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Report  
Defending Equality in  
an Age of Democratic Decline  
**Reframing Europe's Gender Equality  
Strategy for 2026–2030**

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# I. Introduction

The European Union's Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 was conceived in a markedly different political environment. Drafted at the beginning of President von der Leyen's first mandate, it reflected a moment of relative confidence in the EU's normative power, its legal *acquis* on equality, and its ability to advance progressive standards through a combination of legislation, mainstreaming, and soft coordination. With the first ever female Commission President, there was a lot of hope for a breakthrough in decades long failure to achieve more gender equality. Six years later, that context no longer exists. Gender equality has moved from being a policy priority among others to becoming one of the most contested political fault lines in Europe's democratic landscape.

This paper is written against that backdrop. It assesses the outgoing Gender Equality Strategy not as an isolated policy document, but as an instrument that has been tested by political resistance, institutional caution and a rapidly deteriorating external and internal environment. It does so at a moment when the European Commission is preparing a new Gender Equality Strategy for the 2026–2030 period, under a mandate that explicitly frames equality within a broader agenda of security, preparedness and democratic resilience. The stakes of this transition are high. Whether the next Strategy merely reiterates ambitions or fundamentally recalibrates the EU's approach will shape the Union's capacity to defend gender equality in an increasingly hostile political climate.

The purpose of this paper is therefore twofold. First, it offers a political stock-taking of the Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025, examining where it delivered tangible progress and where it remained structurally vulnerable. Second, it identifies the challenges that the next Strategy must confront if it is to remain credible, enforceable and fit for the political realities of the coming years. Rather than cataloguing individual actions or legislative files, the analysis focuses on the Strategy's underlying assumptions, its implementation gaps and its inability to anticipate the scale and organisation of the backlash it would face.

This assessment is grounded in the perspective of Forbidden Colours, a civil society organisation working at the intersection of gender equality, the fundamental rights of LGBTIQ+ people, democratic resilience, and the monitoring of transnational anti-rights networks. From this vantage point, the limitations of the current Strategy are not abstract. They are visible in the systematic obstruction of EU equality initiatives in the Council, in the selective non-implementation of agreed standards at national level and in the growing coordination between anti-gender actors across borders.

Since 2020, the political context has shifted dramatically. Within the EU, a growing number of Member States have adopted more conservative or openly hostile positions towards gender equality and the fundamental rights of LGBTIQ+ people, often framing these issues as ideological impositions rather than treaty-based obligations. At the same time, external pressure has intensified. The return of a Trump administration in the United States has been accompanied by renewed efforts to delegitimise equality policies globally, including direct attacks on diversity, equity and inclusion measures and increasing political hostility towards EU regulatory frameworks such as the Digital Services Act. These dynamics do not remain external to the Union. They actively shape the information space and political narratives within Europe itself.

Against this backdrop, the Commission's continued commitment to a "Union of Equality," reaffirmed in the Mission Letter to the new Commissioner for Equality, Preparedness and Crisis Management, signals ambition but also raises critical questions.

The sections that follow develop this argument by first examining the achievements and shortcomings of the 2020–2025 Strategy, then situating them within the transformed political and geopolitical context, before identifying the structural gaps that must be addressed. The analysis culminates in concrete policy recommendations aimed at ensuring that the 2026–2030 Strategy treats gender equality not as a

technocratic policy field, but as a core component of the European Union's defence of its democratic values.

## II. Assessment of the Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025: Ambition, Delivery but Political Blind Spots

The Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 set out with a level of ambition that was, at the time, politically credible. Its language reflected a confident normative posture, presenting gender equality as a core value of the Union and embedding it across a wide range of policy fields. Terms such as “gender equality in all its diversity” and repeated references to intersectionality conveyed an aspiration to move beyond formal equality towards a more substantive and inclusive approach. Six years on, however, the distance between ambition, delivery and political will has become increasingly visible.

