



# OPINION

European Economic and Social Committee

## Gender equality

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Gender equality

(Exploratory opinion at the request of the Czech presidency)

**SOC/731**

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**EN**

Request by the Czech Presidency of the Council	Letter of 26/01/2022
Legal basis	Article 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
Section responsible	Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship
Adopted in section	22/06/2022
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Outcome of vote (for/against/abstentions)	194/13/13

## 1. **Conclusions and recommendations**

- 1.1 The EESC underlines that success in enhancing gender equality in a sustainable way lies in nurturing a **life-long gender equality culture (LLGEC)** that goes through the whole life cycle and provides measures tailored to the specific characteristics and needs of every stage of life. Being a matter of culture, it cannot be brought about only by means of single policies and measures but requires recognition, ownership and constant commitment by all actors of society.
- 1.2 An LLGEC must be cultivated starting from early childhood by setting an example for children in the family, and continuing through nursery and throughout all school stages. The EESC calls on Member States, through their education policy, to enhance gender-neutral teaching with respect to both knowledge and social skills, as well as learning contexts free from gender stereotypes.
- 1.3 To sustain LLGEC further, gender equality needs to be fostered in all economic and societal activities, including businesses, public services and political life. The EESC believes that keeping gender equality up systematically in various contexts is a necessary means of moving things forward.
- 1.4 The EESC recommends that Member States, supported by the Commission and the EESC, together with social partners and relevant civil society organisations, launch a wide-ranging awareness-raising and information campaign to promote LLGEC. Special attention should be paid to the central role of both traditional and social media as platforms for shaping attitudes.
- 1.5 The campaign should draw decision-makers' attention to the state and progress of gender equality in the MS in question and encourage MSs to seek inspiration from each other and share good practices. Political actors, decision-makers and public organisations should also lead by example in enhancing gender equality in their own activities.
- 1.6 Gender equality in terms of participation in political decision-making at national, regional and municipal levels is crucial, considering the remarkable impact of political decisions on citizens' lives. Increasing the share of female politicians at all levels requires strengthening the awareness of voters, as well as of parties nominating candidates and fostering a culture that encourages and enables women to take an active part in political life.
- 1.7 As the improvement of gender equality requires measures to be introduced in several policy fields, the EESC reiterates its call to policymakers at all levels to follow the principle of gender mainstreaming and include the gender equality aspect in all decisions, including those on budgeting, investment and funding, including public procurement.
- 1.8 Considering the challenges caused by an ageing population and the need to secure a skilled workforce, the inclusiveness of labour markets is ever more important. The removal of any obstacles and provision of incentives for the overall participation of women in labour markets, irrespective of profession, task or age, is thus crucial. For example, flexible working arrangements, parental leaves, and taxation, and other kinds of incentives play a role in

enhancing gender equality. In addition to legislative frameworks, the practical modalities should be laid down using the possibilities of collective bargaining between the social partners.

- 1.9 As the post-pandemic recovery needs to take place in line with the green and digital transition, STEM competences are ever more essential. From the point of view of gender equality and prevention of segregation, it is important to attract girls to study more STEM subjects, while also attracting more boys to study and apply for care and education professions. These aspects should be embedded in career guidance and staff retention measures.
- 1.10 The EESC finds it vital to promote women's leadership in businesses, public organisations and in social partner's organisations. It calls on MSs, business organisations and social partners to launch training and mentoring programmes targeted at female leaders and candidates for directors in public organisations or for board and senior executive positions in businesses, trade unions and private organisations. It also welcomes the political agreement reached recently between the European Parliament and the Council on the Directive on improving the gender balance among non-executive directors of listed companies, and invites the EU institutions to proceed swiftly with putting it into effect in a prompt and efficient manner.
- 1.11 Any obstacles to female entrepreneurship must also be removed. As access to finance is a prerequisite for entrepreneurship, equal access by women to both private financing and public funding must be ensured. The EESC also calls on MSs to direct appropriate public investment in projects that enhance gender equality, including in digital and care infrastructure.
- 1.12 The EESC calls for proper attention to be paid to gender equality when addressing the issue of Ukrainian refugees. This applies to support for children to access care and schooling, integration of women in labour markets via quality employment, and access to sexual and reproductive health services.

