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

Delegations will find attached the Council Conclusions on the above subject approved by the EPSCO Council at its meeting held on 19 October 2026.[1]

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[1] Minor editorial corrections have been introduced into the text.

ANNEX

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. Within the framework of its stated aim to build a Union of Equality, the Commission has drawn up strategies aimed at combating discrimination, eliminating barriers to participation and fostering equality and inclusion. The EU has also adopted a comprehensive framework of legislative acts promoting equality and prohibiting discrimination.

3. The European Pillar of Social Rights and the associated Action Plan identify the principles of equal opportunities, gender equality, the prevention of poverty and social exclusion, 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. The Commission Communication on the European Pillar of Social Rights of 22 July 2026 identifies inequalities, fairness and equal opportunities as priority areas for further action and underlines that persistent inequalities constitute structural barriers to the Union's cohesion, resilience, innovation and competitiveness.

4. The Commission's Anti-Poverty Strategy and the strengthened European Child Guarantee underline that the cost of non-action to combat poverty is significant and multifaceted. Poverty undermines social cohesion, children's wellbeing and equal opportunities, weakening democracy and holding back Europe's economic potential. It also contributes to the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage. Prejudice and stigma can put specific groups at a disadvantage from the outset and throughout the life course. Women, children and groups in vulnerable situations are more at risk of poverty or social exclusion than others.

5. The Commission's Strategy to strengthen the application of the Charter of Fundamental Rights in the European Union 2020-2030 reiterates the commitment to ensure that Union institutions and Member States apply the Charter to its full potential.

6. 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 prospect of success. It recognises multiple and diverse barriers to entering and remaining in the labour market access that are faced by women, by young people and by older citizens who wish to remain economically active, as well as by persons with disabilities and other underrepresented groups.

7. 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. The One Europe, One Market Roadmap, signed by the Council, the European Commission and the European Parliament, provides a blueprint for achieving decisive progress in strengthening European competitiveness.

RECOGNISING THAT:

8. Strengthening competitiveness, sustainability and productivity is vital for the European Union's economic prospects.

9. The findings of the Employment and Social Developments in Europe (ESDE) 2025 report[2] indicate that approximately 51 million people of working age remain outside the labour market, including around 32 million women.

10. Discrimination and inequalities, including gender inequalities, continue to pose structural obstacles to full, equal and meaningful labour market participation. Harnessing the potential of the entire population, including by ensuring that everyone has equal opportunities to participate fully in economic, political, cultural and social life, will contribute to building a more competitive, inclusive and cohesive society, thereby reinforcing democratic resilience.

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[2] Employment and Social Developments in Europe 2025 - Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

Equality as an Enabler of Competitiveness

11. Non-discrimination and equality, including gender equality, are not only crucial for the realisation and protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms but also as essential economic enablers contributing directly to higher labour market participation, productivity and innovation. When people face barriers to employment, leadership, entrepreneurship or skills development, economies fail to make full use of available human capital. By fostering a diverse workforce and ensuring that everyone has equal opportunities to develop their skills and to fulfil their potential, the European Union turns its values into a competitive advantage.

12. According to the Charter of Fundamental Rights, specifically Article 21, "Any discrimination based on any ground 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 shall be prohibited." The Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) has also provided case law interpreting these grounds of discrimination. The existence of discrimination, as well as the various grounds on which it can be experienced, including the characteristics encompassed in those grounds, has often been noted by the Council. Also, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, the European Institute for Gender Equality, the European Economic and Social Committee, the European Committee of the Regions and Eurofound have noted or documented the existence of discrimination in the EU on these grounds, including discrimination based on characteristics such as gender identity.

13. The OECD[3] has shown that discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity, race, religion, disability, age, sexual orientation, and gender identity 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 health[4], and

    b. causing challenges to government arising from increased public expenditure, including on the provision of services such as healthcare, long-term care and social support, as well as lost revenue stemming from the multiplier effect of lower wages on consumption and tax revenue.

14. Conversely, advancing equality strengthens social cohesion, while generating economic benefits.[5] For example, OECD data shows that improving income equality boosts long-term GDP growth.[6]

15. In the effort to build an evidence-based approach to increasing competitiveness, the design and delivery of policies that offer equal opportunities for all can be improved by effectively using all available data and improving the collection, processing, disaggregation and analysis of data in relation to equality and non-discrimination, including by taking intersectional discrimination into account and by improving access to administrative data. Labour market intelligence and skills forecasting can also provide important insights.