### Progress through persistence, not inevitability

Several of the Strategy's most tangible outcomes materialised not because the document itself provided strong enforcement tools, but because political pressure and institutional persistence continued well beyond its publication. The Directive on pay transparency illustrates this dynamic particularly clearly. While the Strategy announced the intention to introduce “binding measures on pay transparency by the end of 2020,” it remained deliberately vague on their scope and content. This vagueness stood in contrast to [President von der Leyen's 2019 Political Guidelines](#), which promised a binding proposal within the first 100 days of her mandate. The subsequent delay and prolonged silence triggered sustained criticism from civil society and equality actors. It was this pressure, rather than the Strategy's promises, that ultimately pushed the Commission to act, leading to the adoption of the [Pay Transparency Directive in 2023](#).

A similar pattern can be observed in the long-stalled proposal for a Directive on improving the gender balance among non-executive directors of companies. Originally tabled in 2012, the file had been blocked in the Council for nearly a decade. The Strategy reaffirmed the Commission's commitment to its adoption, but it was a shift in national political contexts (specifically the change of governments in Germany and the Netherlands and their withdrawal of vetoes) that unlocked agreement in October 2022 (Debusscher, 2022). These examples underline an important lesson: where progress occurred, it did so through changing political conditions and sustained advocacy, not because the Strategy itself had resolved structural blockages.

### Legal consolidation and enforcement successes

In other areas, the 2020–2025 period did see significant consolidation of the EU's legal framework on gender equality. The EU's accession to the Istanbul Convention in 2023 marked a major institutional breakthrough. Following the [Court of Justice's 2021 opinion](#) confirming that the Union could accede without unanimity among Member States, the Council's decision and the European Parliament's consent demonstrated the Commission's capacity to act decisively when political will aligned with legal clarity. This step addressed one of the Strategy's long-standing calls and strengthened the EU's toolbox to combat gender-based violence at Union level. Though, the Strategy did fail on convincing more member states to accede or consent to the Convention on a national level. In May 2020, the Hungarian parliament even blocked the national ratification of the Convention.

Similarly, the Strategy's emphasis on gender mainstreaming in funding instruments translated into concrete mechanisms. The introduction of a horizontal enabling condition on the effective implementation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights in the [Common Provisions Regulation](#) (CPR) represents a structural success. Gender equality considerations were further integrated into the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) following the COVID-19 crisis, signalling a recognition that macro-economic governance and crisis response are not gender-neutral. At the same time, critical scholarship has noted that these obligations often lacked

precision, limiting their transformative potential (Elomäki & Kantola, 2021). The RRF, in particular, suffered from vague guidance on gender mainstreaming, reducing the consistency and depth of its impact across Member States.

### **Language, mainstreaming and institutional fragility**

The Strategy placed considerable emphasis on mainstreaming equality across EU policies and institutions, presenting the creation of a stand-alone Commissioner for Equality and a Task Force on Equality as historic achievements. In practice, however, these institutional arrangements proved fragile. The merging of equality responsibilities with other portfolios in the subsequent Commission cycle, combined with uncertainty about the continued role and visibility of the Task Force, has weakened political ownership. Symbolic details, such as the delayed updating of official Commission communication channels, may appear minor but reflect a broader downgrading of equality's institutional prominence.

The document's language further reveals an ambition that was not matched by operational clarity. While intersectionality is repeatedly invoked as a guiding principle, the Strategy offers limited guidance on how it should be implemented in practice (Debusscher, 2022). This ambiguity allowed intersectionality to function more as a rhetorical commitment than as a concrete methodological framework, leaving significant discretion to Member States and individual Directorates-General.

### **The missing political diagnosis**

Most strikingly, the Strategy failed to anticipate or address the rapid rise of organised anti-gender and anti-rights movements across Europe. Despite page two of the document stating "progress with regard to gender equality is neither inevitable nor irreversible", it contains no meaningful analysis of political backlash, despite clear warning signs on Member State level already visible in 2020. The de facto abortion ban resulting from Poland's Constitutional Tribunal ruling later that year exposed the fragility of sexual and reproductive rights within the Union, yet abortion is conspicuously absent from the Strategy's text. This silence is particularly notable given that Malta (home country of the Commissioner for Equality responsible for the 2020-2025 Strategy) maintained a total ban on abortion throughout the period.

