

Gender equality in Europe: progress or retreat?



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Event report

The Friends of Europe debate on 28 March 2023 marked the final event of the [EURIGHT project](#) to raise awareness about the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (EU Charter) and to engage people in the construction of a strong European Union.

Participants discussed the role of the EU Charter and local, national and European actors in achieving gender equality in the EU, particularly through the lens of the [Renewed Social Contract](#).

Recommendations:

- The EU should consider indirect discrimination in the development of all policies, not only those directly addressing inequality.
- Create a formal legal duty for elected parliamentarians to ensure that they take into account women's and feminist interests in policymaking.
- Ask the European Commission to maintain a 50/50 male/female gender balance in the College of Commissioners as part of their new mandate in 2024 and push for the European Parliament to continue progress towards improving gender balance.
- It should be made mandatory for all political parties competing in elections at the European and national level to have parity candidates.
- Ensure proper implementation of the 2019 EU directive on parental leave.
- Discuss toxic gender norms and how these damage men trying to live full lives.
- Encourage the use of EU tools on gender mainstreaming and intersectionality at the local level.
- Improve the collection of gender-segregated data to understand how men and women operate in society.
- Develop narratives to showcase gender equality as an instrument for empowerment and common good, not just to protect the weakest in society.

Summary

The power of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights

EURIGHT has successfully introduced the EU Charter to a new audience, particularly younger people, said **Laura Gonzalez Mendez**, Project Coordinator for International Affairs at the Gijón City Council. But she warned that the project also highlighted the importance of countering a ‘backsliding’ against gender equality. The EU Charter could be used to help harmonise EU legislation on issues such as sexual health and reproductive rights.

“The causes of inequality are often very hidden in structural problems

Pierangelo Celle, Law Professor at the University of Genoa

In addition, she said the European Commission College of Commissioners should aim for a 50/50 male/female gender balance under a new mandate. The audience almost unanimously voted in favour of making gender equality a legal obligation for the European Commission.

“The EU Charter is a very powerful instrument in law,” said **Pierangelo Celle**, Law Professor at the University of Genoa. “It both gives individuals a course of action to protect themselves from discrimination based on gender and it expressly advocates for action to promote equality between men and women.”

He said this should mean a more “proactive” and non-sectoral approach to promoting gender equality. In the development of any policy or activity, there should be “a pause to say: how will this impact women?” he explained, because “the causes of inequality are often very hidden in structural problems.”

This makes it vital to consider indirect discrimination when developing of any policy, not only those directly addressing inequality. EU Charter practices of gender mainstreaming and intersectionality should also be used at a local level.

Gender-proofing Europe and EU policy

Karen Melchior, Member of the European Parliament Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality, said there was “a very large silent majority supporting women’s rights,” which was threatened by the rise of populism in the EU. “We feel part of the majority, so sometimes think we don’t need to be as active as the people spreading misinformation. We need to be more vocal.”

Audience and panel members commented that the green transition is moving faster than the EU gender equality agenda, in part because businesses see green policies as an opportunity. There were calls to create a business case for gender equality

in order to boost progress across all sectors.

Europe is the world leader for seeing women in senior political roles, said **Silvana Koch-Mehrin**, President and Founder of Women Political Leaders, “but the EU Council photo of national leaders is still very male.”

“ *We need to be more vocal*

Karen Melchior, Member of the European Parliament Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality

She suggested that a Renewed Social Contract should “make it mandatory for every political party to have parity candidates, and then put women in constituencies where they can win.” A similar approach, from which inspiration can be drawn, was adopted successfully in Mexico, Koch-Mehrin said.

Iceland, meanwhile, has come “as close as we can get” to a “gender-equal society,” she added. The game changer in this case was when the country began to offer three months maternity and three months paternity leave. This was supported by Melchior, who called for proper implementation of the 2019 EU directive on parental leave, which goes beyond men doing the ‘women’s job’ and taking on the responsibility of running a household.

For her part, **Laura Kaun**, Policy and Campaign Director at EU Women’s Lobby, expressed her support for the set-up of a “legal duty of elected parliamentarians to ensure they take into account women and feminists’ interest in their policymaking”, as well as for keeping a 50/50 gender diverse College of Commissioners.

“ *The EU Council photo of national leaders is still very male*

Silvana Koch-Mehrin, President and Founder of Women Political Leaders

Event moderator and Friends of Europe’s **Dharmendra Kanani** regretted that, despite progress in Europe and elsewhere, inequality persists in the EU. “I find this shocking, we should all have a sense of anger.” Women in the EU, for instance, earn on average only €0.83 for every €1 earned by a man.

Kanani remarked that increased parity should include a more representative audience at events like the Friends of Europe debate. “It’s a bit unfortunate that 80% of the people here today are women,” he concluded.



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+32 2 893 98 23

info@friendsofeurope.org

friendsofeurope.org

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