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[3] OECD, Combatting Discrimination in the European Union, 2025

[4] OECD, Combatting Discrimination in the European Union, 2025

[5] 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

[6] OECD (2015), In It Together: Why Less Inequality Benefits All, OECD Publishing

16.[7] Persisting inequalities in both access to education and learning outcomes at all levels risk entrenching disadvantages across generations, weakening social cohesion and reducing Europe's long-term economic potential by limiting individuals' opportunities to fully, equally and meaningfully participate in society and the labour market. Targeted national education policies and adequate social transfers are essential for tackling these inequalities.

17. In the area of Gender Equality,

a. Although some progress has been made over the last decade, women continue to experience lower pay and employment rates than men and remain significantly underrepresented in positions of leadership and decision-making, including in politics. Harnessing the potential of all women as workers, entrepreneurs, and leaders is imperative for the EU's economic growth. Gender equality in corporate leadership roles is associated with stronger company performance.[8] It may also have beneficial impacts on economies resilience in response to structural changes, such as the green and digital transitions.[9]

b. Substantial improvements in gender equality could generate up to 10.5 million jobs and raise the EU employment rate to 80% by 2050.[10] Besides meeting the imperative to foster gender equality as a fundamental right, the promotion of gender equality represents a prerequisite for sustainable growth, democratic resilience and long-term competitiveness. Indeed, it is 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 by 2050.

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[7] See Council Resolution on the second cycle of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area (2026-2030).

[8] See e.g. S&P Global. (2019). Although Still Underrepresented, Women in C-suite are Driving Profitability

[9] European Commission (2022), The Macro Economic Benefits of Gender Equality, Anne Kingma and Anneleen Vandeplas, Economic Brief 071, March 2022

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

c. In order to address persistent gender gaps and inequalities, in 2025, the European Commission adopted the Roadmap for Women's Rights, as well as the accompanying Declaration of principles for a gender-equal society, which was endorsed by all Member States. The Commission's Gender Equality Strategy 2026-2030 outlines actions to implement the eight principles of the Roadmap.

d. Closing the gender gaps in employment,[11] working hours,[12] pay,[13] and pensions,[14] which requires addressing structural drivers such as unequal distribution of unpaid care and support, gender stereotypes, occupational segregation and gender-based violence against women, is essential for building a fairer economy, for ensuring lifelong economic independence and self-sufficiency for women, for protecting groups at greater risk of poverty throughout the life course and for eradicating poverty. The gender employment gap, for example, is particularly pronounced for groups such as mothers (particularly single mothers), women providing care for older relatives, women with dual caring responsibilities, older women, migrant women, women facing ethnic and racial discrimination (including Roma[15] women), women with disabilities, and women in rural areas and outermost regions. The gender pension gap is influenced by career interruptions linked to caregiving responsibilities and part-time work. This gap results in older women having lower pensions and facing a higher risk of poverty than men.

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11 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

12 OECD, Gender Equality and Economic Growth: Past progress and future potential, OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers No. 304, 2024

13 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)

14 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

15 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.

e. Existing measures to reduce gender gaps include work life balance measures such as those outlined in the Work Life Balance Directive ((EU) 2019/1158), the Directive on Improving the Gender Balance among Directors of Listed Companies ((EU) 2022/2381) and legal provisions and policies on equal pay and working conditions including the Pay Transparency Directive ((EU) 2023/970), as well as measures to prevent and combat all forms of gender-based violence against women, which remains a major barrier to women's full, equal and meaningful participation in the labour market; existing measures to combat violence include those set out in Directive ((EU) 2024/1385) on combating violence against women and domestic violence.

f. Analysis by Eurofound also 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.[16]