## 2. **General comments**

- 2.1 This opinion is a response to the request by the Czech Presidency to look into the progress on gender equality, and tools and measures to enhance it from several points of view, such as post-pandemic, recovery and employment, empowerment of young people, education and skills, entrepreneurship and corporate leadership, work-life balance, as well as the issue of migration and refugees, including due to the war in Ukraine. These issues have previously been addressed in existing EESC opinions and many other gender equality aspects are also being addressed in other EESC opinions<sup>1</sup>, covering issues related to e.g. working conditions and payment, care infrastructure, poverty and energy poverty, and gender-based violence.
- 2.2 Endemic discrimination, including gender discrimination, is a major cause of people being left behind. The EESC underlines that gender equality is rooted in the EU values<sup>2</sup> and eliminating inequalities and promoting equality between men and women requires a holistic and horizontal

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<sup>1</sup> SOC/723, SOC/633, SOC/610, SOC/717.

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Articles 2 and 3(3) Treaty on European Union, Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, Article 8 Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

approach. Success in enhancing gender equality in a sustainable way lies in nourishing a **life-long gender equality culture** that goes through the whole life cycle and provides measures tailored to the specific characteristics and needs of every stage of life.

- 2.3 An LLGEC must be cultivated starting from early childhood by setting an example for children in the family, safeguarding the equal rights and obligations of each family member, showing tolerant behaviour as the norm, and respecting everyone's private space and time. All prejudice regarding division of activities, tasks and work in the family to "feminine" and "masculine" should be avoided, as well as showing and teaching any other types of an unequal behaviour. It shall come on learning by doing basis and be started as early as taking care in equal share and turns for babies and infants by both parents – in a supportive manner so that they can both keep their respective rights to privacy, work and rest. The EESC calls upon the EC and MS to make every effort to support both parents to combine their private and professional lives and providing families with appropriate choices. Effective implementation of the Work-Life Balance Directive and securing accessible and affordable early childhood education and care is of outmost importance here.
- 2.4 Children's integration into society starts as soon as they start going to crèche and then nursery school. Therefore, these types of care facilities have to develop strong LLEGEC teaching and training. The simple fact that many of these facilities employ mostly female staff reinforces the stereotype or belief that raising children and taking care of them is a female task.
- 2.5 The next key step is providing young people with gender neutral teaching, and learning contexts free from gender stereotypes throughout the school years. The importance of this is underestimated in many Member States. For example, nurturing children's interest in STEM subjects based on how their brains are responding, not on their gender, is key to ensure that their talent and potential are fully stimulated, developed and tapped into for the benefit of the later stages of their life. In addition to the knowledge aspect, it is equally important to ensure that children and young people obtain social and other necessary skills and develop emotional intelligence in a gender-neutral manner, without imposing any pigeonholing or prejudices. This also applies to breaking away from appearance-related gender stereotypes.
- 2.6 Fostering the self-esteem and self-confidence of children and young people is an essential driver of LLGEC, which can, at its best, generate a positive outlook that lays the ground for the perception and realisation of equality for the rest of their life.
- 2.7 Providing career guidance that respects gender equality plays an important role in enhancing gender equality, helping career development and job retention and preventing segregation with respect to studies and professions. While it is important to attract girls to study STEM subjects, it is also important to attract more boys to study and apply for education and care professions, especially in view of the increasing care needs of the ageing population<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> SOC/687.

