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NOTE

From: General Secretariat of the Council
To: Delegations
Subject: Draft Council Conclusions on Equality as a driver for economic growth and competitiveness in the EU

Delegations will find attached a set of draft Council Conclusions on "Equality as a driver for economic growth and competitiveness in the EU" prepared by the incoming Irish Presidency.

This document will be examined by the Working Party on Social Questions at its meeting on 3 July 2026.

NB. The deadline for written comments will be on 7 July (COB).

**Draft Council Conclusions on Equality as a driver for economic growth and competitiveness
in the EU**

RECALLING THAT:

1. Equality and non-discrimination are founding values of the European Union as enshrined in the European Union Treaties, as well as the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.
2. The European Pillar of Social Rights and the associated Action Plan identify the principles of equal opportunities, gender equality, the inclusion of persons with disabilities and quality and affordable early childhood education and care (ECEC) as cornerstones of competitiveness and a sustainable and inclusive growth model.
3. The Commission's Competitiveness Compass for the EU, Communication on the Union of Skills and Roadmap for Quality Jobs (which paves the way for a forthcoming Quality Jobs Act) stress that Europe's competitive strength lies in its people. The Competitiveness Compass notes that it is essential to create conditions where everyone has an equal chance of success. It recognises the barriers to labour market access that are faced by women, young people, migrants and older citizens who want to remain active, as well as by persons with disabilities and other underrepresented groups.
4. The High-Level Report on the Future of the Single Market by Enrico Letta and the Report on European Competitiveness by Mario Draghi underline that its social foundations, skills base and inclusion of all talents increasingly shape Europe's economic strength. The Draghi Report underlines that the EU's efforts to hone its competitive edge need to be guided by European values, which should be further reinforced by its action. Noting that persistent discrimination faced by specific groups, whether due to gender, disability, ethnicity, or other factors, hinders their full participation in the Single Market and undermines the promise of opportunity for all, the Letta Report calls for targeted actions, renewed funding, and meticulous monitoring to dismantle systemic barriers.

ACKNOWLEDGING THAT:

5. Strengthening competitiveness, sustainability and productivity are vital for the European Union's economic prospects.
6. The findings of the Employment and Social Developments in Europe (ESDE) 2025 report¹ indicate that approximately 51 million people remain outside the labour market, including around 32 million women.
7. Inequalities continue to pose structural obstacles to full labour market participation. Harnessing the potential of the entire population will contribute to building a more competitive, inclusive and cohesive society, thereby reinforcing democratic resilience.

Equality as an Enabler of Competitiveness

8. Equality and non-discrimination are not only crucial for the realisation and protection of fundamental rights but also as essential economic enablers contributing directly to higher labour market participation, productivity and innovation. By fostering a diverse workforce, the European Union turns its values into a competitive advantage.

¹ [Employment and Social Developments in Europe 2025 - Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion](#)

9. Discrimination, whether based on grounds such as sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation, imposes significant personal, social and economic costs and hinders equality of opportunity including by
- a. weakening economic potential and social cohesion by negatively affecting employment, income, educational attainment, political and civic participation and health²,and
 - b. causing challenges to government arising from increased public expenditure, including on the provision of services such as healthcare and social support, as well as lost revenue stemming from the multiplier effect of lower wages on consumption and tax revenue.
10. Conversely, advancing equality strengthens social cohesion, while generating economic benefits.³ For example, OECD data shows that improving income equality boosts long-term GDP growth⁴.
11. In the effort to build an evidence-based approach to increasing competitiveness, effectively using all available data and improving the collection, disaggregation and analysis of data in relation to equality and non-discrimination will help to improve the design and delivery of policies.

² OECD, Combatting Discrimination in the European Union, 2025

³ European Parliamentary Research Service (2023), Increasing European added value in an age of global challenges, Mapping the cost of non Europe (2022-2032), [EPRS_STU\(2023\)734690_EN.pdf](#)

⁴ OECD (2015), In It Together: Why Less Inequality Benefits All, OECD Publishing

12. In the area of Gender Equality,

- a) Despite progress in the last decade, women continue to experience lower pay and employment rates than men and remain significantly underrepresented in decision-making. Harnessing the potential of all women as workers, entrepreneurs, and leaders is imperative for the EU's growth. Gender equality in corporate leadership roles is associated with stronger company performance⁵. It may have beneficial impacts on economies resilience in response to structural changes, such as the green and digital transitions.⁶
- b) Substantial improvements in gender equality could generate up to 10.5 million jobs and raise the EU employment rate to 80% by 2050⁷. Beyond the moral imperative for improved gender equality, such advancements represent a high-yield investment, with the potential to increase the EU GDP per capita by up to 9.6%, equivalent to 3.15 trillion euros.

