



COFACE Families Europe submission in response to the 2026-2030 gender equality strategy public consultation

August 2025

Introduction

[COFACE Families Europe](#)¹ wishes to actively participate in shaping the European Commission's Gender Equality Strategy for 2026-2030. We believe that equality between women and men is a cornerstone for the reconciliation of the family and professional life, with an equal sharing of family care responsibilities between men and women. This is clear from all COFACE positions and activities, including the 2022 #FamilyTeamWork [international campaign](#) and the 2025 expert meeting [Equal at Home – Equal at Work](#) in Warsaw.

[EIGE's Gender Equality Index](#) indicates that Europe is moving in a positive direction overall but there is still a need for substantial progress before the EU reaches gender equality, as well as significant differences across Member States. The Gender Equality Strategy 2026-2030 offers an opportunity to set new priorities and intensify efforts towards inclusion, equity, and support for all.

In this document, we present key recommendations for the new strategy with initiatives focusing on closing the gender care gap and, in general, on addressing the intersections of gender equality and family well-being, building upon the objectives highlighted in the [European Commission's Roadmap for Women's rights](#).

Key recommendations

- Prevent online gender-based violence through awareness-raising, strong enforcement of the Digital Services Act, and including a gender perspective in the upcoming Action plan against cyberbullying.
- Approach gender equality through a multi-generation lens.
- Ensure the effective implementation of the EU Directives on Pay Transparency, Gender-balance on Company Boards, Combating Violence Against Women and Work-Life Balance, as well as the Barcelona targets for childcare for 2030.
- Combat gender-based biases in hiring with diversity policy measures and flexible work arrangements.
- Close the gender care gap through a mix of measures including gender-responsive local services providing support to both mothers and fathers.
- Build family-supportive workplaces through Corporate Sustainability Reporting with indicators on work-life balance and gender equality.
- Build intersectionality into the design of the Gender Equality Strategy.
- Establish a Gender Equality Strategy Platform.

¹ [COFACE Families Europe](#) is a network which represents millions of families, volunteers, and professionals. COFACE advocates for strong social policies that take into consideration family needs and guarantee equal opportunities for all families. Our areas of work include social and family policy, education, disability rights, gender equality, children rights, migration, consumer issues as well as the impact of technological developments on families.

1. Freedom from online gender-based violence

Online gender-based violence remains a widespread and deeply harmful issue affecting the lives of women and girls throughout the EU, including online harassment, sexual violence, sexism, cyberbullying and AI generated deep nudes. For example, more than 70% of female video game players admit to having encountered sexism and 36.4% say they have been insulted during an online game.² Girls and women are also disproportionately affected by AI generated deep nudes.³ Data from the OECD also shows that, in most countries, girls are more likely to report cyberbullying victimisation.⁴ Additionally, research has shown that women and girls who are racialised, have a disability and/or identify as LGBTIQ+ are targeted even more by online gender-based violence.⁵

These attitudes toward women reflect broader societal issues, reinforcing restrictions on women's participation in various spaces and perpetuating inequality and violence. The consequences of online violence can be as serious as physical violence. The Strategy must **prioritise the prevention of all forms of online violence** against women and girls, including through [awareness campaigns](#), the full implementation of the Directive on Combating Violence Against Women, strong enforcement of the Digital Services Act, and including a gender perspective in the upcoming Action plan against cyberbullying.

2. Equal pay and economic empowerment

Women are more at risk of financial insecurity in older age than men. Elder women tend to retire earlier than men when considering caregiving responsibilities, health limitations and economic constraints.⁶ This comes along with lower retirement savings due to fragmented employment trajectories and lower earnings, leading to financial gender gaps. The Gender Equality Strategy should **approach gender equality through a multi-generation lens** and consider measures targeting different generations from children to older persons.

3. Equal employment opportunities and adequate working conditions

Gender gaps in labour market outcomes persist across Europe, including in hiring, wages, working hours, career advancement and pensions. For example, research findings confirm that women, especially single mothers, face systemic biases in hiring processes across Europe.⁷ Gender-equal labour markets, however, are not only fair, but also more productive and resilient to demographic shifts by expanding the labour force to ease pressure on pension systems, healthcare, and public

² Nira Santana Rodríguez and Octavio Díaz Santana, [Una aproximación desde el enfoque de género, al consumo de videojuegos y la situación de las jugadoras en el sector](#), 2020.

