



Women's Rights in Turbulent Times: Conclusions of the 2017 Annual Colloquium on Fundamental Rights

On 20 and 21 November 2017, First Vice-President Frans Timmermans together with Commissioner Věra Jourová hosted the European Commission's [Annual Colloquium on Fundamental Rights](#), which this year focused on **women's rights in turbulent times**.

The high-level Colloquium brought together around the same table over 400 politicians, national and EU policy makers, representatives of International Organisations, civil society leaders, academics, legal practitioners, activists, businesses and trade unions, media representatives and journalists. Participants explored together the relationship between the fulfilment of fundamental rights for women, and pluralism, solidarity, tolerance, justice and equality. **They agreed to join forces and step up the efforts to protect and promote women's rights in the European Union.**

The topics for discussion included the presence and risk of normalisation of misogyny in society and its links to the violation of the fundamental rights of women in all spheres of life; the key obstacles to gender equality in economic empowerment and political participation; the international women's movement and the shrinking space for civil society; links between violence against women and other forms of violence in society, including in the context of populist and extremist movements; and the gendered nature of hate speech, racism, and other forms of discrimination.

The debate was informed by [concept papers](#), and the results of a [Special Eurobarometer survey on gender equality](#) released on the first day of the Colloquium. The survey shows that 84% of the respondents consider that gender equality is important for them personally. This included 80% of male respondents. The survey findings however show persistent stereotypes, as well as changing attitudes on some facets of women's and men's roles in society. For instance, 4 in 10 respondents agreed with the statement that the most important role for a man is to earn money, and that the most important role for a woman is to take care of her home and family. At the same time, 84% of Europeans approve of a man doing an equal share of household activities, and taking parental leave to take care of his children. More than half of respondents think there should be more women in political decision-making positions, and 86% feel their interests can be represented by a female politician. 70% of respondents are in favour of legal measures to ensure parity between women and men in politics. Only 26% of respondents are aware of the legal

guarantee for equal pay for equal work in their country, and 64% are favour of the publication of average wages by job type and gender at their company.

At the Colloquium, **First Vice-President Frans Timmermans** stressed that any backsliding on gender equality and women's rights is unacceptable: *"I thought, growing up, that the fight for equality was a linear fight. Just leading to ever better standards. But over the last five to ten years – probably also linked to the conflagration of crises we've had – things are moving backwards in many parts of the world. Sometimes religion is used as an argument, or tradition is used as an argument. Or indeed privilege is presented again as normality. But it's happening. I would say on behalf of all of us: 'Not on our watch.'"* First Vice-President Timmermans underlined the crucial importance of empowering women, as a benefit to society as a whole, and the role of men and boys in this movement: *"We need to address the issue of male privilege. Not by disempowering men, but by empowering women. And as soon as men understand that it's not something that's been taken away from them, but that it's something that's added to society as a whole – which benefits both men and women – I think we'll get there. I do believe that a vast majority of men, once they see privilege and understand it, they will be part of the correction of privilege."*

Věra Jourová, Commissioner for Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality echoed many participants in highlighting the continued scarcity of women's voices in public discourse: *"Women's voices are still not heard or even silenced. Democracy begins with our bodies and our voices. Women are still not around the table, but rather on the menu, when it comes to decision-making".* She reflected on the achievements of the European Commission's year of focused actions to combat violence against women in 2017 and encouraged stakeholders to continue fighting, because *"violence is not inevitable. Every act of violence is conscious, based on a decision".* The Commissioner also emphasised the need for further collaboration and alliances in protecting and promoting women's rights: *"Change is possible, but we need to work together. The role of civil society is indispensable. We have to bring men to understand the issues and power relations and to become the allies in our effort to achieve gender equality. And we have to address intersectionality, be it regarding colour, religion or disability."*

Women's rights under attack

The opening session of the Colloquium saw participants agreeing on the importance of **encouraging women to break through the barriers of silence** imposed on them throughout history.

They expressed concern at the growing wave of mobilisation around the world against gender equality. Several populist and extremist movements have been targeting **women's sexual and reproductive health and rights** in their attacks.