- 2.8 To sustain LLGEC throughout the whole adult stage, gender equality needs to be fostered both in family life, and in any economic and societal activities, including businesses, public services and political life. Being a matter of culture, it cannot be brought about with single policies and measures but requires recognition, ownership and constant commitment by all actors of society. The Swedish approach, where the government "has declared itself a feminist government" is one example of ensuring that the knowledge and experience of both men and women is used to promote progress in all aspects of society<sup>4</sup>.
- 2.9 The EESC believes that keeping gender equality up systematically in various contexts, while ensuring the appropriate legal and policy framework, is a necessary means of moving things forward. The EESC recommends that Member States, supported by the Commission, the European Economic and Social Committee and together with social partners and relevant civil society organisations, launch a wide-ranging awareness-raising and information campaign to promote LLGEC. Special attention should be paid to the central role of both traditional and social media as platforms for shaping attitudes, e.g. through advertising.
- 2.10 The campaign should draw decision-makers' attention to the state and progress of gender equality in the MS in question, measured by the Gender Equality Index, for example. It should also encourage MSs to seek inspiration from each other and share good practices. Public administration and organisations should lead by example in enhancing gender equality in their own activities. As a good practice, the EESC recommends that these actors – as well as trade unions, , employers' and civil society organisations – make public the gender balance in their management and supervisory boards. To get the positive perception across to the whole of society, the campaign should especially address men and boys with convincing messages about the benefits of gender equality.
- 2.11 Gender equality in terms of participation in political decision-making at national, regional and municipal levels is crucial, considering the remarkable impact of political decisions on citizens' lives. Increasing the share of female politicians requires strengthening the awareness of voters, as well as of parties nominating candidates.
- 2.12 As the improvement of gender equality requires measures to be introduced in several policy fields, the EESC reiterates its call to policymakers at appropriate levels to follow the principle of mainstreaming and include the gender equality aspect in all decisions, including decisions on budgeting, investment and funding, as well as in public procurement. Gender mainstreaming also needs to be properly monitored and evaluated. Moreover, a holistic approach to gender equality is needed with a special focus on where gender intersects with other characteristics e.g. disability, ethnic origin, single parenthood, socio-economic status, age or sexual orientation.
- 2.13 The EESC encourages all EU institutions, Member States and stakeholders to make active use of the valuable work done by EIGE, for instance when it comes to gender disaggregated data and statistics. The EESC also wants to underline the importance of active inclusion of the social partners when it comes to promoting gender equality, since it is in many ways directly linked to the labour market and working conditions. Collective bargaining is a key instrument to achieve

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<sup>4</sup> <https://sweden.se/life/equality/gender-equality>.

gender equality in the world of work. It is also important to utilise the EESC as an active platform for work on fostering the life-long gender equality culture.

### 3. **Specific comments - employment in post-pandemic recovery**

- 3.1 While the COVID-19 pandemic affected both women and men, the impacts have been different and the effects of the crisis risk jeopardising the progress achieved in the past decade in terms on the reduction of gender inequalities in the MS. Besides affecting the work-life balance, the pandemic has hit women harder through job losses or temporary unemployment, as sectors dominated by female workers were particularly affected<sup>5</sup>. Women entrepreneurs have also been much more likely than men to report closing a business due to the pandemic. The largest gender gap was reported in Europe and North America, where women were 50% more likely to report closures than men<sup>6</sup>.
- 3.2 From the point of view of gender equality and diversity, a key challenge in the post-pandemic recovery is to ensure that national recovery and resilience plans are gender-sensitive and include targeted actions to improve gender equality on the labour market. Measures should also create the right conditions for entrepreneurship and doing business, including a supportive fiscal framework and removing obstacles to female entrepreneurship.
- 3.3 The need to remove obstacles and provide incentives applies to the overall participation of women in labour markets, irrespective of profession and task. It also applies to women of all ages. While it is crucial to engage young people in the labour markets through the provision of quality job opportunities, it is also important to provide opportunities for elderly people to give their contribution in a proper way<sup>7</sup>. Considering the challenges caused by an ageing population and the worsening lack of a skilled workforce in some sectors, the inclusiveness of labour markets is ever more important also from the macro-economic point of view.
- 3.4 The EESC stresses the need for an ambitious and effective transpositions of the Work-Life Balance Directive. The practical modalities to promote and facilitate better work-life balance for parents shall be laid down in the process of collective bargaining – which is the right instrument to ensure the best solutions and practices taking into account the interests of workers and businesses. Together with flexible working arrangements and flexible paid parental leaves, taxation and other incentives for women to stay on the labour market play a role in enhancing gender equality. Appropriate pay for paternity leave, especially in the first months, would encourage fathers to take longer leave, helping them to develop a closer relationship with the baby and help the mother to recover, while enhancing her work-life balance. Separate income taxation of spouses contributes to encouraging both parents to be active on the labour market. It must also be recognised that measures that enable and encourage working, also contribute to more decent pensions.