[16] See the Eurofound's webpage entitled Taking stock: Further experiences in gender pay transparency implementation and effectiveness | Eurofound

g. Eurofound has shown that adequate working-time arrangements and a supportive social infrastructure enable better work-life balance and fuller labour-market participation, with benefits extending beyond workers to businesses and society at large.[17] As highlighted in the Commission's Gender Equality Strategy, many women struggle to combine their professional and private lives, as they continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of unpaid care and domestic work compared with men. In this context, creating the conditions for equal opportunities in access to the labour market, including for all care givers, entails taking into account the different lived experiences of pregnancy, maternity, paternity and parenthood, as well as of caring for older persons and other dependants.

h. Women perform a disproportionate share of unpaid care work and domestic work throughout the life course, which is one of the main reasons why women work part time or are economically inactive. Women are also overrepresented in care occupations.[18] The demand for care in the EU is expected to increase[19] due to factors such as demographic change and labour market pressures. As care services are an indispensable part of social infrastructure, investment in this sector is essential for ensuring competitiveness as well as gender equality.

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[17] Eurofound (2026), European Working Conditions Survey 2024: Overview report, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

[18] Eurofound, Advancing towards a care society: addressing the gender care gap, April 2025

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

i. While improving outcomes for children and others that require care, the availability of affordable, accessible and quality ECEC as well as quality long-term care and support services also has a strong positive impact on the employment situation of parents and carers, in particular women. Care leave policies and other measures to reconcile work, family and private life, including measures to promote the equal sharing of unpaid care and support work between women and men, are also crucial as they contribute to social cohesion, sustainable demographic development, labour market resilience and the long-term competitiveness of the European Union.

j. The gender investment gap[20], which is due to structural, behavioural, and institutional barriers, negatively affects women's entrepreneurship and leadership opportunities, stifling Europe's innovation potential. Research has shown that start-ups led by women are economically more successful and resilient, and that a higher share of women-led start-ups would be conducive to innovation.[21] Yet currently, venture capital distribution is starkly unequal: for every €100 invested, less than €3 goes to women-led teams. Addressing the gender investment gap requires tackling gender bias in financial decision-making and improving women's access to business networks and investors.

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

[21] European Investment Bank, "Support for female entrepreneurs: Survey evidence for why it makes sense" https://www.eib.org/en/publications/online/all/finance-female-entrepreneurs

k. The rapid advancement of digital technology and AI has far-reaching implications for the future of work. It has positive potential and can be actively used to advance gender equality in all areas and bridge systemic gaps. Realising this potential also requires promoting women's participation in the development and deployment of AI, thus enabling them to actively shape this technology and to contribute to innovation and the Union's competitiveness. However, it is important that tools such as AI-driven recruitment and workers' management are trustworthy and designed, deployed and monitored in a gender-responsive and human-centric manner. This would entail a safety-by design approach, effective human oversight, a human rights perspective, gender mainstreaming, regular bias assessment, the development of non-discriminatory AI systems, and the managed use of high-quality and representative data. Without appropriate safeguards, digital technology and AI tools can be detrimental to equality and amplify prejudice and discrimination on different grounds, perpetuate existing gender stereotypes, gender inequalities and digital divides, and reinforce gender bias and other intersecting biases. It is important that users not only have technical competences but also training in combating discrimination. Ensuring that the digital transition is gender-responsive is essential if Europe is to avoid reproducing existing inequalities in emerging sectors and to expand the talent pool needed for innovation-led competitiveness.

l. As the Council has noted in its Conclusions on "Preventing and combating cyber violence against girls", it is important to protect women and girls online, including against AI-enabled violence. Cyber violence against women and girls has significant social, political and economic consequences threatening democracy and competitiveness.

m. 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. For example, while the rise of remote work enabled by digitalisation can offer women greater flexibility, it can also reinforce gender stereotypes and unequal patterns of sharing of care and domestic work. Without targeted measures to combat gender stereotypes and to ensure equal access to education and jobs in STEM[22] fields and digital and AI skills, supported by education and lifelong opportunities for reskilling and upskilling, as well as measures to improve the retention and career progression of women in STEM, there is a risk that sectoral disparities and the gender digital divide will widen. According to the European Institute for Gender Equality (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.[23] It is also essential to ensure equal access to HEAL[24] fields and to encourage more men to choose careers in this sector and other caregiving occupations. A gender-responsive approach to skills, STEM and HEAL policies can support both equality and competitiveness by reducing segregation, improving the match between skills and labour market needs, and making emerging sectors more inclusive and sustainable.

