in Parliament, the European Commission was obliged to look into the petition more closely. This went ahead on 26 February 2026, and after the Commission's recognition of abortion as a health care service, anyone who wishes to do now has the right to access a safe abortion. However, no new funding has been made available to support the measure, but Member States receiving patients will be able to reimburse the costs incurred through a pre-existing social fund made available by the Commission. However, there is no provision requiring Member States to draw on this fund to guarantee the said reimbursement of costs. The relative success of this initiative illustrates the power enjoyed by women's rights movements in Europe,

while they are being suppressed in the United States and China, where women risk exile or imprisonment for speaking out.

Gender Equality

Unlike the United States or China, and following the example of certain Member States such as [France](#), [Sweden and Finland](#), Europe is strengthening gender parity requirements in all areas. This has led to greater representation of women in many aspects of political life and business, as well as in civil society. Once again, these results should be viewed with caution, as studies reveal significant disparities between Member States. However, over the last ten years, many countries have caught up: in terms of the pay gap for example [Estonia has seen the biggest improvement, dropping from 29.8% in 2013 to 16.9% in 2023](#). Spain follows with a reduction of 8.6 percentage points (from 17.8% in 2013 to 9.2% in 2023). In Luxembourg, women now earn slightly more than men!

The year 2026 could mark a paradigm shift within the European Union, which is moving from a value-based system to one founded on rules. Several directives are set to come into force. Europe is leading the way in the face of competition from the United States and China. While the United States shows mixed results and China exploits the status of women to suit its demographic and economic needs, the European Union uses the law as a tool to exert influence on the international stage. Having been too timid for too long, it finally seems to be recognising the need for equality between men and women in all areas and throughout its territory. On Women's Rights Day, the Commission is expected to publish a new strategy for 2026-2029 that will tackle the "care" economy, i.e. professions involving caring for the elderly, the handicapped or the sick, which are largely carried out by women and often go unrecognised. It will also aim to strengthen European action to protect women in the digital sphere, who are heavily affected by *fake news* and *deep fakes*.

Helen Levy and Juliette Bachschmidt

Research Assistants, Robert Schuman Foundation

Retrouvez l'ensemble de nos publications sur notre site :

www.robert-schuman.eu

Directeur de la publication : Pascale JOANNIN

ISSN 2402-614X

Les opinions exprimées dans ce texte n'engagent que la seule responsabilité de l'auteur.

© Tous droits réservés, Fondation Robert Schuman, 2026

LA FONDATION ROBERT SCHUMAN, créée en 1991 et reconnue d'utilité publique, est le principal centre de recherches français sur l'Europe. Elle développe des études sur l'Union européenne et ses politiques et en promeut le contenu en France, en Europe et à l'étranger. Elle provoque, enrichit et stimule le débat européen par ses recherches, ses publications et l'organisation de conférences. La Fondation est présidée par M. Jean-Dominique GIULIANI.