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<sup>5</sup> SOC/662.

<sup>6</sup> Global Entrepreneurship Monitor.

<sup>7</sup> For further gender-related aspects in connection to ageing, see also SOC/687.

3.5 While the participation of women in labour markets has increased in the last decade, there is still a clear gender segregation<sup>8</sup>. Inequalities in access to education and economic opportunities for women persist, although Europe has the lowest rates of inequality - with some differences between Western and Eastern Europe - compared to other parts of the world<sup>9</sup>. The EESC has also called for prompt measures to eradicate the gender pay and pension gaps in all areas and sectors, notably through binding pay transparency measures<sup>10</sup>, and stresses that the former aggravates the latter, to which women are particularly vulnerable.

Moreover, cultural context and traditional stereotypes affect women's occupational choices. Far more women than men work, for example, in education, care, health, and social sectors, while men dominate sectors such as construction and heavy industries.

3.6 In promoting gender equality as part of an inclusive and sustainable industrial development agenda, efforts need to be directed not only at strengthening the competitiveness of economic sectors where women already work in significant numbers, but also at enabling them to participate in new sectors and roles. The inclusion of women in new sectors and occupations they were previously excluded from will in turn allow emerging sectors to thrive by making full use of richer and more diverse skill sets. Offering quality jobs is a requisite to ensure that existing gender inequalities are not perpetuated in these new sectors.

3.7 Gender segregation is also visible in education. While women graduate from tertiary education and participate in life-long learning, they prefer other subjects over science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Considering that the post-pandemic recovery needs to take place in line with the green and digital transition, STEM competences play an ever more essential role. Additionally, the importance of emotional skills (i.e. personal and social) alongside functional competences is essential as this forms the basis for enabling resilience, mental strength, conflict management, collaboration and factual communication. The focus of the future definitely needs to be on rational and emotional intelligence. LLGEC needs to include emotional education, as the World Economic Forum 2021 states that the top seven human skills include creativity, emotional intelligence and complex problem solving<sup>11</sup>.

3.8 With respect to the digital transformation, clear gender segregation in education and labour markets can be seen in terms of the distribution of ICT graduates, ICT specialists, and scientists and engineers in high-technology sectors.

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8 EIGE.

9 Gender Gap Index.

10 SOC/678.

11 The digital, female-founded start-up UPN'CHANGE ([www.upnchange.com](http://www.upnchange.com)) has found ways to translate deep expertise in psychology and coaching into simple digital tools to help people develop personal, social and creative skills. The vision of UPN'CHANGE is to unleash the potential of employees and teams with digital tools to enable organisations to achieve sustainable success. Because the right skillset means effective collaboration. Effective collaboration means innovation. And innovation means growth for everyone.

- 3.9 Encouraging girls' interest in STEM is crucial for their successful inclusion in the professions of the future. On top of that, targeted measures and development programmes are needed to help attract and retain them in STEM-related careers. In 10 years, 9 out of 10 jobs will require digital skills<sup>12</sup>. The future of work will see a shift in demand towards technology professionals such as computer engineers and ICT specialists. Women comprise 65% of European employees but account for only 17% of the [European ICT workforce](#), while by 2026, 57% of the jobs set to be displaced by technology would have belonged to women<sup>13</sup>.
- 3.10 Involvement of women in the development of AI is also essential in order to avoid algorithms that are based on biased data on reality and thus provide biased results. An intersectional approach is also necessary in this area. Moreover, as access to high-speed connectivity and digital skills form the necessary basis for a successful digital transformation, they should be available and accessible to all, irrespective of gender, age, disability, socio-economic background, or geographic location.
- 3.11 The underrepresentation of women in the fields of technology is problematic also from the green transition point of view, as tackling climate change and environmental problems requires development and introduction of many kinds of technological solutions.
- 3.12 While both digital and green skills must be considered an integral part of every profession, they have the potential to attract young people more than older workers. On the other hand, there is clearly a difference between work-related ICT skills, which include data management and desktop publishing, and the digital literacy commonly associated with young people, such as messaging and recreational Internet use.
- 3.13 Besides STEM competences, it is also important to encourage girls to study economics and management subjects, so as to prepare them for leadership positions. Moreover, it is important to guide them to learn entrepreneurial and risk management skills and to strengthen their self-confidence to avoid and tackle the impostor syndrome<sup>14</sup>. Looking at the stress typology of women, there seems to be a tendency towards more introvert, as opposed to extrovert, personalities in stress situations. This results in women not seeking out exposed positions due to fear of negative comments from others, which are taken personally, not feeling qualified if they do not (over)fulfil all specifications in a job description, and not wanting to be a "quota woman". This is often related back to (unconscious) beliefs and fears. While the enhancement of skills and competences require practical measures at the level of teaching and learning methods and of career guidance, these objectives should also be connected to the general awareness-raising programme on LLGEC.
- 3.14 One specific aspect to be addressed is the gender bias in healthcare, due to a lack of research, male-centric education, misdiagnosis and undertreatment. Ignorance of sex- and gender-based