⁵ See e.g. S&P Global. (2020). When Women Lead, Firms Win: How Gender Diversity in the C-suite and Boardroom Drives Financial Performance

⁶ European Commission (2022), The Macro Economic Benefits of Gender Equality, Anne Kingma and Anneleen Vandeplass, Economic Brief 071, March 2022

⁷ See the EIGE's webpage entitled [Economic Benefits of Gender Equality in the European Union | European Institute for Gender Equality](#)

- c) Closing the gender gaps in employment⁸, pay⁹, and pensions¹⁰ is essential for building a fairer economy and protecting groups at greater risk of poverty. The gender employment gap, for example, is particularly pronounced for mothers (particularly single mothers), migrant women, women facing ethnic and racial discrimination (including Roma women), women with disabilities and women in rural areas.
- d) Existing measures to reduce gender gaps include work life balance measures such as those outlined in the Work Life Balance Directive (EU) 2019/1158 and legal provisions and policies on equal pay and working conditions including the Pay Transparency Directive (EU) 2023/970.
- e) Analysis by Eurofound highlights that pay transparency instruments can serve as a strategic tool to boost competitiveness by enhancing talent acquisition and retention, increasing employee performance, and facilitating technological adoption and workforce development.¹¹
- f) The gender investment gap¹², which is due to structural, behavioural, and institutional barriers, negatively affects women's entrepreneurship and leadership opportunities, stifling Europe's innovation potential. Currently, venture capital distribution is starkly unequal: for every €100 invested, less than €3 goes to women-led teams.

⁸ The EU employment rate for men of working age in 2024 exceeded that of women by 10.0 percentage points. See the Eurostat's webpage entitled [Gender statistics - Statistics Explained - Eurostat](#)

⁹ The average gender pay gap in the EU is 11.1%. See the Eurostat's webpage entitled [Gender pay gap statistics - Statistics Explained - Eurostat](#) (2024)

¹⁰ The average gender pension gap in the EU is 24.5%. See the Eurostat's webpage entitled [Women's pension 25% lower than men's in 2024 - News articles - Eurostat](#)

¹¹ See the Eurofund's webpage entitled [Taking stock: Further experiences in gender pay transparency implementation and effectiveness | Eurofound](#)

¹² European Commission, The Gender Investment Gap affecting both women-led companies and women-led investment funds, October 2025

- g) Women are overrepresented in care occupations, and unpaid care responsibilities are among the main reasons why women work part time or are economically inactive¹³. As the demand for care in the EU is expected to increase¹⁴, investment in this sector is essential for ensuring competitiveness as well as gender equality. The availability of affordable and quality ECEC as well as quality long-term care has a strong positive impact on the employment situation of parents, in particular women, while also supporting children.
- h) The rapid advancement of digital technology and AI has far-reaching implications for the future of work, presenting both opportunities and risks. Unless properly controlled through human oversight, emerging tools such as algorithmic management and AI-driven recruitment risk perpetuating existing gender imbalances and reinforcing gender and other intersecting bias. On the other hand, AI systems also have positive potential and can be actively used to advance gender equality in all areas and bridge systematic gaps.
- i) Moreover, given the persisting horizontal and vertical occupational segregation of the EU labour market, technological shifts are likely to produce different impacts for women and men. Without targeted interventions to ensure equal access to STEM¹⁵ fields and digital skills, there is a risk of deepening sectoral disparities. According to EIGE, closing the gender gap in STEM would contribute to an increase in GDP equivalent to €820 billion and generate up to 1,200,000 jobs by 2050.¹⁶

¹³ Eurofound, Advancing towards a care society: addressing the gender care gap, April 2025

¹⁴ Eurofound (2025), Unpaid care in the EU, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg

