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for European Studies

# Building a Gender Equality Legacy

From the von der Leyen Commission

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## Summary

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The von der Leyen Commission has made gender equality a central component of its ambitious programme. This policy brief highlights that, notwithstanding the significant progress of recent years, barriers remain which prevent women from advancing equally in society. The first of these barriers is posed by gender stereotypes. The second concerns differences in preferences and opportunities for work–life balance. The third barrier is caused by the combined negative effects of class and gender.

This brief sets forth a number of policy recommendations aimed at helping the von der Leyen Commission to build a lasting legacy for gender equality. Only by making profound structural changes will the current Commission achieve results that can be viewed as truly transformational.

One recommendation is to *put educational investment at the core of Europe's Social Market Economy*. The second recommendation is to develop *formal childcare for children from three to school age*. This is a public policy that has a positive effect on men's and women's attitudes towards gender equality, in addition to wider benefits for the economy, parents' work–life balance, educational outcomes and women's equality in general. Finally, *all policies at EU level should be assessed to determine their impact across multiple barriers and policy sectors for achieving gender equality*. Policies focused on vulnerable groups often overlook the fact that the barriers preventing women from utilising existing resources are found in many different areas.

**Keywords** Gender equality – Stereotypes – Work–life balance – Education – Intersectionality



# From policy to reality: Juncker and building momentum for real change

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Gender equality is an important focus point of the *European Pillar of Social Rights*, which was introduced in 2017.<sup>1</sup> The framework's 20 principles are divided into three groups: (1) equal opportunities and access to the labour market, (2) fair working conditions and (3) social protection and inclusion. Fair working conditions include providing adults who have care duties, including parents, with leave arrangements and flexible working patterns; and encouraging men and women to share their care responsibilities equally. Gender equality is also dealt with in relation to access to jobs, career progression and equal pay.

The *New Start* Initiative underlines the need to correct inequalities in pay and in career opportunities, which often favour men.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, the initiative focuses on paternity leave, parental leave, care leave and flexible working arrangements, but does not mention lifelong learning, education or training. Ongoing education that provides people with opportunities to acquire additional qualifications after they have completed their formal education is essential for greater gender equality, especially among groups on the lower rungs of the social ladder.

Motivated by a deep understanding that equality is a core value of EU, the Juncker Commission started a policy of promoting more women within the European Commission. Between 2014 and 2019 the percentage of management positions in the Commission occupied by women increased from 30% to 41%. The greatest rise was in top management positions: the percentage of deputy directors who are women increased from 8% to 40%, while in the case of director generals, there was a rise from 14% to 38%.<sup>3</sup> The first woman to become European Commission president still has a lot to do to change the EU's top-level decision-making processes, which are dominated by men. It is clear, however, that when it comes to understanding and promoting gender equality, the Juncker Commission made a good start.

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<sup>1</sup> *European Pillar of Social Rights*, European Commission (2018).

<sup>2</sup> European Parliament and Council Directive 2019/1158/EU on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU, OJ L188 (20 June 2019).

<sup>3</sup> European Commission, 'Women in Management: Juncker Commission Exceeds Its 40% Target', Press release (22 October 2019), accessed at [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_19\\_6139](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_19_6139) on 19 August 2020.



# Leaving a gender equality legacy from the von der Leyen Commission

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Soon after she was nominated to become the European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen adopted the twitter hashtag ‘Europe Is a Woman’. In reply she received a message expressing ‘Hope in greater visibility and acceptance for gender equality’.<sup>4</sup> Von der Leyen started by giving a strong signal that she wanted to establish gender equality in the selection of commissioners. This important step in breaking the glass ceiling for highly educated women will ensure that there is a gender balance in the top positions of the European Commission. With the appointment of Mairead McGuinness in October 2020, the von der Leyen Commission is now gender balanced.