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<sup>12</sup> World Economic Forum Annual Meeting, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> The impostor phenomenon e.g., in which one is affected by self-doubt regarding own abilities and capabilities, can hinder applying for leadership- or exposed positions. Especially very reflective people, who tend to withdraw under stressful circumstances, have difficulties in dealing with people who project strong self-confidence.

differences across medical disciplines easily leads to incorrect diagnosis or medication, because female symptoms differ from male symptoms, or because drug dosages are based on clinical trials which are mainly conducted on men. There is also a lack of research on female-specific conditions, such as endometriosis and menopause, and of gender-disaggregated data in research making it difficult to understand the mechanisms behind health issues and hampering attempts to find an appropriate response to e.g. a higher risk of females developing long Covid.

- 3.15 To avoid the negative impact of biased medicine on women's participation in the labour market, the EESC stresses that in all European health and pharmaceutical strategies, gender bias and sex- and gender-based differences must be taken into account and addressed. Moreover, the right of women to make autonomous decisions about their own body needs to be fully respected.

#### 4. **Specific comments – work-life balance**

- 4.1 Gender equality in terms of work-life balance is highly important for the economy and society as it is closely related to well-being, overall employment and participation in labour markets, as well as to careers and positions in both the public and private sectors. This applies to various tasks and responsibilities in businesses, administration and political decision-making.
- 4.2 Work-life balance poses a bigger challenge for women than for men because women account for a larger share of unpaid housework and caring responsibilities. According to the Gender Equality Index<sup>15</sup><sup>16</sup>, the EU's score has dropped since 2010 in the domain of time, which measures the distribution of housework and caring responsibilities. The significant variations between Member States reflect differences in national systems and family cultures.
- 4.3 The pandemic has increased the pressure on families in terms of work-life balance. This applies especially to women and single mothers, while with regard to childcare, there are indications of a narrower gender gap due to both parents teleworking<sup>17</sup>. Teleworking can provide many opportunities to contribute to gender equality and a better coordination can add value. However the EESC has also warned of the need to prevent teleworking from further widening the unequal division of work at home between women and men<sup>18</sup>. The pandemic has affected the work-life balance of women in various positions, including entrepreneurs, managers, and employees. It is not to be forgotten that women often have a different feeling of accountability and responsibility when it comes to "caring for others".
- 4.4 Many factors related to gender equality are dependent on the national social infrastructure, which plays an important role in gaining higher participation in labour markets and a better work-life balance. The most obvious systems cover the care system, parental leave, the school system, and employment measures.

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15 EIGE, <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2020-report/progress-gender-equality-most-notable-company-boards>.