Taken together, the Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 delivered important legal and institutional gains, particularly where political pressure, judicial clarity, and changing national contexts aligned. Its language reflected an inclusive and forward-looking vision of gender equality, but this vision was not supported by a corresponding political analysis of resistance, backlash and democratic erosion. Mainstreaming advanced, but intersectionality remained under-defined. Enforcement tools improved, yet the Strategy largely treated opposition as a technical obstacle rather than a structural political threat.

These shortcomings are not merely retrospective critiques. They directly shape the challenges facing the next Strategy. As the political environment becomes more conservative, both within the EU and globally, the gap between aspirational language and enforceable action risks widening further. The following sections examine how this evolving context fundamentally alters the conditions under which the 2026–2030 Gender Equality Strategy will operate and why a different political approach is now required.

### III. Evolving Political and Geopolitical Context: Gender Equality as a Democratic Fault Line

The political environment in which the Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 was implemented differs fundamentally from the context in which it was drafted. What initially appeared as episodic resistance to equality measures has since evolved into a more coherent, transnational and strategically organised challenge. Gender equality has become a primary entry point through which democratic norms and fundamental rights are contested across the European Union.

The geopolitical dimension of the current backlash goes beyond rhetorical criticism or diplomatic posturing. For instance, in 2025, US embassies in several European countries sent formal letters to suppliers demanding certification that they do not implement Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, a requirement grounded in a Trump administration executive order banning DEI programmes in US federal contracts (Clifford Chance, 2025).

The US administration's main geopolitical anti-equality campaigns fit together within their digital imperialistic supremacy campaigns.

In late in 2025 the US State Department announced visa bans on European individuals, including former European Commissioner Thierry Breton, involved in the Digital Services Act (DSA). European leaders, including heads of state and Commission officials, condemned these measures as coercive and beyond appropriate diplomatic conduct. These sanctions came after the European Commission announced they are fining X for €120 million under the DSA.

In February 2026, the Financial Times reported that the US is planning to finance MAGA-aligned think-tanks and charities in Europe. The news came, again, after the European Commission announced an investigation into X's GPT Grok. Media reported that Grok allowed users to "undress" pictures of real humans, including children, without their consent.

These actions illustrate a broader contest over regulatory sovereignty and normative power packaged as 'retaliatory sanctions' that directly intersects with EU policy spaces where gender, equality and democratic resilience are negotiated.

These external pressures chip away at the EU's ability to assert its own normative frameworks (such as the DSA or AI-act) on equality and inclusion. They feed into political narratives that characterise equality initiatives, particularly DEI-related measures, as economically damaging, politically divisive or culturally alien. They also reinforce internal institutional hesitation to use robust, explicit language on rights that are already under pressure from domestic conservative forces.

#### The internal reflection

Within the EU, this shift is marked by the consolidation of conservative and 'illiberal' political forces in several Member States. Gender equality, sexual and reproductive rights and LGBTIQ+ inclusion are increasingly framed not as treaty-based obligations but as ideological impositions allegedly at odds with national identity, tradition, or sovereignty. This reframing has enabled sustained political obstruction, selective non-implementation of EU law and the gradual normalisation of rollback narratives that were still politically marginal when the Strategy was adopted.

Crucially, this backlash is no longer confined to national capitals or diplomatic statements. It is increasingly visible at EU level itself, including in areas traditionally assumed to be politically safeguarded. Recent developments in EU funding and political group discipline illustrate how anti-rights narratives are beginning to shape outcomes from within the institutions.

A first warning sign can be observed in the evolution of language used in EU funding instruments. In the CERV-2025-EQUAL (*this is the funding call code within the Commission's Citizens, Equality, Rights & Values Programme*) call for proposals, the objectives section foregrounds discrimination on the basis of sex, while making no explicit reference to gender identity, gender expression or sex characteristics. A comparison with the 2023–2024 CERV work programmes reveals a noticeable toning down of language related to trans and intersex inclusion.