In the Commission, women account for 53.4% of the cabinet posts. However, there is no gender balance for each type of position. It turns out that 21 of the 25 heads of cabinet (or 84%) are male, while 119 of the 131 secretaries in the commissioners’ offices are female.<sup>5</sup> The latest figures give fuel to the critics who argue that the goal of gender equality in the Commission’s decision-making processes has been not achieved. It is too early for judgments. The goal set forth in the Gender Equality Strategy is for the Commission to reach a gender balance at all management levels by the end of 2024.<sup>6</sup>

It is clear that the right gender balance cannot be achieved immediately at all levels of decision-making within the Commission. Rather, it is a matter of a process of development. Von der Leyen’s voice has a better chance of being heard if other women in leadership positions join in. Immediately after taking up the position of Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund, Kristalina Georgieva referred to her ‘relentless’ commitment to addressing gender

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<sup>4</sup> BBC News, Ursula von der Leyen: ‘First Woman to Lead the EU’, 7 January 2020, accessed at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48841980> on 19 August 2020.

<sup>5</sup> N. Foote and G. Fortuna, ‘The Brief – Gender-Washing at the Commission?’, *EurActiv.com*, 6 December 2019, accessed at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/news/the-brief-gender-washing-at-the-commission/1408595/> on 19 August 2020.

<sup>6</sup> European Commission, ‘Gender Equality Strategy: Striving for a Union of Equality’, Press release (5 March 2020), accessed at [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_358](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_358) on 19 August 2020.



inequality and using the Fund's budgeting instruments and other tools to help countries reduce barriers faced by women in the paid labour force.<sup>7</sup>

There is a need for ongoing efforts to achieve gender equality in Europe. This holds for women at the top, where the glass ceiling needs to be broken, for women in middle occupational positions and also for women with lower levels of education, to whom the concept of the 'sticky floor' has been applied. 'What these terms and labels have in common is that they are the result of research that stopped looking at the individual men and women of organizations as individuals and looked at the barriers—the elements of the organizations' social and cultural architecture—that stopped women's (and particularly ethnic minorities') employment mobility'.<sup>8</sup>

The following sections discuss three types of barriers to achieving gender equality in European societies, work organisations and families. These barriers are linked to (1) existing gender stereotypes, (2) limited opportunities to establish a sustainable and desirable work–life balance (WLB) and (3) the resultant accumulation of multiple disadvantages which impact gender equality in a wide variety of distinct, but interlinked, societal areas.

## Barrier 1 – Overcoming stereotypes associated with politics and leadership

The belief that relations between men and women are changeable is central to understanding and decreasing social inequalities. The 2017 Eurobarometer on gender equality reveals that men and women in Europe differ in their attitudes towards the gender stereotypes associated with politics. No large differences between men and women have been observed in their responses to statements about ambition, interest or skills, although men are slightly more likely to share these views.

<sup>7</sup> A. Shalal, "'Buckle Up.'" New IMF Chief Vows "Relentless" Focus on Gender Equality', World Economic Forum, 21 October 2019, accessed at <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/10/imf-chief-kristalina-georgieva-gender-equality> on 19 August 2020.

<sup>8</sup> M. S. Morgan, *Glass Ceilings and Sticky Floors: Drawing New Ontologies*, Economic London School of Economics and Political Science, Department of Economic History Working Papers no. 228 (London, 2015), 9, accessed at <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/64807/1/WP228.pdf> on 19 August 2020.



However, looking at the opinions of men and women shows that the majority of each gender think women spend more time on housework and caring activities. However, women are more likely to think this way (77% vs. 69% of men). Men are also more likely to think men and women spend the same amount of time on these activities (25% vs. 19%).<sup>9</sup>

When it comes to assessing the degree to which people adhere to gender stereotypes, people's level of education turns out to be a very important factor. Those with relatively low education (who completed their education before they turned 16) are most likely to believe that men are more ambitious.<sup>10</sup>

The same tendency has been identified concerning trust in female politicians: people who have more education have greater confidence in female politicians. The longer respondents have remained in education, the more likely they are to say there should be more women in politics. They are also less likely to say that the number of women currently in politics is about right. For example, 59% of those who completed their education when they were 20 years of age or older say there should be more women in these positions, compared to 47% of those who completed education before they turned 16.<sup>11</sup> Thus, education, or rather the lack of a more complete educational experience, is an important barrier to achieving greater gender equality in politics (and in leadership positions generally).