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22 Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

23 Economic Benefits of Gender Equality in the European Union | European Institute for Gender Equality

24 Health, education, administration, literacy.

18. In the area of LGBTI[25] equality,

a. The third LGBTIQ survey of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) found that "in the EU today, many of those with a sexual orientation, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual or pansexual, and/or a certain gender identity, trans women and men, non-binary and gender diverse people, and intersex people with diverse sex characteristics or gender expression suffer discrimination, harassment and violence or isolation and exclusion because of who they are." Moreover, according to FRA,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%). The survey also shows discrimination in areas such as education, healthcare, housing and social life.

b. The Commission's LGBTIQ+ Equality Strategy 2026-2030 underlines that "empowering LGBTIQ+ people … drives entrepreneurship, innovation and fosters sustainable economic growth. For instance, cities that are welcoming and inclusive of LGBTIQ+ people have stronger 'innovation ecosystems', greater concentrations of skills and talent, higher levels of entrepreneurship and a better quality of life."

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[25] In the present text, the acronyms LGBTI, LGBTIQ, and LGBTIQ+ are used, depending on the terminology employed in the specific document, initiative, or policy area being referenced. According to the Commission's LGBTIQ+ Equality Strategy 2026–2030, **"**LGBTIQ+ people are people:
• who are attracted to others of their own gender (lesbian, gay) or any gender (bisexual);
• whose gender identity and/or expression does not correspond to the sex they were assigned at birth (trans, non-binary);
• who are born with sex characteristics that do not fit the typical definition of male or female (intersex);
• whose identity does not fit into a binary classification of sexuality and/or gender (queer);
• who identify with other sexual orientations or gender identities not specifically captured by the LGBTIQ acronym (the +)**."**

c. OECD analysis[26] 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 people[27] 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.

19. In the area of Disability,

a. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), to which all Member States and the EU are Parties, commits Parties to taking all effective and necessary measures to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms by persons with disabilities through appropriate support measures and services. In addition to measures to combat discrimination, this includes ensuring self-determination for persons with disabilities, and accessibility and reasonable accommodation in all areas of life, based on the principle of universal design, including in the areas of employment, education, independent living, training and access to and supply of goods and services.

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26 Over the Rainbow? The Road to LGBTI Inclusion | OECD

27 The economic cost of stigma and the exclusion of LGBT people : a case study of India

b. In 2024, only 51.8% of persons with disabilities were in employment, compared to 71.8% of persons without disabilities.[28] In order to allow persons with disabilities to make employment choices on an equal basis with others, it is necessary to remove barriers to labour market participation. Barriers negatively impacting the disability employment gap include misconceptions regarding the cost of workplace adjustments and of the provision of reasonable accommodations. Lack of inclusive and accessible education and training (including upskilling and reskilling), 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 workforce[29] but are also disproportionately represented in part-time employment,[30] which is often not by choice, and has a negative effect on their economic independence. Women with disabilities can face an increased risk of violence, which in turn, also negatively affects their financial self-sufficiency and 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.

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[28] See Eurostat webpage entitled Employment gaps for women & people with disabilities - News articles - Eurostat

[29] European Institute for Gender Equality, Gender Equality Index

[30] 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 and the Communication on Enhancing this Strategy up to 2030 aims to contribute to the implementation of the UNCRPD. The Strategy emphasises the need for equal access to quality jobs, to education, to independent living, to goods and services, and to cultural life, sport, travel and leisure activities. Ensuring and improving the accessibility of education at all levels, including higher education and vocational education and training through inclusive policies, staff training and robust support services[31] and tailored interventions, complemented by supported social entrepreneurship and 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. Affordable assistive technologies including inclusive, trustworthy AI can enhance independence, support communication, improve accessibility and promote equal opportunities for participation in society, including education, employment and community life. Ensuring that technological tools and the digital environment as a whole are accessible, affordable and inclusive is key to fostering equal opportunities in digital skills development, reskilling and upskilling. It is important to acknowledge the risk of discriminatory impacts of AI, including due to bias in training data, and to ensure that rights of persons with disabilities are protected and promoted in the development and use of AI.

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 the transition towards independent living and rights-based supported decision-making.