¹⁵ Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics

¹⁶ [Economic Benefits of Gender Equality in the European Union | European Institute for Gender Equality](#)

13. In the area of LGBTIQ+ equality,

- a) Inequalities in employment, healthcare, education, and access to services continue to restrict opportunities for LGBTIQ+ people. FRA’s third LGBTIQ survey¹⁷ found that 19% of respondents had experienced discrimination in employment (looking for a job or at work). This figure doubles for trans women (43%) and trans men (35%).
- b) The Commission’s LGBTIQ+ Equality Strategy 2026-2030 underlines the importance of the full inclusion and empowerment of LGBTIQ+ persons as a prerequisite for their contribution to entrepreneurship, innovation and sustainable economic growth. It underlines that inclusive workplaces that support LGBTIQ+ people benefit from broader perspectives, creativity and improved problem solving. Cities which foster an inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ persons tend to demonstrate stronger ‘innovation ecosystems’, a higher concentration of skills and talent, and an overall higher quality of life.¹⁸
- c) OECD analysis¹⁹ shows that legal LGBTI inclusivity is positively associated with economic development and that countries that have introduced the most legal protections for LGBTI people fare better in terms of GDP per capita.
- d) A World Bank study on the economic cost of stigma and exclusion of LGBT people²⁰ found that discrimination against this group leads to lower labour productivity and output, inefficient investment in human capital because of lower returns to education and discrimination in educational settings, lost output as result of health disparities linked to exclusion, and costs to social and health services resulting from the need to address the effects of exclusion.

¹⁷ [EU LGBTIQ Survey III | European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights](#)

¹⁸ [Open for Business City Ratings](#)

¹⁹ [Over the Rainbow? The Road to LGBTI Inclusion | OECD](#)

²⁰ [The economic cost of stigma and the exclusion of LGBT people : a case study of India](#)

14. In the area of Disability,

- a) The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) commits Parties to taking all effective and necessary steps to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms by persons with disabilities. This includes ensuring both accessibility and reasonable accommodation in all areas of life, including employment, education and training.
- b) The disability employment gap in the EU rose to 24% in 2024,²¹ despite the significant skills and talent of persons with disabilities. This is partly due to misconceptions regarding the cost of workplace adjustments and of the provision of reasonable accommodations. Lack of inclusive and accessible education and training, recruitment, work and career progression are also major barriers to participation in the labour market. Moreover, women with disabilities are not only less likely to participate in the workforce²² but are also disproportionately represented in part-time employment²³, which has a negative effect on their economic independence.
- c) Implementing measures, such as those set out in the Commission's recently reinforced Disability Employment Package, can ensure equal access to high-quality, sustainable jobs in the open labour market for persons with disabilities, thereby supporting their economic autonomy and social inclusion while enabling employers and economies to benefit from a broader and more diverse talent pool.

²¹ See Eurostat webpage entitled [Employment gaps for women & people with disabilities - News articles - Eurostat](#)

²² European Institute for Gender Equality, Gender Equality Index

²³ Eurofound (2023). Changing labour markets – How to prevent a mismatch between skills and jobs in times of transition – Background paper, Eurofound, Dublin

- d) The Commission's Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 emphasises the need for equal access to quality education. Improving the higher education accessibility through inclusive policies, staff training and robust support services²⁴, complemented by targeted transition-to-work programmes, can help unlock the full potential of persons with disabilities and promote their equal participation in the labour market.
- e) Technology and AI can enhance independence, support communication, improve accessibility and create new opportunities for participation in education, employment and community life. However, if accessibility is not ensured, these tools can add further obstacles and create social isolation.
- f) Realising the rights of persons with disabilities enables their full participation in society, and supports their contribution to their local economies, for example, through a move towards independent living and supported decision-making.

15. In the area of Anti-Racism,

- a) The persistence of racism negatively affects all aspects of life²⁵. For example, Muslims most often face discrimination when looking for work (39%) or in the workplace (35%). In addition, two in five Muslims (41%) are overqualified for their job compared to 22% of people generally. Similarly, people of African descent are more likely to have temporary contracts and work in elementary occupations. The overqualification rate²⁶ is higher for people of African descent than for the general population (46% compared to 22%).