## **Barrier 2 – Work–life balance: juggling work, family and the stress of modern life**

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Amartya Sen points to sex as a factor that restricts the freedom of individuals to make choices in their own lives, even when they have the same set of primary

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<sup>9</sup> European Commission, Special Eurobarometer 465. June 2017. Gender Equality 2017 (November 2017), 38, accessed at <https://ec.europa.eu/comfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/ResultDoc/download/DocumentKy/80678> on 19 August 2020. Question QC7 is as follows: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements. 7.1 Women are less interested than men in positions of responsibility in politics; 7.2 Men are more ambitious than women; 7.3 Women have less freedom because of their family responsibilities; 7.4 Politics is dominated by men who do not have sufficient confidence in women; 7.5 Women do not have the necessary qualities and skills to fill positions of responsibility in politics. (Ibid., 14)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 49.



goods.<sup>12</sup> Family responsibilities are seen by women as the major barrier to their freedom of choice. A 2018 report by Eurofound provides evidence that opportunities to establish a satisfying WLB are spread unevenly across Europe. Men appear to be less satisfied with their WLB than women are.<sup>13</sup>

Recent studies show that when choosing a job, well-educated men place more value on WLB options than those with lower education.<sup>14</sup> This suggests that during the education process men have experienced an important behavioural change.

Establishing a WLB is important for higher-educated men and women but is not taken into account by their lower-educated counterparts. Thus, the importance that WLB policies have for people differs in accordance with people's level of education. To be effective and to achieve the goal of greater gender equality, policies should be properly addressed to the needs and preferences of the different class and social groups in society.

Affordable childcare is important for overcoming the social polarisation in beliefs and preferences. Achieving a balance between work and family life by means of affordable, accessible and flexible childcare has been identified as a key policy measure for achieving a better quality of life and gender equality for the middle classes.<sup>15</sup> Policies in this area also need to take account of socio-economic and cultural differences. For example, in some socio-economic groups there is often a tradition of rearing small children in the family until school age. This can impact on when mothers return to employment, should they wish to do so.

Compared to men with medium levels of education, those with less education are more likely to support the traditional norm and to place less value on WLB. Similarly, one observes the negative effects of lower education on the value women place on WLB. When choosing a job, lower-educated women support the traditional norm and attach less importance to WLB. Women with tertiary

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<sup>12</sup> A. Sen, *Inequalities Re-Examined* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 85–6.

<sup>13</sup> Eurofound, *Living and Working in Europe 2017*, Publications Office of the European Union (Luxembourg, 2018), accessed at [https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ef\\_publication/field\\_ef\\_document/ef18007en.pdf](https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ef_publication/field_ef_document/ef18007en.pdf) on 19 August 2020.

<sup>14</sup> R. Stoilova, P. Ilieva-Trichkova and F. Bieri, 'Work–Life Balance in Europe: Institutional Contexts and Individual Factors for Achieving Gender Equality', *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, doi: 10.1108/IJSSP-08-2019-0152.

<sup>15</sup> E. Drea, *The Middle Class IN FOCUS: Priorities for the 2019 Elections and Beyond*, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, (Brussels, 2018), accessed at <https://martenscentre.eu/sites/default/files/publication-files/middle-classes-europe-2019-elections.pdf> on 19 August 2020.



education support the traditional male bread-winner model less than do women with secondary education. Women with lower educational attainment are being left behind and dealing with this situation remains an important challenge for academics and policymakers alike.

These findings illustrate how gender equality issues have a significant impact on a broad section of inter-linked areas. They also show the importance of the existing policy focus on the effects of education, class, ethnicity and gender. Given the negative effects of low education for women, what are the best policy approaches? Rather than focusing solely on raising educational levels, it might be better to develop more holistic policy approaches that take into account the multiple constraints on individuals stemming from one's socio-economic standing or gender.