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

20. In the area of Anti-Racism,

a. As research conducted by FRA has shown, the persistence of racism negatively affects all aspects of life[32] and has significant social and economic consequences for persons and groups exposed to discrimination based on racial or ethnic origin. The work of FRA highlights this, through its surveys and reports on, among others, people of African descent, Muslims, Jews, Roma, persons belonging to other ethnic or racial minorities, and persons with a migrant background. For example, people of African descent are more likely to have temporary contracts and to work in elementary occupations. The overqualification rate[33] is higher for people of African descent than for the general population (46% compared to 22%). Muslims, some of whom have ancestors in the Middle East or Africa, 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. Racial discrimination disproportionately affects women and girls, who face combined gendered and racialised barriers, including in education, employment and access to services.

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 12.7 billion euros 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.

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[32] 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 Monitoring and recording antisemitism in the EU – State of play and ways forward | European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights

[33] The proportion of people with tertiary education employed in low- or medium-skilled occupations

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 both human-led and technology-facilitated obstacles in recruitment, for example, due to having names perceived as foreign, wearing religious clothing or being a person of colour. Employees from ethnic minority backgrounds also face greater barriers to career advancement and reduced access to influential networks.

21. In the area of Roma inclusion,

a. Roma continue to experience much higher rates of economic disadvantage and social exclusion than the general population. For example, persons perceived to be Roma, or identified as Roma based on their names, face obstacles when seeking employment. In addition, 36% of Roma reported that they had experienced discrimination when looking for work. The 2024 FRA Roma Survey[34] showed that only 54% of Roma aged 20-64 were in paid work, which was significantly lower than the rate for the general EU population (74%). Further, only 38% of Roma women were 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 that leads to discrimination in hiring processes and the workplace, low levels of education and basic skills and a lack of access to tailored public programmes and support.

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[34] The survey covered 10 EU Member States (Bulgaria, Czechia, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Romania and Spain) and three accession countries (Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia).
Roma survey 2024 | European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights

c. The EU Roma Strategic Framework calls upon the Member States to halve the gap in the NEET[35] rate for this community, with a target of reducing Roma youth NEET to below 33% and that at least 45% Roma women are in paid work 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. Targeted policies may be needed to address gendered drivers of Roma girls' NEET rates, which are linked to discrimination, poverty, and gender norms.

d. The 2024 FRA Roma Survey shows that only 32% of Roma aged 20-24 attained at least upper-secondary education, far lower than the rate for the general EU population, 84%. The survey also shows that Roma increasingly experience discrimination in interactions with educational institutions. Reducing such discrimination as well as educational inequalities in general and promoting equal access to higher education and vocational education and training, are essential for improving access to skilled employment for young Roma people and as a way of strengthening Europe's skills base. Encouraging young Roma to remain in the education system beyond compulsory schooling means fostering a climate of trust and cooperation with Roma students and their families from the earliest stages of education. The EU Roma Strategic Framework aims to increase access to education for Roma, to reduce the gap in the completion rates for upper-secondary education between Roma and the general population by at least one third and to increase the share of Roma youth attaining at least upper-secondary education to 50% by 2030.

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[35] Not in education, employment, or training.

22. In the area of combating age discrimination and ageism,

a. Demographic shifts across the Union necessitate the full utilisation of human capital across all age cohorts to sustain economic growth and competitiveness. While age diversity is an inherent component of a resilient labour market, systemic ageism and age discrimination act as a barrier to productivity and innovation as well as being one of the main causes of premature labour market inactivity among older citizens. Council Directive 2000/78/EC is essential for ensuring that access to employment, vocational training, and career progression is predicated on objective competency rather than chronological age. Ageism can intersect with gender stereotypes and other forms of discrimination, creating specific compounded barriers in recruitment, career progression and employee retention throughout the life course.

b. Consistent with the proportionality requirements of Article 6(1) of Council Directive 2000/78/EC, any differences in treatment based on age must be objectively and reasonably justified by legitimate employment or labour market aims. Beyond the fundamental right to equal treatment, fostering age-neutral environments represents a high-yield economic strategy. By removing age-based biases in recruitment, employee retention and career progression and by promoting access to lifelong learning, reskilling and upskilling opportunities, the EU can optimize labour force participation, enhance institutional stability, and secure the long-term economic resilience necessary to support a high-employment, competitive Single Market.