This drift is even more visible in the legislative sphere. The European Parliament's [resolution on My Voice, My Choice](#) was widely seen as a landmark moment for sexual and reproductive rights at EU level. The initiative itself represents one of the clearest expressions of democratic demand in this policy area: more than 1.1 million verified European citizens called on the European Commission to act not by harmonising national abortion laws, but by proposing a solidarity-based financial mechanism to ensure access to safe and legal abortion for anyone in Europe who lacks it. Framed explicitly as a public health measure and grounded in the Treaties, the Charter of Fundamental Rights and existing EU health competences, the initiative articulated a concrete, legally plausible path forward where the Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 had remained silent.

Yet the parliamentary handling of this initiative simultaneously exposed the depth of institutional resistance. During the vote on the resolution, an amendment introduced by the French delegation within the European Conservatives & Reformists (ECR) delegation was adopted stating that “*only biological women can get pregnant and bear children*,” ([Amendment 7](#)) explicitly excluding trans and non-binary people from the scope of the text. This amendment passed with the support of a substantial part of the European People's Party, including decisive backing from its leadership. The result was a paradoxical outcome: a resolution expressing support for a citizen-led demand for reproductive rights, while embedding biologically reductive language that directly contradicts the inclusive principles underpinning EU equality policies.

These developments are reinforced by shifts in political group behaviour. On LGBTIQ+ issues more broadly, there is growing evidence that internal discipline within major political groups discourages visible engagement. Reports that Members of the European People's Party were instructed not to take proactive positions on the fundamental rights of LGBTIQ+ people, including an initial ban on participation in the banned Budapest Pride, underscore how equality issues are increasingly treated as politically toxic.

The contrast between the *My Voice, My Choice* initiative and the institutional responses instigated by political changes internally and abroad it triggered is therefore emblematic of the moment the EU now faces. European citizens are articulating clear demands for solidarity, dignity and access to fundamental healthcare. At the same time, parts of the Union's political architecture are retreating into caution and ambiguity. This growing gap between democratic demand and institutional delivery fundamentally alters the conditions under which the next Gender Equality Strategy will operate.

## IV. Thematic Gaps and Structural Shortcomings

The main weakness of the Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 was not insufficient ambition, but a misreading of the political environment in which it would operate. The Strategy treated gender equality primarily as a thematic policy area to be advanced through mainstreaming, funding and incremental legal progress. It did not recognise gender equality as a central fault line in Europe's democratic crisis. As a result, it was structurally ill-equipped to respond to organised backlash by the anti-rights movement, institutional obstruction and the growing weaponisation of equality itself.

This misdiagnosis had tangible consequences. As anti-gender narratives consolidated across several Member States and increasingly at EU level, equality objectives were stalled or selectively implemented

without triggering a proportionate political response. Gender equality remained largely siloed from the Union's rule-of-law, democracy and security frameworks, despite clear evidence that attacks on gender and the rights of LGBTIQ+ people are integral to broader strategies aimed at undermining civic space, fundamental rights and democracy itself.

One of the most consequential gaps was the Strategy's silence on abortion and bodily autonomy. By 2020, restrictions on sexual and reproductive health and rights were already intensifying, culminating later that year in Poland's de facto abortion ban, while Malta maintained a total prohibition. In 2022, Hungary obliged persons seeking an abortion to "listen to the foetal heartbeat". Yet abortion was absent from the Strategy, reflecting institutional caution rather than political inevitability. This omission left the EU unprepared when abortion returned forcefully to the European agenda. The *My Voice, My Choice* European Citizens' Initiative (mobilising more than 1.1 million citizens around a legally grounded proposal for access to safe abortion) exposed the growing gap between societal demand and political will.

While gender mainstreaming featured prominently in the Strategy and advanced procedurally, particularly in funding instruments, it lacked political force. Intersectionality was invoked but weakly operationalised, leaving implementation uneven and vulnerable to rollback. As resistance intensified, inclusive language and references to bodily autonomy and gender diversity became among the first elements to be quietly scaled back, revealing the limits of mainstreaming without enforcement or political ownership.

One crucial shortcoming in the Strategy is how people identifying as male could be incorporated in a more gender equal Europe. Already for years, influencers in the so-called 'manosphere' are indoctrinating primarily teenagers into being more misogynistic (Duetsche Welle, 2025). Failing to identify this as a major threat to a gender equal Europe leads to a Strategy that is not matching reality.