16 Eurofound.

17 Sevilla and Smith 2020.

18 SOC/662 Teleworking and gender equality.

- 4.5 Reiterating its previous suggestions<sup>19</sup>, the EESC finds it important for Member States to implement the Work-life Balance Directive in an ambitious, efficient and timely manner, to provide families with appropriate and more equal choices, including promoting better paid parental leave for both parents. At the same time, implementation of the Directive must also take into consideration the needs of businesses, in particular SMEs.
- 4.6 The EESC emphasises the need for the Member States to invest in diverse care infrastructures, including childcare, after-school care, elderly care, and care for people with disabilities, so ensure accessibility and affordability for all. The EESC invites the Member States, together with social partners, to elaborate appropriate instruments, that will help families to have easy and effective access to supporting and care services
- 4.7 Furthermore, a new kind of mindset is needed at all levels to improve gender equality with respect to work-life balance. Reducing and breaking stereotypical thinking in terms of family roles is key here, as well as employment practices which encourage work-life balance for both women and men.

## 5. **Specific comments - leadership**

- 5.1 While gender equality and non-discrimination at work are ensured by legislation, equal participation of women and men in business leadership is supported, not only by the provision of equal opportunities, but also by the wider economic and societal benefits it brings through its contribution to broader perspectives, creativity, and competitiveness<sup>20</sup>. It is in the interests of companies to make use of women's higher education and talents by supporting their presence on boards and in other leadership positions. This requires that the benefits of diversity are well understood, as well as the negative impact for the individuals and society of not promoting diversity in all areas.
- 5.2 While there is still much room for improvement, the biggest progress in the EU's score in the Gender Equality Index since 2010 has been in the domain of power, which measures progress in political and economic decision-making. The most notable improvement was women's increased presence on the boards of the largest listed companies. This explains most of the overall increase in the Index score<sup>21</sup>.
- 5.3 The means of enhancing gender diversity on company boards vary between Member States<sup>22</sup> and there are clear differences in terms of the current situation and the progress made over time. Some Member States have adopted mandatory national quotas for large, listed companies, with

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<sup>19</sup> SOC/529.

<sup>20</sup> Also see SOC/338 and SOC/486.

<sup>21</sup> EIGE Statistical brief: gender balance in corporate boards 2020.

<sup>22</sup> EIGE.

quotas ranging from 25 to 40%<sup>23</sup>. On the other hand, a number of Member States exceed the EU average or have made substantial progress without having quotas, relying on self-regulation. In France, where legislation was introduced in 2011, more than 40% of board members are women, and eight countries have exceeded the level of one third. At the same time, there are some Member States with less than a 10% share. The average share in the EU is around 30%.

- 5.4 The differences also relate to individual companies. While top companies have shown considerable progress, less change can be seen at the bottom end of the company ranking<sup>24</sup>. It is also worth noting that although board members are often executive leaders, the countries that perform best in terms of the share of women holding CEO positions in large companies seem not to be the same as those countries which perform best in terms of company board members<sup>25</sup>.
- 5.5 Thus, there does not seem to be one explanation alone for the differences between Member States. This is to be expected, since differences in national traditions and cultures play a significant role in the development of gender equality. Supporting positive development, sharing of best practices and learning from others' experiences is of utmost importance.
- 5.6 The EESC also reiterates its conclusions and recommendations on the matter<sup>26</sup>, and welcomes the political agreement reached recently between the European Parliament and the Council on the Directive on improving the gender balance among non-executive directors of listed companies, proposed by the Commission in 2012. The Committee invites the EU institutions to proceed swiftly with putting it into effect in a prompt and efficient manner. Member States, in consultation with social partners, are in the best position to decide on the best and most appropriate practical measures to increase the share of women on boards, bearing in mind that it is the owners of a company who determine the board's composition.
- 5.7 The EESC finds it important to promote women's leadership by means of common programmes for female leaders and candidates for board and senior executive positions, and through individual training and mentoring<sup>27</sup>. It encourages companies to invest in such programmes which could also be supported by EU funding. Women's promotion to leading corporate positions should also be accompanied by equal payment with men holding the same positions, following the principle of equal pay for equal job done, which the EESC fully endorses.

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23 <https://eige.europa.eu/news/countries-legislated-quotas-could-achieve-gender-balance-parliaments-2026-those-without-may-take-close-twenty-years>.

24 European Women on Boards <https://europeanwomenonboards.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/EWoB-Gender-Diversity-Index-2020.pdf>.