²⁴ European Commission, Inequalities and disabilities research in the EU, Towards a fair and equal access to health, education and employment, October 2025

²⁵ See the FRA's webpage entitled [Muslims in Europe face ever more racism and discrimination | European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights](#), [Being Black in the EU – Experiences of people of African descent | European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights](#)

²⁶ The proportion of people with tertiary education employed in low- or medium-skilled occupations

- b) The Commission's EU Anti-Racism Strategy 2026-2030 recognises combating structural racism as a strategic investment in the Union's competitiveness. A 2025 OECD study estimates that racial discrimination costs the EU up to EUR 12.7 billion in lost GDP annually. The socioeconomic impact of racial discrimination includes reduced access to employment, financial hardship and disproportionately high exposure to discrimination, resulting in lower levels of economic security for those affected.
- c) Students belonging to racial or ethnic minorities often encounter racism that hinders educational success and their capacity to fulfil their potential. The obstacles persist in the labour market, where job applicants face obstacles in recruitment, for example, due to names perceived as foreign.

16. In the area of Roma inclusion,²⁷

- a) Roma continue to experience much higher rates of economic disadvantage and social exclusion than the general population. The 2024 FRA Roma Survey shows that only 54% of Roma aged 20-64 are in paid work, which is significantly lower than the rate for the general EU population (74%). Further, only 38% of Roma women in paid work compared to 69% of Roma men.
- b) Barriers that hamper access to the labour market include antigypsyism, a prevalent form of racism recognised as a root cause of discrimination and exclusion of Roma, discrimination in hiring processes and the workplace; low levels of education and basic skills; and a lack of access to tailored public programmes and supports.

²⁷ Acknowledging the diversity that exists among Roma, the term 'Roma' is used as an umbrella term to refer to a number of different groups of Romani origin such as Roma, Sinti, Kale, Gypsies, Romanichels and Boyash/Rudari. It also encompasses groups such as Ashkali, Egyptians, Eastern groups (including Dom, Lom, Rom, and Abdal), as well as traveller populations, including ethnic Travellers, Yenish or those designated under the administrative term 'Gens du voyage', and people who identify themselves as Gypsies, Tsiganes or Tziganes, without denying the specific characteristics of those groups.

- c) The EU Roma Strategic Framework calls upon the Member States to halve the gap in the NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) rate for this community, with a target of reducing Roma youth NEET to below 33% by 2030. While the overall rate improved from 62% in 2016 to 47% in 2024, a serious gender gap persists: 61% of young Roma women are NEET, compared to 33% of young Roma men.

CONSIDERS THAT

17. Addressing the issues outlined above can have a meaningful and significant impact on the Union and on the lives and wellbeing of its people, as well as boosting the Union's competitiveness, driving sustainable economic growth and preserving the European social model.

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION CALLS ON MEMBER STATES, in accordance with their competences, TO:

18. Support measures to promote women's entrepreneurship, business ownership and access to financial resources, including through dedicated peer-learning programmes. Promote gender-equal access to finance and economic opportunities with a particular focus on high-growth sectors such as STEM fields, AI, and digital and green technologies.
19. Strengthen policies to close the gender employment gap, paying specific attention to horizontal and vertical occupational gender segregation.

20. Strengthen policies to close the gender pay gap and gender pension gap including by identifying the root causes and addressing them through targeted reforms.
21. Strengthen the care economy and promote the equal sharing of care responsibilities between women and men. Support access to affordable quality ECEC and to affordable and quality long-term care infrastructure and services.
22. Encourage educational and career choices free of gender bias, particularly with a view to increasing the participation of women in STEM, as well as the number of men in caregiving sectors and in HEAL²⁸ occupations. Invest in education and training to boost financial and digital literacy and skills, especially among women and girls, including with a view to building STEM and entrepreneurial mindsets early.
23. Enhance the collection, disaggregation, analysis and use of equality data, including by continuing efforts to ensure that data collected and used, across different data sources, is accurate, comprehensive and comparable, by raising awareness of and utilising existing sources of equality data and by analysing where gaps exist.
24. Support gender-responsive and equality related research and data collection in the digital sector, with a focus on the development and use of non-discriminatory algorithms.
25. Encourage national and regional authorities to integrate inclusion and nondiscrimination into their business and talent attraction strategies in order to bolster both local innovation ecosystems and equality.