In this context, participants further stressed **the fundamental role of grassroots actors, including civil society organisations**, in offering a counter narrative and defending the human rights of women and girls. They underlined the importance of offering them more support, particularly through funding, while also increasing collaboration between different organisations in order to achieve tangible results together.

Discussants further underlined that different grounds of discrimination (such as gender, race, immigration status and disability) intersect and that multiple discrimination leads to additional burdens, which need to be taken into account when designing actions and policy for protecting and promoting women's rights.

Male and female participants alike agreed that **men also need to support this cause** not only because it is right, fair and just, but also because it is smart, since countries and companies which

are more gender-equal are more prosperous and profitable, while men who live in more gender-equal families are happier.

When asked how they felt about the future of women's rights in the EU, participants declared themselves overall *hopeful*. This reflects that while threats to women's rights and to gender equality have been very visible and present in public discourse recently, so have responses to these threats and awareness about the need to defend human rights, through for example women's movement such as the Women's Marches or the #MeToo movement online.

Empowering women's public voices, including online

This session first looked at the underlying mechanisms that fuel misogynistic hate speech, especially in the online world. Participants underlined the **lack of comparative data** to properly inform policy developments. Simultaneously, they highlighted current findings by the Council of Europe, the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, think tanks and academia that show that sexist hate speech and misogyny offline and online are a growing concern. In addition, the ethnicity, faith or sexual orientation of women is also often used to target them. Female public figures, including politicians, journalists, athletes or academics are also more exposed to threats and hatred. Strong testimonies were given of the impact this can have on women's health, voices and choices. Participants agreed that the **situation online is a reflection of what is happening offline** and that a global approach is needed.

Prevention through education, at the youngest age, about stereotypes, relations between boys and girls, and the impact of sexism and misogyny, was highlighted as an essential area to further invest in. Women and girls must also be given the means to be fully aware of the technological aspects of social media in order to be able to protect themselves better. The importance of networks between women and men and the positive impact of strong voices of women and male "role" models" were seen as essential to empower women to stand strong.

As other key ingredients of this holistic approach, participants mentioned the need for specific legislative frameworks in the Member States to combat misogynistic hate crimes efficiently and reinforce support and help for victims. They underlined the importance of implementing the EU Victims' Rights Directive and the Council of Europe recommendations on gender equality. **Proper training of medical care professionals, social care workers, police officers and legal practitioners** was deemed essential to avoid further victimisation and ensure an efficient follow-up of complaints. Addressing current underreporting through awareness-raising was seen as crucial.

Participants also called for **increased resources for civil society organisations, equality bodies and National Human Rights Institutions** to provide women with legal and psychological support, including in court, and help them counter and block hate messages online. The representation of women in the IT business might also help to ensure that tools are developed in a way that protects women. **IT platforms present in the discussions underlined their role** in working with users and civil society in the identification and removal of illegal content. They can also play a very important role in empowering credible online voices and role models to counter misogyny and hate.

Promoting women's rights through inclusive and sustainable civil society

In this session, participants discussed their experiences of being active in women's rights organisations. Participants agreed that **civil society plays a crucial role in the promotion of women's rights** and actors should work closer together in order to maintain the political pressure on decision-makers, especially at a time when there is increasing resistance. Importantly, challenges and threats mobilise traditional actors and new allies alike.

Most participants highlighted that **intersectionality has to play a bigger role in the women's movement**. This includes interests of groups of women that are marginalised, such as women of colour, religious minorities, transwomen, migrant women, as well as women with disabilities being better represented. It is not simply a question of solidarity; many participants stressed that without an intersectional approach, gender equality cannot be achieved and the women's movement will lack credibility. Simultaneously, to advance fundamental rights of all other groups, it is crucial to take into account the gender perspective. Therefore, different civil society organisations need to work together. Participants agreed that increased attention to the experiences of women in minority groups does not mean a diffusion of the focal point for action for the women's movement, which remains discrimination based on gender.

Participants called for **more and more sustainable resources for civil society initiatives**, and a better use of resources through **gender budgeting at European and national level**. Women's rights organisations report great difficulties in obtaining reliable public support and suffer from decreasing funding, in the wake of the economic crisis. Participants agreed that European and national policy makers should address this concern in the upcoming years.