25 Different sources combined by FI Chamber of Commerce, <https://naisjohtajat.fi/wp-content/uploads/sites/28/2019/01/women-directors-and-executives-report-2018.pdf>.

26 SOC/475.

27 One excellent example are the training and support programmes, offered by WKÖ - [https://www.wko.at/service/Women\\_in\\_Business.html](https://www.wko.at/service/Women_in_Business.html).

## 6. Specific comments – entrepreneurship

- 6.1 In promoting entrepreneurship, the full potential of female creativity and capabilities must be tapped into. Women entrepreneurs have also shown themselves to be strong and resilient in the face of crisis and chaos<sup>28</sup>.
- 6.2 Women entrepreneurs were also severely impacted by the pandemic, and having to bear a disproportionate share in caring responsibilities, aggravated by a lack of childcare services and lockdown. Yet, many women entrepreneurs managed to turn the new business context to their advantage and to inspire others, especially other women, to also become entrepreneurs and start more businesses. This produces positive effects such as job creation and consequent well-being.
- 6.3 Europe has some of the lowest rates of female entrepreneurship compared to women in other parts of the world (5.7%, compared with a world average of 11%). One explanation is that women in European countries have more other job options, compared to other parts of the world. Nonetheless, job scarcity was still the most common reason cited for business start-ups, more so by women than men<sup>29</sup>.
- 6.4 Access to finance is a prerequisite for entrepreneurship, and equal access must be ensured in terms of both private financing and public funding. The EESC calls for the evaluation of the criteria of relevant funding, such as the Recovery and Resilience Facility, to promote equality in entrepreneurship, as well as to encourage investment in projects that enhance gender equality, including in digital and care infrastructure.
- 6.5 Women in Europe are much more likely to have fewer employees (between 1 and 5) if they run an enterprise, or to be self-employed. Women in older age groups are more likely to lead enterprises. While women consider entrepreneurship an attractive option and although they are highly educated on average, they report a low sense of entrepreneurship, in terms of seeing new business opportunities, having the skills to start a business and being undeterred by fear of failure<sup>30</sup>.
- 6.6 Together with cultural reasons, the problems of combining the demands of work and family may generate this kind of perception. Consequently, women entrepreneurs may stick to certain sectors and be reluctant to grow their business. To encourage female entrepreneurship, women need to be supported in overcoming these perceptions and restricting factors<sup>31</sup>. In line with the Better Regulation agenda, the top level EU strategy to ensure that EU legislation in general delivers on its objectives in the most effective and efficient way, further incentives can be provided by measures that simplify administrative procedures and

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28 Women's Entrepreneurship 2020/21: Thriving Through Crisis. Published by the Global Entrepreneurship Research Association, London Business School, ISBN: 978-1-9160178-8-7.

29 Ibid.

30 Global Entrepreneurship Monitor.

31 Also see SOC/446.

reduce compliance costs, without undermining the level of protection of the relevant legislation<sup>32</sup>.

## 7. Specific comments – Ukrainian refugees

- 7.1 The Russian invasion of Ukraine caused an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, including the arrival of hundreds of thousands of asylum-seeking refugees – mainly women and children – in the EU MSs. All MSs, supported by civil society, are doing their utmost to take care of and accommodate the refugees and integrate them into the labour markets, but there are many challenges that call for better coordinated solutions<sup>33</sup>.
- 7.2 As most of the refugees are women with children, access to social care services, crèches, nurseries and schools is a critical bottleneck that prevents the women from being integrated into the labour market. Moreover, overcoming the language barrier, recognition of the education and qualifications of refugees and swift re- and up-skilling are central elements of integration. Securing the necessary means for distance working, such as internet connectivity and devices, are also among the tools needed to tackle this issue.
- 7.3 The EESC calls for a more coordinated approach between the MSs when they put into practice the *Policy guidance on supporting the inclusion of Ukrainian refugees in education: considerations, key principles and practices*<sup>34</sup>. The EESC also invites the EC to activate all potential funding possibilities, especially for MS receiving huge numbers of refugees.
- 7.4 Women during war and fleeing from conflict are more vulnerable to sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. Rape is often used as a weapon in war. For Ukrainian women refugees, and in particular for rape victims, it is crucial to have access to Sexual and Reproductive Health Services, including contraception, emergency contraception, safe abortion care and psychological trauma care. Women should never be forced into proceeding with an unwanted pregnancy. The absence of these services in Member States should never be a reason to stop them from leaving an unsafe country. All Member States must ensure access to these services for all refugees. In general, trauma care for every refugee needs to be offered proactively, otherwise this is the perfect breeding ground for later conflicts and negative emotions costing states enormously! In this area, low-threshold, hybrid offers of support are needed desperately and funding of such start-ups needs to be supported consistently.
- 7.5 One more issue to be tackled is the vaccination status of the refugees – especially children. As the EU has well developed vaccination programmes for children, many dangerous diseases are eliminated – such as poliomyelitis, smallpox, some types of hepatitis, etc. To preserve this achievement, the MSs must mobilise their health care systems, and guidelines at EU level will

