

## #BerlinPerspectives

Analysing German European Policy

# Making progress, fighting rollback

Germany's EU Council Presidency must secure gender equality achievements and reach new milestones

by Gabriele Abels

- *The rollback against gender equality in several EU member states jeopardizes achievements made since the 1980s and the potential for future progress.*
- *The new EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 should be supported by the Council and can give a push to this policy field.*
- *The Covid-19 pandemic affects women and gender equality in specific ways, and has to be a vital issue on the EU agenda.*
- *Violence against women is finally an important topic on the EU and the German Council Presidency's agenda in part as a result of the pandemic.*

The EU has a long record in gender-equality policy. Its initiatives go back to the 1970s and since the 1990s it claims to have the most progressive gender regime in the world. However, gender equality is far from being realized in the EU. In fact, there are clear signs of a rollback, as documented in the 2020 Gender Equality Index. The work of the EU's European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), the index attests to the persistence of the problem across all member states. The EU average score is 67.9 of 100 points, with Sweden scoring highest (83.8) and Greece lowest (52.2). Germany is just under the EU average (With 67.5). Equality in the labour market, violence and participation in economic and political institutions are still key areas needing urgent action.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has raised the status of gender equality in unprecedented ways since her first speech in the European Parliament in July 2019 and within her first 100 days in office. Key activities since she took office include the appointment for the first time of a Commissioner for Equality, Helena Dalli, setting up a high-level Commission Taskforce on Equality and the presentation of a new Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025, which puts forward new legislative

proposals. The strategy was presented on 5 March 2020, just before International Women's Day.

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At the same time, though, there is an ongoing rollback with regard to gender equality in several member states, especially in Eastern Europe and where conservative populist parties are in power. There gender equality as a value is questioned and denounced as a "Western" ideological issue.

Finally, the issue falls under the auspices of the council for employment and social affairs (EPSCO) and the lack of a formal gender equality council makes it more difficult for it to receive institutional backing. Informal meetings are organized as an ad hoc substitute for the absence of such a council.

## Gender on the Council Presidency agenda

It is only since the late 1990s that gender equality found prominence on the agenda of the Presidency of the Council of the EU. Initially, pioneering Scandinavian countries used their Presidencies for fostering gender equality on an array of issues, and other member states later followed this example. Gender equality features more prominently on the agenda Germany's current Presidency than in previous ones, but it is still 'sectoralized'. In the official programme "Together. For Europe's recovery" gender equality is listed under 'Priority III. A fair Europe' but it is not mainstreamed throughout. Federal Minister for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth Franziska Giffey announced Germany's priorities in this field – labour market discrimination and gender-based violence – at an informal meeting of equality ministers in Sweden on 3-4 December 2019. Further priorities are LGBTI

rights, young people, and care work. These priorities are aligned with the Commission's Gender Equality Strategy and the recently announced LGBTI Strategy. The trio presidency (Germany jointly with Portugal and Slovenia) presented a joint programme for 2001-22 in July 2020. It was not until early September 2020 that activities of the federal ministry were presented to a wider public in an online conference. There have since been regular briefings on specific priorities and a joint meeting with the EIGE on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on women. Due to the pandemic, domestic violence, care work and the economic impacts on women are now paramount concerns.

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## Priority I: Pandemic violence

Violence against women and gender-based violence has a pandemic dimension in the EU: every third women being affected. Domestic violence has increased during lockdown. Some EU legislation indirectly addresses this. Many member states already had an action plan, and it was 'upgraded' in the form of campaigns, additional funds and/or accommodation for victims. Yet, overall the support systems are insufficient. The Istanbul Convention of the Council of Europe also aims to combat this violence and calls for such support systems. The EU signed the convention in 2017 but formal accession is still pending, primarily because several member states veto it (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia) and some (Poland, Hungary) even consider refraining from national ratification. Germany is trying to mediate among member states in favour of accession.

In addition, networking and practical instruments are being developed and strongly supported by Germany's

government. Above all, the establishment of an EU-wide phone number linked to national helplines, which are in place in many member states, is being discussed. At the informal equality conference on 20 November, 22 member states supported this instrument; others abstained doubting the technical feasibility. This initiative is supported by the Commission, which needs to establish some technical prerequisites. Furthermore, awareness raising and exchange of best practices is part of the strategy against gender-based violence.