Equal participation at work and in politics: a fundamental rights prerequisite

Participants highlighted the crucial **contribution of women to the European Union economy**. Participants emphasised that women's political and economic empowerment should be a **joint exercise for men and women together**, and will benefit both as well as economic sustainability.

The introduction of **gender quotas was welcomed** by the participants as a possible effective solution, as illustrated for instance in the Parliament of the Republic of Ireland and in Germany for non-executive positions in the largest companies. Participants emphasised the need to swiftly adopt the **Women on Boards** proposal tabled by the European Commission.

Multiple discrimination faced by some women, in particular **based on disability or ethnicity** was again highlighted as an area needing more action. Participants described discrimination and inequality as complex being not only about limited access to job opportunities or political parties, but also about lack of **access to sponsorship, networks, mentoring and challenging roles**. Participants stressed the marginalisation experienced, for instance, by Roma women with reference to homelessness, unemployment, the inaccessibility of education and public health care.

Participants agreed that **sexual harassment and online hate speech remains a barrier** to women playing a bigger role in business and politics. Participants called for legal measures to tackle sexual harassment in the context of the momentum created by the #MeToo movement.

Many participants pointed out that there is a **lack of litigation on violations of women's rights**. Furthermore, some participants invited women to play a more active part in changing their role in the society: "If you are not around the table you are on the menu".

To address the root cause of women's underrepresentation at work, decision-making and politics, **gender stereotypes must be tackled from an early age**. Role models, including those that do not conform to gendered expectations, can play a key role. The process of un-stereotyping advertising would also have a positive impact.

Women's economic empowerment: is it possible to close the gender pay gap?

The discussions in this session highlighted that, after initial progress on women's labour market participation and pay equality, it is now more difficult to advance. Participants agreed that it should be **possible to close the gender pay gap by 2030**, but it requires concerted action from all stakeholders. Shifting the balance of responsibility and starting to **"share the care"** were highlighted by many as essential elements of the way forward. In this light, participants emphasized the need to adopt the Commission's proposed Work-Life Balance Package.

When consulted, participants named strengthening **pay transparency** as one of the two essential measures to tackle the gender pay gap, alongside **tackling horizontal and vertical labour market segregation**, while **better work-life balance** came in as a close third. Discussants emphasised the **added difficulties of implementing measures aimed at closing the gender pay gap in small and medium sized companies**, and the continuing need to find ways to do this, particularly as transparency there tends to be lower.

The use of Dr Jude Browne's 'Critical Mass Marker approach' was proposed: this involves shifting the focus from blanket gender quotas of 40% applied only to corporate boards, to instead devising **quota systems at any level of the organisation** where a disproportionately large group are failing to move on to the higher level, thus addressing the structural inequalities within the company.

Participants recognised the need to start a **dialogue with young people** and present positive **role models** to combat gender stereotyping at home and in schools. At the same time, the domains of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics were presented as an opportunity for women around the world to shape the future generation of leaders, and to **prevent a future digital divide**.

Discussants also highlighted the need to address **multiple discrimination in relation to occupational segregation, as highlighted with the example of domestic and care workers**, many of whom are women and migrants. To combat discrimination against these workers, participants emphasised the importance of implementing the International Labour Organization's Convention 189 for domestic workers and referred to the French and Belgian "titre service" system as an example of a best practice, where consumers can pay for household services through subsidised vouchers, helping to ensure decent wages but also ensuring that workers are protected in terms of social security and working conditions.

Participants highlighted that further **clarification on the definition of the concept of "work of equal value"** would be useful, as well as the need to revise Directive 2006/54 for that purpose.

Engendering democracy: women in the political process

Participants stressed that politics are about power, and the holders of power get to set the rules of the game. Skewed laws and political "infrastructure" keep women out of politics. Political party rules and processes, the composition of party lists and access to party funding were raised repeatedly as blockers. National and European political parties were called upon to commit to the **sustained inclusion of women on party lists** by promoting the objective of increased equality, for example through greater transparency on candidate selection, "zipper" systems where male and female candidates would appear alternately on such lists, women's caucuses and other similar initiatives.