Finally, the Strategy failed to embed gender equality within the EU's broader effort to defend democracy. As the Union increasingly acknowledged threats posed by disinformation, foreign interference and coordinated attacks on democratic institutions, gender equality remained largely absent from this analysis, despite being one of the primary targets of organised anti-democracy and anti-rights movements. This separation constrained the EU's ability to deploy its full political and legal toolkit at a moment of escalating contestation.

## V. From Strategic Reframing to Political Action

If the next Gender Equality Strategy is to be credible in the current political context, it must move beyond incrementalism and explicitly position gender equality as a core component of the Union's democratic resilience. The European Parliament has already acknowledged in its resolution on the Gender Equality Strategy of 13 November 2025 that anti-gender and anti-rights movements constitute a direct threat to the Union's values, fundamental rights, rule of law and that sexual and reproductive health and rights, including access to safe abortion, are central to women's dignity, equality and autonomy. Likewise, Equinet in its response to the public consultation to the new Gender Equality Strategy have stressed that the persistence of backlash demands stronger institutional anchoring, clearer mandates and more politically robust approaches in the next Strategy (Equinet, 2025). The challenge for the 2026–2030 Strategy is therefore not only to address policy gaps, but to respond to a structural confrontation over democracy itself.

### Recommendations for the Gender Equality Strategy 2026–2030

To respond effectively to the organised anti-rights movement and to restore credibility to the Union's commitment to gender equality, the next Gender Equality Strategy should include the following measures:

#### **Integration of gender equality in democratic and security infrastructure:**

- **Frame gender equality explicitly as part of the EU’s democratic defence architecture**  
Require systematic integration of gender equality into initiatives such as the Democracy Shield, rule-of-law monitoring, and democratic resilience frameworks, recognising that anti-gender movements are central actors in broader anti-democratic strategies.
- **Mandate the EEAS to conduct dedicated research on FIMI targeting gender equality**  
Building on existing EEAS work on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference targeting LGBTIQ+ people (EEAS, 2023), commission a specific analysis of how FIMI operations target women’s rights, reproductive rights, and gender equality narratives and use these findings to inform EU external and internal policy responses.
- **Allocate targeted EU funding to counter the anti-rights movement through democratic civil society**  
Under the future AgoraEU programme in the MFF 2028–2034, earmark dedicated funding to support civil society organisations working to expose, counter and build resilience against anti-gender and anti-rights movements, including their transnational coordination and disinformation tactics.
- **Strengthen enforcement of the Digital Services Act (DSA)**  
Ensure faster and more robust enforcement of the DSA, including higher and more rapid fines for platforms that fail to address systemic amplification of hate speech, misogyny, and anti-gender disinformation, recognising their direct impact on democratic participation and equality.
- **Safeguard inclusive language and intersectionality across EU policies and funding**  
Reverse the trend towards diluted terminology by explicitly protecting references to gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics in EU strategies, legislation and funding instruments, and by operationalising intersectionality with clear guidance and accountability mechanisms .
- **Reinforce the role and independence of equality bodies**  
Strengthen mandates, resources and political backing for national equality bodies and EU-level coordination, ensuring they can act effectively in increasingly hostile political environments, as highlighted in the Equinet consultation.
- **Enlarge the mandate of the European Union’s Global Human Rights Sanction Regime (EUGHRSR)**  
The current EUGHRSR does not allow foreign individuals that sponsor anti-human rights campaigns in the EU to be sanctioned. It is crucial for the EU’s sovereignty to allow this sanction regime to also sanction these individuals.

#### **Sexual health & reproductive rights:**

- **Formally recognise *My Voice, My Choice* as a democratic mandate**  
Commit to proposing an EU-level, solidarity-based financial mechanism to ensure access to safe and legal abortion for anyone in Europe who lacks it, in line with Articles 9 and 168 TFEU and the Charter of Fundamental Rights. This mechanism should support Member States willing to provide abortion care to cross-border patients, without harmonising national abortion laws.
- **Explicitly integrate abortion and bodily autonomy into the Gender Equality Strategy**  
Treat access to safe abortion as a core issue of gender equality, public health, dignity, and democracy, rather than a peripheral or optional concern. The absence of abortion from the 2020–2025 Strategy must not be repeated.