c. The labour market participation of older persons can be further supported through age-management measures in the workplace, including flexible working arrangements, occupational health and wellbeing measures, workplace adaptation, mentoring schemes and intergenerational knowledge transfer.

d. In addition to taking action in the labour market, it is important to tackle age discrimination and ageism across all other areas of life, ensuring that that older persons are enabled to fully participate in and contribute to society and the economy through extended economic activity, increased social participation, volunteering and intergenerational learning. Population ageing also has an impact beyond employment such as increasing the demand for affordable and accessible social and health care services to support independent living. Different groups experience these issues differently. For example, women generally live longer than men and are therefore more likely to experience health problems related to old age. For this reason, women also have increased long-term care needs in later life.

CONSIDERING THAT

23. Addressing inequalities, including 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, preserving the European social model and putting the Union's values into practice.

24. This set of conclusions builds on previous work and political commitments voiced by the Council, the Commission and the European Parliament and relevant stakeholders in this area, including the documents listed in the Annex.

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION CALLS ON MEMBER STATES, in accordance with their competences, and respecting the role and autonomy of the social partners, TO:

25. Combat gender stereotypes and gender-based segregation in all areas of society and the economy, so as to promote gender equality, social cohesion and economic growth, including through measures that empower all women and girls to participate fully, equally and meaningfully in education, training, employment, cultural activities, politics and public life.

26. Continue to implement their national strategies or action plans that advance equality and non-discrimination.

27. Support measures to promote women's entrepreneurship, business ownership and more equal access to financial resources, including through dedicated mentorship and 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, as well as sustainable agriculture and rural entrepreneurship, including by means of measures to eliminate gender bias in investment decisions and measures to support women-led start-ups. Encourage partnerships with financial institutions, such as banks and investments funds, and support training for their staff on gender bias and discrimination.

28. Strengthen policies to close the gender digital divide by fostering digital entrepreneurship and leadership and combat its root causes.

29. Strengthen policies to close the gender employment gap, to reduce horizontal and vertical occupational gender segregation and to prevent involuntary part-time work, and take steps to eliminate gender stereotypes in education, training and employment, including in workplace cultures. Support measures to promote equal career progression and equal representation in positions of responsibility including on boards of companies. Support national public employment services and civil society organisations in their efforts to improve women's equal access to employment.

30. Take steps, where appropriate and in accordance with national circumstances, to identify and address financial disincentives to enter or remain in employment arising from structural obstacles including the design of benefit systems, in particular for second earners[36] and single parents.

31. Support measures to prevent and combat gender-based discrimination in working life, including discrimination related to pregnancy and to unpaid care and support work.

32. Strengthen policies to close the gender pay gap and gender pension gap and to ensure the enforcement of the principle of equal pay for equal work or work of equal value, including by identifying the root causes of these gaps such as the systemic undervaluation of work in sectors and occupations where women are overrepresented, and by addressing those causes through targeted measures aimed at safeguarding women's financial self-sufficiency and economic independence over the life course.

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[36] Second earners are employed individuals who earn less than their partners.

33. Strengthen the care economy, including by ensuring fair pay and good working conditions in the care sector, as well as flexible working arrangements. Promote the equal sharing of care and support responsibilities between women and men through measures consistent with applicable Union law and national systems, including where appropriate the provision of earmarked and non-transferable maternity, paternity and/or parental leave and by encouraging men's and fathers' take-up of care and support responsibilities. Support access to available, accessible, affordable and high-quality ECEC[37] and long-term care and support services and infrastructure.

34. Take relevant measures to support organizations and companies in their efforts to implement work-life balance measures and to adopt family-friendly workplace policies for all care-givers, while taking a life-course perspective and paying specific attention to maternity, paternity, parenthood and those who need to care for older persons and other dependants.

35. Encourage educational and career choices free of gender bias and gender stereotypes, particularly with a view to increasing the participation of women and girls in STEM, as well as attracting more men and boys to the caregiving and support sectors and to HEAL occupations. Invest in education and training to boost financial and digital literacy and skills over the life course, especially among women and girls, and to foster interest, confidence and competence in STEM subjects and entrepreneurship from an early age including through inclusive and interdisciplinary STEAM[38] approaches that connect science and technology with the arts, the design sector and the humanities as well as with societal challenges. Promote equal access to inclusive upskilling and reskilling opportunities linked to the green and digital transitions, particularly for underrepresented and marginalised groups.