The **complexity and multidimensionality of the concept of gender balance in politics** was acknowledged. Issues included the lack of economic independence of women, the role of media, gender stereotypes, harassment and (online) violence, measures and indexes of gender equality and

sensitivity, two-headed leadership, and the digital divide. To ensure women and men enjoy equal rights and effective opportunities to express their needs and to see their interests equally represented, the debate on the issue should extend beyond mere numbers and statistical data on women in politics to include institutional and structural factors – in other words, it is not just about how many women you get in through the door, it is about making sure the system encourages sustainable equality of opportunity. Participants considered that **measures are urgently needed to foster an inclusive, intersectional approach in addressing women's political empowerment**, considering socio-economic and demographic factors which influence the exercise of women's political rights, with a view to increasing the engagement and representation of diverse groups of women, especially women from minority backgrounds, such as Roma, and women with disabilities.

Participants called for funding of projects which help women turn out to vote, stand as candidates (including financial and mentoring support for individual candidates), get involved in campaigning and political organisations and participate in the political debate, and support educational activities which increase women's awareness of the right to vote and stand for elected, with a focus on local and European elections. Part of this should be achieved through exchanging best practices which help citizens vote in and stand for EU elections, including increasing equal representation of men and women, to support turnout and broad democratic participation in the perspective of the 2019 European elections.

Confronting a culture of violence

Participants raised concerns about the efforts being made to counter violence against women, which are seen as not sufficient. They agreed that **violence is not inevitable** and every act of violence is done with deliberate intention and is permitted by others. The need to think creatively to **shift the fear and shame away from victims onto the perpetrators** was recognised in order to bring about change on a cultural level, so that the *perpetration* of violence and harassment is generally considered both unacceptable and disgraceful.

When asked which area of action they would prioritise to reduce violence against women in the EU, participants overwhelmingly chose education in schools, confirming that **combating gender stereotyping from an early age** is an essential part of the struggle to end violence against women.

The discussion highlighted clearly the need to involve men when talking about women's rights, while also emphasising the need for women to stand up for themselves, be ambitious and support each other. **Men need to commit and be part of the solution**; women do not need charity, but solidarity. Discussants mentioned the importance of media in displaying healthy relationships between men and women, based on equality, so they become attractive for young people to follow.

Participants underlined the **importance of the Istanbul Convention** for preventing violence against women and protecting victims, at EU and Member State level.

Another important point raised throughout the session was the **need to apply an intersectional approach to addressing violence against women**, for instance through ensuring access to general services as well as specialised support for women from marginalized groups.

The **health domain** was identified as one of the areas where further action could be considered, with discussants identifying a need to provide specific training to health professionals in order to appropriately identify and support victims of violence against women.

Harnessing our collective capacity to end violence against women

The participants welcomed the fact that the European Union is in the process of acceding to the **Istanbul Convention**. They cautioned against recently emerging movements fuelled by right-wing politicians trying to disrupt the progress on gender equality and on women's rights by suggesting women's rights would be bad for so-called traditional values of the family.

Speakers pointed out that **women with disabilities** are often not explicitly included in strategies on combating violence against women. They often have no possibility to physically access shelters and other facilities and thus, are forced to stay in violent situations. The high, and increasing, murder rate of **transwomen** was also emphasised, as was the vulnerability of **homeless women**. To make sure all women, including those most vulnerable, are taken into account, participants highlighted that "violence against women is to be addressed from the margins to the centre". Participants underscored that organisations working against violence need increased **funding**. They called for **alliances** among public and private organisations and also agreed that there is a **lack of training among police forces, teachers, social workers and people working in the justice and health sectors**.

Trafficking of women for labour and sexual exploitation

Participants expressed concern about the fact that **trafficking in human beings, a crime driven by profit, remains extremely lucrative** in the European Union and not enough progress has been made, with low numbers of identified victims and convictions of perpetrators. Since **women and girls are the majority of trafficking victims**, particularly for sexual exploitation, participants agreed on the need to ensure that trafficking is treated as violence against women and included in the gender equality agenda.