²⁸ Health, Education, Administration, Literacy.

26. Continue efforts under the EU Roma Strategic Framework to halve the NEET rate by 2030, including by taking steps to improve access to employment for Roma women.
27. Enhance the labour market participation of persons with disabilities, including through support in employment and career progression by means of measures such as facilitating the transition from sheltered settings to the open labour market.
28. Continue to share best practices among Member States for the advancement of economic resilience through the promotion of inclusion and fairness in the labour market, recognising this as a long-term strategic investment in Europe's future.

CALLS ON THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION AND THE MEMBER STATES, in accordance with their respective competences, to:

29. Take measures, in line with the values enshrined in Article 2 TEU, and having regard to Article 19 TFEU and Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, to ensure the effective and consistent implementation of the Union acquis in the areas of employment, equality, gender equality and disability.
30. Support the implementation of actions and initiatives set out in the Disability Employment Package to promote the employment of persons with disabilities and to combat stereotypes.
31. Embed inclusiveness in all entrepreneurship policies across sectors, including by fostering inclusive mentoring schemes, and consider targeted funding for entrepreneurship among underrepresented groups including persons with disabilities, LGBTIQ+ persons, migrants and persons belonging to an ethnic or racial minority.

32. Continue to promote and support the EU Platform of Diversity Charters in order to help public and private sector organisations across the EU to design and implement effective diversity and inclusion policies.
33. Support the work of Equality Bodies, including assisting victims of discrimination, monitoring and reporting on discrimination, raising awareness of rights, and making recommendations on matters relating to discrimination.
34. Take steps to increase diversity in the workforce, for example through awareness-campaigns on stereotypes and prejudices, inclusive education and hiring practices, training and upskilling, and the facilitation of codes of conducts for the private employment sector.
35. Support measures to combat harassment in the workplace, including sexual harassment, through legislative, policy and awareness-raising measures.

CALLS ON THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION TO:

36. Present a European Care Deal that recognises both paid and unpaid forms of care, promotes the economic empowerment of women and lays out a comprehensive set of measures to improve the care sector and to increase and support the workforce in this area.
37. Enhance equality mainstreaming, including gender mainstreaming, in the EU's economic policies. In particular, strengthen equality and gender mainstreaming in economic, social and digital policies, as well as within key economic and social policy coordination mechanisms such as the European Semester.

38. Promote the collection, analysis and use of disaggregated equality data as an essential tool for addressing inequality and discrimination, including through the preparation of a Commission Recommendation in this area.
39. Enhance monitoring of the socio-economic cost of discrimination and the barriers faced by specific groups at high risk of discrimination, including from an intersectional perspective, and building on available data and research from relevant bodies and agencies in this field.
40. Effectively integrate anti-discrimination considerations into EU policies and support the fight against discrimination at the national, regional and local level including through the provision of technical assistance in the collection of equality data, including data on intersectional discrimination.
41. Monitor and evaluate the impact of AI and algorithmic management on equality in the labour market including by adopting an equality perspective and seeking to ascertain where AI might affect certain sectors or types of occupation more than others, including potential job losses.
42. Continue monitoring the evolution of the gender employment, pay and pension gaps, and support Member States by providing technical support, data and analysis.

43. In light of the unanimous endorsement by the Member States of the Declaration of principles for a gender-equal society attached to the Commission's Roadmap for Women's rights, work towards implementing those principles including by taking the following measures foreseen in the Gender Equality Strategy 2026-2030:
- a. an Action Plan for Women in Research, Innovation and Start-ups;
 - b. expansion of gender-smart financing targets;
 - c. improving access to finance for women entrepreneurs in the EU;
 - d. improving the gender balance in the financial sector in collaboration with the European Investment Bank Group; and
 - e. presenting an education package to attract more girls to STEM fields and careers, as well as promoting more boys to HEAL careers
44. Develop guidance on inclusive hiring practices in collaboration with EU Platform of Diversity Charters, as outlined in the LGBTIQ+ Equality Strategy, the Anti-Racism Strategy and the Gender Equality Strategy.

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