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[37] Including in line with the Barcelona targets for 2030.
[38] Science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics.

36. Where appropriate, in accordance with national data collection systems, and while respecting the principle of self-identification and applicable safeguards and data protection and privacy rules, enhance the collection, analysis and use of disaggregated equality data, as well as labour market data, at national, regional and local levels, including from an intersectional perspective, where appropriate. Continue efforts to ensure that data collected and used, across different data sources, is as accurate, comprehensive, comparable and accessible as possible, by raising awareness of and utilising existing sources of equality data, including administrative data, and by analysing where gaps exist, in accordance with national needs.

37. Support gender-responsive and equality-related research and data collection, with a view to identifying and preventing discriminatory outcomes in the design, development, deployment and use of algorithms and AI systems, including in management.

38. Promote the uptake of human-centric, accessible and trustworthy AI while ensuring adequate safeguards, transparency and human oversight, and a high level of protection of health, safety and fundamental rights as enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, including in the areas of work and in the access to and enjoyment of essential public services, in accordance with the EU AI Act.

39. Promote the effective enforcement of nondiscrimination and gender equality law, including through appropriate sanctions and remedies, in order to prevent discrimination, address its consequences and generate economic benefits.

40. Urge national, regional and local authorities to integrate inclusion and nondiscrimination into their business and talent attraction strategies in order to bolster both local innovation ecosystems and equality, while promoting territorial cohesion, particularly in remote regions.

41. Enhance the labour market participation of persons with a migrant background, including by means such as offering career counselling and mentoring, improving the recognition of qualifications and competences acquired outside the EU, and supporting employers' role in the economic integration of foreign nationals.

42. Continue efforts under the EU Roma Strategic Framework, to halve the NEET rate and to halve the gender employment gap between Roma women and Roma men by 2030, including by taking steps to improve social inclusion, as well as access to education and employment opportunities for Roma women and youth, for example, through tailored active labour market policies in line with Council Recommendation on Roma equality, inclusion and participation.

43. Continue the implementation of the Youth Guarantee, ensuring that all young people under 30 receive a good-quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship, or traineeship within four months of leaving formal education or becoming unemployed, paying particular attention to young people with low educational attainment, to young people with migrant or minority backgrounds, to Roma youth, to young people experiencing social exclusion, and to young persons with disabilities.

44. Enhance the labour market participation of persons with disabilities, in particular women with disabilities, including by promoting accessible workplaces and public spaces, by providing support in employment and by enabling career progression through accessible and inclusive education and the provision of reasonable accommodation, thereby also facilitating and supporting the transition from sheltered settings to the open labour market. Support measures to promote the entrepreneurship of persons with disabilities.

45. Enhance the economic and social inclusion of older people by supporting their participation in society and the labour market, and through age mainstreaming, as well as through accessible and affordable health and social care services. Take steps to ensure accessible and affordable learning opportunities, alongside opportunities for cultural, leisure and civic participation, thus enabling older people to develop and use their skills and maintain autonomy as active contributors to society.

46. 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.

47. Boost efforts to ensure effective equal access to quality inclusive education, training and lifelong learning for all.

48. Promote the development of study modules focused on equality, diversity and inclusiveness in the context of business studies and economics at different educational levels, including with a view to strengthening the capacity of companies and other private sector organisations in these areas.

CALLS ON THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION AND THE MEMBER STATES, in accordance with their respective competences, and respecting the role and autonomy of the social partners, to:

49. 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.

50. Take measures to ensure protection against all forms of discrimination and across all areas of society, with the aim of upholding human rights and fundamental freedoms and of reducing barriers to participation.

51. 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.

52. Promote inclusiveness and equality, including gender equality, in all entrepreneurship policies across sectors, including by fostering inclusive mentoring schemes and supporting social entrepreneurship, and consider targeted funding for entrepreneurship among marginalised and underrepresented groups including women, persons with disabilities, LGBTI persons, persons with a migrant background and persons belonging to a national, ethnic or racial minority.