## **Barrier 3 – Struggling with multiple disadvantages**

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Comparative studies (based on both qualitative and quantitative data) reveal that the negative effects of gender, class and ethnicity are in evidence across a wide spectrum of areas, including migration, domestic violence, WLB and access to education. This 'intersectionality' is also a useful policy tool for combating many of the socio-economic disadvantages facing men and women in Europe today.

The EU's Gender Equality Strategy 2020–25 incorporates intersectionality as a 'cross-cutting principle' that combines gender with other personal characteristics. The aim is to make visible how these intersections contribute to unique experiences of discrimination.<sup>16</sup>

The 'cross-cutting approach' requires a policy focus that takes into account inequalities related to class, gender and ethnicity. It requires these inequalities to be addressed in different policy topics including access to education and lifelong learning opportunities, to quality jobs and to achieving leadership positions in both civil society and political institutions. The implementation of an intersectional approach in different policy fields contributes to the aim of

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<sup>16</sup> European Commission, 'Gender Equality Strategy', 2.



‘challenging (existing) privileges, avoiding the potential stigmatisation of people and groups at different points’.<sup>17</sup>

## Policy Recommendations

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The recommendations of this policy brief focus on helping to ensure that the gender equality agenda advanced by the von der Leyen Commission has lasting results. At the same time, these recommendations are made in full awareness of the primacy of national governments in areas such as education and childcare. Thus, these recommendations offer a framework for developing best practices within member states while offering a starting point for further work by EU authorities.

Investing in education should be put at the core of Europe’s social market economy. This would improve the environment for discussing and analysing all matters related to gender equality. The definition of ‘social investment’ that the EU has adopted centres on the idea of investing in people: ‘It means policies designed to strengthen people’s skills and capacities and support them to participate fully in employment and social life. Key policy areas include education, quality childcare, healthcare, training, job-search assistance and rehabilitation.’<sup>18</sup>

Focusing on these areas will increase support for more women in politics and help overcome the belief that natural differences between men and women are decisive when it comes to possessing the qualities needed to take up leadership positions.

Formal childcare for children from three to school age should be developed. This is a public policy that, according to research results, can result in a broadening of horizons in relation to gender equality issues. The important role of the EU in highlighting and promoting best practices in this area should not be underestimated. Childcare has a positive effect on men’s and women’s

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<sup>17</sup> E. Lombardo and L. R. Agustin, ‘Framing Gender Intersections in the European Union: What Implications for the Quality of Intersectionality in Policies?’, *Social Politics* 19/4 (2011), 482–512.

<sup>18</sup> European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, Social Investment, accessed at <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1044&langId=en> on 19 August 2020.



attitudes towards gender equality—in addition to the benefits outlined above, on the economy, parents' WLB and women's equality in general.<sup>19</sup>

All policies at EU level should be assessed to determine their impact across multiple disadvantages and policy sectors. Policies focused on vulnerable groups often overlook the fact that the barriers preventing women from utilising existing resources are spread across many different areas. For example, women with small children can only benefit from opportunities for adult education when they have access to affordable and inclusive childcare. Greater compatibility between different policies—such as those for social protection, employment and education—would make it easier for the current Commission's proposals to result in improvements to people's WLB. And this, in turn, would improve the quality of life for both men and women from all social classes.

The positive effects in all three areas—overcoming gender stereotypes through education, providing more opportunities for establishing a meaningful WLB and improving opportunities for women experiencing multiple disadvantages—could become even more pronounced now that a woman is in the top position at the European Commission. Von der Leyen's leadership role will be even stronger if the commissioners work together for gender equality, with everyone viewing gender equality as a strategic goal in the policy field for which he or she is responsible and making gender balance an objective at all levels of the decision-making process.

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<sup>19</sup> H. Penn, *Putting Childcare at the Heart of the Social Market Economy*, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies (Brussels, 2019), accessed at <https://martenscentre.eu/sites/default/files/publication-files/childcare-social-market-economy-europe.pdf> on 19 August 2020.



## About the author

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## Credits

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