Discussants insisted on the importance of ensuring that existing legislative measures, such as the 2011 Anti-trafficking Directive, are fully implemented and that sufficient funding is provided for this. Participants recognised the need to **step up international cooperation between the EU Member States and the countries of origin** of victims of trafficking, in order to reduce demand and fight criminal networks. Participants also called for a new EU Strategy. Moreover, the discussion highlighted clearly the need for training of all the professionals involved.

Participants expressed concern that **victims of trafficking are still being treated as criminals in many cases**, being primarily considered illegal migrants. However, trafficking of women also affects EU citizens and also occurs outside of a migration context. Participants emphasised the need to ensure **unconditional access to assistance for victims**, independent from criminal proceedings in relation to immigration status. Participants also underlined the need to ensure access to justice and consider the links between prostitution and trafficking in human beings. The models applied in countries such as Sweden, Iceland, Norway and France, banning the purchase of sex and decriminalising people in prostitution, were praised by many as the best way forward.

Key European Commission actions

The European Commission is undertaking a number of actions directly responding to the topics raised in the Colloquium. This includes in particular:

Counteracting anti-gender mobilisation and backsliding of women's rights in the political and public sphere

- The Commission will continue to deliver on the actions in the “Strategic Engagement on Gender Equality (2016-2019)”, including publishing regular reports on gender equality and the Gender Equality Index in cooperation with the European Institute for Gender Equality. The Commission will also monitor the implementation of the Strategic Engagement and will consult stakeholders on next steps.
- The Commission will ensure women's rights and gender equality are properly reflected in all its political decision-making. The promotion of women's rights and gender equality will receive special attention during the meetings of the Commission's Project Team on Sustainable Development, which includes all Commissioners. Wherever relevant, the Commission will continue to put the topic of gender equality on the agenda in discussions with Member States.
- The Commission will continue within the current programming period to dedicate funding to organisations that promote gender equality and have an impact on closing gender gaps. It will pay particular attention to the European Institute for Gender Equality's study on gender budgeting in the European Structural and Investment Funds that is being conducted on local, regional, national and EU level, with results expected in 2019.
- The Commission will, when developing policies, increasingly take into account multiple discrimination, based, in addition to gender, on factors such as age, ethnicity, religion, and ability. An increased focus will be given to the situation of Roma women and girls in the implementation of the EU framework for national Roma integration strategies.
- The Commission will monitor and firmly denounce any discourse, laws and policies that undermine gender equality.

Protecting women's right to a life free from violence

- The European Commission will cooperate actively with the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union to ensure the completion of the accession process to the Istanbul Convention, including internal arrangements for the implementation of the Convention.
- The Commission will continue to raise awareness on violence against women through the social media campaign [Non.No.Nein. Say No – Stop Violence Against Women](#) and through the Spotlight Initiative, including informing and educating about different types of violence, such as domestic violence, sexual violence, cyber violence, harmful practices such as female genital mutilation, forced marriage and honour crimes, and about the available instruments and effective tools to address violence.
- The Commission will continue improving data collection on different forms of gender-based violence, including on trafficking in human beings disaggregated by gender. A survey is being developed within the European Statistical System and the aim is to carry out a full scale survey in 2019-20 in all Member States willing to participate. The European Institute for Gender Equality will provide access to existing statistical data and information on gender-based violence, aiming to support the Institutions and experts engaged in preventing and combating gender-based violence in the European Union and beyond. This data will include administrative data, analysis of the costs, data on cyberviolence against women, as well as an analysis of legal acquis relating and a mapping of methods and tools used to address gender-based violence in Member States.