## Priority II: Discrimination in the labour market

The labour market is still gender-segregated horizontally as well as vertically, with the gender gap in relation to domestic care work a key reason. Women often work part-time and in 'female' – horizontal segregation – such as services and care where lower wages prevail. In addition, the gender pay gap, which leads to a gender pension gap, is still striking in the majority of member states. Germany's Council Presidency focuses non-discrimination in the labour market – discussed at the EPSCO Council on 13 October 2020 – and especially on pay transparency. Germany, which has such a system (although not a very effective one) supports this initiative. At the EPSCO summit on 3 December 2020 a council conclusion on tackling the gender pay gap was adopted unanimously.

The fact that there are fewer women in management positions – vertical segregation – is another issue. The Commission's Women on Boards directive proposal remains pending after several years, with several member states having issued subsidiarity-based objections. Germany has so far abstained due to the divergent views of the parties in the coalition government. With Germany acting as mediator, bilateral talks (for example with Hungary) were initiated and the topic was on the agenda of the 13 October EPSCO. It is most unlikely that there will be a Council majority in favour of the proposal in the near future, however. Yet, having recently agreed on legislation on this issue, Germany's government could now support this at the EU level.

## Pandemic and ideological rollback

Germany's Council Presidency was declared a Covid-19 one – not only in relation to the pandemic's effects on processes but also in terms of priorities. Violence against women and the re-traditionalization of care work have been two main issues. Following the outbreak of Covid-19, more cooperative arrangements of sharing care work among partners were often reversed and women took over the brunt of telework plus home schooling. The NextGenerationEU recovery programme reflects gender considerations at least to some degree, but the effectiveness of this will have to be evaluated. Portugal, which takes over the Presidency in January, has already declared that it will focus on the pandemic's socio-economic impacts on women.

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The pandemic also affects women worldwide. Germany's Presidency has supported the Commission's activities for a follow-up Gender Action Plan (GAP III) in external relations and development aid. Poland and Hungary – which are among the member states scoring lowest in the 2020 Gender Equality Index (55.8 and 53 respectively) – raised objections to the use of the term 'gender equality' at the development council meeting in November.

One of the final tasks of the Germany's Presidency is to push for the support of the Gender Equality Strategy. The European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality adopted it and it is expected that the plenary will do so at its session later this month. On 3 December 2020 the EPSCO Council declared its broad support for the strategy. The support of the Parliament and the Council will be crucial to give more – legislative – teeth to the by and large ambitious strategy of the

Commission.

Overall, the German Presidency has set the right priorities on gender equality, aligned with the Commission's strategy. It has also tried to find compromises on vital issues and been successful in some cases; for example, regarding an EU-wide help line for countering domestic violence, adoption of a Council conclusion on tackling the gender pay gap and ensuring overall support for the new Gender Equality Strategy. It has also been constrained by the internal conflicts in Germany's government over equality issues, as in the case of the Women on Boards directive. Moreover, securing previous achievements is an important task given the rollback in several member states, as ongoing opposition against the Istanbul Convention illustrates. With Conservative populist governments continuing to raise objections against gender equality, to denounce gender as an 'ideology' and to favour a re-traditionalization of 'natural' gender relations, meaning women's subordination, it is of the utmost importance that the following presidencies – Portugal and Slovenia – continue addressing these issues. The Trio Presidency Declaration on Gender Equality is a good starting point.

## Further Reading

- *Abels, Gabriele, Mushaben, Joyce M. (2020) Great expectations – strong limitations: Ursula von der Leyen and the Commission's New Equality Agenda. The JCMS Annual Review of the European Union in 2019, JCMS 58 (S1), 121-132.*
- *Abels, Gabriele (2020) „The beginning of a new chapter“? Eine Einordnung der neuen EU-Gleichstellungsstrategie 2020-2025. integration 43 (2) 2020, 144-153*
- *Abels, Gabriele (2021) Gendering the Council System, in: Gabriele Abels/Andrea Krizsan/ Heather MacRae/Anna van der Vleuten (eds.): Routledge Handbook of Gender and EU Politics. Abingdon, New York: Routledge (forthcoming).*
- *BMFSFJ (2020) Germany's Presidency of the Council of the EU 2020: Focus areas and objectives of the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth for Germany's Presidency of the Council of the EU 2020, Berlin.*
- *BMFSFJ (2020) Trio Presidency Declaration on Gender Equality, July 2a020.*
- [Covid-19 wave of violence against women shows EU countries still lack proper safeguards](#)
- [Briefing European Parliament: Violence against women in the EU](#)

*This #BerlinPerspectives reflects the author's views only.*

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