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<sup>32</sup> SME focus – Long-term strategy for the European industrial future. Policy department for Economic, Scientific and Quality of Life Policies, Directorate-General for Internal Policies of the European Parliament. Author: Stephanus Johannes SMIT, PE 648.776 – April 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Building on the suggestions of SOC/513.

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/en/pub/resources/publications/policy-guidance-on-refugees.htm>.

be of great help in this process. Additional complications arise from the fact that in many MSs access to social care, e.g. kindergarten or school, is subject to a completed vaccination status.

7.6 Later on, the reconstruction of Ukraine should be an opportunity to enhance gender equality among Ukrainians, by building up education, health care, social and digital infrastructure, among other things.

Brussels, 13 July 2022

Christa Schweng  
The president of the European Economic and Social Committee

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**N.B.:** Appendix overleaf.

**APPENDIX to the OPINION**  
of the  
European Economic and Social Committee

The following amendment, which received at least a quarter of the votes cast, was rejected during the discussion (Rule 43(2) of the Rules of Procedure):

**AMENDMENT 1**

**SOC/731**

**Gender equality**

**Point 3.5**

**Tabled by:**

ANGELOVA Milena

BLIJLEVENS René

KONTKANEN Mira-Maria

MINCHEVA Mariya

PILAWSKI Lech

VADÁSZ Borbála

**Amend as follows:**

<i>Section opinion</i>	<i>Amendment</i>
<p>While the participation of women in labour markets has increased in the last decade, there is still a clear gender segregation<sup>[1]</sup>. Inequalities in access to education and economic opportunities for women persist, although Europe has the lowest rates of inequality - with some differences between Western and Eastern Europe - compared to other parts of the world<sup>[2]</sup>. The EESC has also called for prompt measures to eradicate the gender pay and pension gaps in all areas and sectors, notably through <b>binding</b> pay transparency measures[3], and stresses that the former aggravates the latter, to which women are particularly vulnerable.</p> <p>Moreover, cultural context and traditional stereotypes affect women's occupational choices. Far more women than men work, for example, in education, care, health, and social sectors, while men dominate sectors such as construction and heavy industries.</p> <p>[1] EIGE. [2] Gender Gap Index. [3] SOC/678.</p>	<p>While the participation of women in labour markets has increased in the last decade, there is still a clear gender segregation<sup>[1]</sup>. Inequalities in access to education and economic opportunities for women persist, although Europe has the lowest rates of inequality - with some differences between Western and Eastern Europe - compared to other parts of the world<sup>[2]</sup>. The EESC has also called for prompt measures to eradicate the gender pay and pension gaps in all areas and sectors, notably through <b>promoting</b> pay transparency measures[3], and stresses that the former aggravates the latter, to which women are particularly vulnerable.</p> <p>Moreover, cultural context and traditional stereotypes affect women's occupational choices. Far more women than men work, for example, in education, care, health, and social sectors, while men dominate sectors such as construction and heavy industries.</p> <p>[1] EIGE. [2] Gender Gap Index. [3] SOC/678.</p>

**Outcome of the vote:**

In favour: 93

Against: 114

Abstention: 12
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