#### **Gender-based violence & reaction to ‘manosphere’:**

- **Propose to the Council the inclusion of gender-based violence as an EU crime under Article 83(1) TFEU**  
Building on the European Parliament’s position, the Commission should formally invite the Council to extend the list of EU crimes (“Eurocrimes”) to include all forms of gender-based violence, recognising its serious cross-border dimension and its role in undermining fundamental rights and democratic values .
- **Introduce EU-wide criminalisation of rape based on the absence of consent**  
Following the Parliament’s calls, the Commission should propose legislation establishing a consent-

based definition of rape across the Union, ensuring equal protection of victims and addressing persistent gaps in national criminal law frameworks.

- **Prioritise Teacher Trainings on efficiently dealing with problems arising from the ‘manosphere’ under Erasmus+**

Under the opportunities for individuals, prioritise transnational cooperation, sharing of best practises and trainings on dealing efficiently with problem arising from the so-called ‘manosphere’ within the Erasmus+ programme.

## VI. Conclusion

The assessment of the Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 shows that progress on gender equality in the European Union is neither linear nor guaranteed. While important legal and institutional gains were achieved, they depended largely on sustained political pressure, judicial intervention and changing national contexts rather than on the Strategy’s own capacity to withstand backlash. At the same time, the political environment in which the Strategy operated deteriorated rapidly. Gender equality became a central target of organised anti-rights movements, instrumentalised to undermine fundamental rights, polarise societies and weaken democratic institutions. The Strategy’s failure to anticipate this confrontation (most notably through its silence on abortion and its limited integration into the Union’s democracy and security frameworks) left the EU reactive rather than prepared.

The next Gender Equality Strategy must therefore mark a decisive shift. Gender equality can no longer be advanced as a neutral social objective or a matter of political will. It must be recognised and defended as a core pillar of the European Union’s democratic project. This requires political courage: to respond to citizens’ demands such as those expressed through My Voice, My Choice; to confront anti-gender mobilisation directly, including through enforcement, funding and external action; and to embed gender equality across the Union’s democracy, rule-of-law, and security architecture. As guardian of the Treaties, the European Commission carries a particular responsibility to ensure that equality is not diluted under pressure, but strengthened as a foundation of a resilient, rights-based European democracy.

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## Executive Summary

This report argues that the EU's Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 was conceived for a political moment that no longer exists. While the Strategy delivered important legal and institutional gains, notably on pay transparency, corporate boards, funding conditionality and EU accession to the Istanbul Convention, these advances were achieved largely through sustained political pressure, judicial intervention, and shifting national contexts rather than through the Strategy's own resilience. At the same time, the political environment deteriorated sharply. Gender equality moved from being a broadly accepted policy objective to becoming one of the most contested fault lines in Europe's democratic landscape. Organised anti-gender and anti-rights movements, increasingly coordinated across borders and amplified by digital platforms, have targeted women's rights, LGBTIQ+ people's rights and sexual and reproductive health as a means to undermine fundamental rights, polarise societies and weaken democratic institutions. The Strategy failed to anticipate this confrontation. Its silence on abortion, its limited operationalisation of intersectionality and its separation from the EU's democracy and security frameworks left the Union reactive rather than prepared.

Looking ahead, the report contends that the next Gender Equality Strategy must represent a decisive political shift. Gender equality can no longer be treated as a thematic social policy to be advanced through mainstreaming alone. It must be recognised and defended as a core pillar of democratic resilience. This requires the European Commission to act on clear democratic mandates, including the My Voice, My Choice European Citizens' Initiative and to explicitly integrate safe access to abortion and bodily autonomy into its equality framework. It also requires confronting the anti-rights movement head-on: through stronger enforcement of EU law, targeted funding for democratic civil society and robust application of the Digital Services Act, and the integration of gender equality into the Union's democracy, rule-of-law and security architecture, including its response to foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI). As guardian of the Treaties, the Commission has a responsibility not to dilute equality under political pressure but to strengthen it as a foundation of a resilient, rights-based European democracy.