- The Commission will continue to monitor closely the transposition and implementation of relevant EU laws in Member States, including the Victims' Rights Directive, the European Protection Orders, and the Anti-Trafficking Directive. The Commission will follow-up on the Communication on the Eradication of trafficking in human beings, in a gender specific manner, using the analysis of measures on protection and support by the European Institute of Gender Equality and the Commission Study on the gender dimension of trafficking in human beings.
- The Commission will continue to actively contribute to the prevention of and response to gender-based violence in emergency situations, including through the European Union leadership of the global multi-stakeholder initiative Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence until the end of 2018;
- The Commission will continue to support concrete initiatives to fight gender-related discrimination and violence in the workplace, such as through the "Platform for change" in the transport sector.
- The Commission will encourage interested information and communication technology and tech sector representatives to examine the scope for industry-led initiatives to tackle misogyny online.
- The Commission has published a [call for proposals under the Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme](#) (open 8 March 2018) to prevent and combat GBV and violence against children. Three of the priority areas are linked directly to issues raised during the Colloquium, namely, (1) the prevention of GBV, particularly changing social norms and behaviour in order to end tolerance of all forms of GBV; (2) the coordination and/or adaptation of support services for sexual and gender-based violence to include refugees and migrants; (3) the prevention and response to cyber sexual- and gender-based violence.

Empowering women economically and politically, and promoting women's voice in all aspects of public life

- The European Commission will work actively with the European Parliament and the Council to ensure the successful completion of the negotiations on the [Work-Life Balance Directive](#) , and with the Member States to ensure the implementation of the 10 actions announced in the [Work-Life Balance Communication](#).
- The Commission will continue to push for the adoption of the [proposal on gender balance in corporate boards](#).
- The Commission will implement the Action Plan on the Gender Pay Gap of November 2017, including specific actions to get more women into the digital sector, such as: continuing to invite companies to join the Grand Coalition on digital skills and jobs; continuing to support the exchange of good practices on gendered innovation, diversity, inclusion, and balanced leadership; and considering appropriate follow-up to the 2018 study on Women in Digital Age.
- The Commission will continue to support the systematic collection of data disaggregated wherever relevant by gender, as a sound basis for policy decisions, including notably on topics such as health, the effects of climate change through the Taskforce on Displacement, and also through the monitoring system in place for the European Social Fund, and the quantitative and qualitative monitoring of the Employment and Social Innovation programme.
- The Commission has published an [open call for proposals](#) (opening 8 March 2018) under the Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme to address: (1) equal participation of women and men in public fora, in leadership positions in politics and in the corporate sector; (2) support to public authorities and civil society in relation to the 'New Start to Support Work-Life Balance for Parents and Carers' initiative.
- The Commission proposed that European political parties who receive funding from the EU ensure that their affiliated national parties are transparent about the gender representation

among their candidates at the last elections to the European Parliament and among their Members of the European Parliament.

- The Commission supports the objectives of the [European Parliament's proposal to reform the electoral act of the European Union](#) to enhance the European dimension and the democratic legitimacy of the EU decision-making process, which is currently under negotiation in the Council, and including proposed provisions to support gender equality in the list of candidates put forward by the political parties, by means of zipped lists (i.e. alternating the sexes on the party list) or other equivalent methods.
- The Commission will continue to support , including through the Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme, projects which help women turn out to vote, stand as candidates, get involved in campaigning and political organisations and participate in the political debate, and support educational activities which increase women's awareness of the right to vote and be elected, with a focus on local and European elections. The Commission invites the European Parliament, the Committee of the Regions and national and European political parties to join it in this effort.
- In the run up to the 2019 European election, the Commission will organise in 2018 a high-level event on democratic participation with a particular focus on encouraging best practices to increase the participation of young people and vulnerable and underrepresented groups, including women.

Supporting the work of civil society organisations and the international women's movement in promoting women's rights and gender equality

- The Commission will continue to support within the current programmes civil society organisations, including women's organisations and non-governmental organisations that promote gender equality and have an impact on closing-gender gaps, women human rights defenders as well as networks, through operating grants and actions grants for specific activities relating to gender equality.
- The Commission will continue to support within the current programming period these organisations both within the EU and abroad, as gender is recognised as a cross-cutting driver for development in the New European Consensus on Development (June 2017) and the EU Gender Action Plan 2016-2020.
- The Commission and the European External Action Service will continue to consult and engage with civil society organisations, including on topics related to peace, security, terrorism and violent extremism, climate change, energy, mobility, economy, migration, trafficking of women and girls, as well as the preparations for the annual United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. In its engagement with civil society organisations the Commission will foster intersectional coalitions for addressing multiple forms of discrimination and tackling the challenges of complex societies.