53. In order to further boost the link between equality and competitiveness, promote equality mainstreaming, including gender mainstreaming, disability mainstreaming and age mainstreaming, in economic, consumer, social and digital policies at the national and Union level, as well as within key economic and social policy coordination mechanisms such as the European Semester.

54. Continue to promote and support the EU Platform of Diversity Charters and relevant national level activities in order to help public and private sector organisations as well as civil society organisations across the EU to design and implement effective diversity and inclusion policies, and also continue to promote actions aimed at promoting greater gender balance in decision-making bodies.

55. Support, in line with the Equality Bodies Directives (EU) 2024/1499 and (EU) 2024/1500, the independent work of Equality Bodies in promoting and enforcing equal treatment, including assisting victims of discrimination, monitoring and reporting on discrimination, raising awareness of rights and obligations, acting in court proceedings in accordance with national law and practice, and making recommendations on matters relating to discrimination.

56. Promote targeted measures encouraging employers in both the public and private sectors to promote equal opportunities in the recruitment of women and underrepresented groups, including through the development of accessible and inclusive dedicated tools and guidelines, taking into account the specific needs and capacities of SMEs. Take steps to increase diversity in the workforce, for example through awareness-campaigns aimed at tackling unconscious bias, stereotypes and prejudices and through inclusive and accessible education and hiring practices, and by means of training and upskilling throughout the life course, and the facilitation of codes of conducts for the private employment sector.

57. Support measures to prevent and combat all forms of gender-based violence, including technology-facilitated gender-based violence, as well as measures to address and eliminate harassment in the world of work, including sexual harassment, through legislative, policy and awareness-raising measures.

58. Support measures to prevent and combat hate, threats and violence targeting persons and groups at risk of discrimination, in order to remove barriers for these persons to participate fully in all areas of life, including implementing strategic and targeted action to combat discrimination and to foster equality.

CALLS ON THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION TO:

59. Present a proposal for a European Care Deal that recognises both paid and unpaid forms of care and support, promotes the economic empowerment of women, encourages men to carry an equal share of caregiving, challenges gender stereotypes, and lays out a comprehensive set of recommendations to address the challenges in the care sector, including with a focus on gender equality, and to increase and support the workforce in this area.

60. Strengthen coordination and synergies across all relevant EU-funded programmes to create clearer pathways to support women and to advance gender equality in innovation and entrepreneurship.

61. Continue efforts to effectively integrate anti-discrimination considerations into EU policies and support the fight against all forms of discrimination at the national, regional and local level including, where appropriate, by supporting relevant stakeholders, including civil society organisations.

62. Promote the collection, analysis and use of disaggregated equality data, including, where appropriate, data on intersectional discrimination, in line with national frameworks, as an effective tool for addressing inequality and all forms of discrimination, including through the provision of technical assistance and the preparation of Commission guidance in this area.

63. 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.

64. Monitor and report on the implementation of the Union of Equality Strategies.

65. Monitor and evaluate the impact of AI systems on the labour market from an equality perspective and so as to ascertain where and how AI might affect certain sectors, social groups or types of occupation more than others, including through its impact on pay, working conditions, career progression, access to training opportunities, and potential job losses for different groups. Regularly evaluate areas of risk and opportunity as regards the impact of AI systems on equality, including gender equality, drawing on the expertise of the European AI Office and building on the research of EU Agencies.

66. Continue monitoring the evolution of the gender employment, pay and pension gaps, as well as the disability employment gap, and support Member States by providing technical support, data and analysis.

67. 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. adopting an Action Plan for Women in Research, Innovation and Start-ups, as well as continuing implementation of the European Research Area Policy Agenda (2025-2027);

    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. continuing efforts to attract and motivate more women and girls to study STEM subjects and to pursue careers in this field, as well as to actively encourage more men and boys to pursue careers in HEAL and other caregiving occupations.

68. 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, as well as with a view to supporting the implementation of the Communication Enhancing the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities up to 2030.

69. Continue to provide support, including financial support, to Member States for projects focused on the collection and use of equality data and the promotion of equality (including gender equality), inclusion and diversity in employment and the business sector.

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