³ Van de Heyning et al., [Deepnudes onder Belgische jongeren: de aantallen, de markt, de impact](#), 2023.

⁴ OECD, How's Life for Children in the Digital Age?, 2025, [doi:10.1787/0854b900](#).

⁵ UNFPA, [Technology-facilitated Gender-based Violence: Making All Spaces Safe](#), 2021.

⁶ Vasile et al., [Explaining cross-country variation in timing and work exit routes among older workers](#), 2025.

⁷ Buttler et al., [How context shapes care-based discrimination in hiring: evidence from a cross-national factorial survey experiment](#), 2025.



finances.⁸ This makes them essential for strengthening the EU's long-term competitiveness and preparedness for future economic and social challenges.

The Gender Equality Strategy should promote measures to increase the labour market participation of women and build family-supportive workplaces, including by combating discrimination in hiring, effectively implementing the EU Directives on Pay Transparency and Gender-balance on Company Boards, and shifting workplace culture to better support the reconciliation of professional and caregiving responsibilities for both men and women (see 4.).

The PATHS2INCLUDE research project studied the organizational-level determinants of hiring discrimination based on care responsibilities, finding that such discrimination is less prevalent in companies with **diversity policy measures and flexible work arrangements**.⁹ The Strategy should encourage employers to adopt concrete, actionable measures like inclusive hiring practices, mentoring programs, and diversity management training to engage managers in diversity efforts, as well as to support the uptake of flexible and inclusive work arrangements.

In addition, the strategy should implement **Corporate Sustainability Reporting monitoring of the gender pay gap, the percentage of women in higher positions and parental leave taken up by fathers**. Indicators on work-life balance and gender equality should be monitored closely by companies to implement strategies that enhance flexible working arrangements and reduce barriers for fathers to use parental leave. Inclusive, family-supportive workplace cultures should be built on equal opportunities, non-discrimination, and a recognition of family diversity.

Indeed, today's families are diverse: single parents, same-sex couples with children, blended families, large and multigenerational households, families with disabilities, and more. Transforming organisational culture to support all workers, regardless of family structure, benefits the entire organisation by contributing to a more attractive and inclusive workplace, helping businesses retain diverse talent and motivating employees. Family-supportive policies can unlock Europe's hidden talent pool, which is essential in this moment of rapid transformations.

4. Work-life balance and care

One of the biggest obstacles to gender equality in the EU is the unequal distribution of care. Currently, only five EU countries do not have a childcare gap (the period following the birth of a child, when well-paid parental leave ends, but before state-supported full-time early childhood education and care (ECEC) is available)¹⁰ which may require parents, mostly mothers, to delay their return to work to care for their child despite inadequate financial compensation, or even to leave employment altogether. The consequences are profound: women, especially mothers, are overrepresented in part-time work (e.g., 69.2% in the Netherlands vs. 12.6% of men) and, in countries with low ECEC participation (e.g., Romania, Slovakia), over 60% of children under three are cared for solely by parents, typically mothers.¹¹ These patterns reflect deep-rooted caregiving

⁸ [Presentation](#) by Jasmin Thomas, OECD, during expert meeting [Equal at Home – Equal at Work](#), 2025.

⁹ Buttler et al., [How context shapes care-based discrimination in hiring: evidence from a cross-national factorial survey experiment](#), 2025.

¹⁰ Martino Serapioni, [Childcare gap in the European Union: A 2025 overview](#), 2025.

¹¹ Based on Eurostat data.



roles and hinder women's career progression, reinforcing gender imbalances in the labour force. Not only childcare, but also informal care¹² for elderly relatives or relatives with disabilities or illness is crucial to consider in initiatives supporting families to reconcile work and care responsibilities, particularly in context of the current demographic trends and ageing population.

The ability to harmonise career and family responsibilities is not merely a personal but a societal challenge, deeply intertwined with gender norms, economic participation, and the well-being of families. A robust strategy for gender equality must prioritise dismantling structural barriers that perpetuate disparities between men and women by placing work-life balance mechanisms at its core, recognising their potential to reshape labour markets, redistribute caregiving responsibilities, and foster equitable opportunities for all. Addressing these challenges requires redefining parental leave policies to encourage shared caregiving and expanding access to care.

The EU Work-Life Balance Directive has already driven reforms across EU countries to better balance work and family life and to promote a more equal sharing of caregiving responsibilities, for example in Poland.¹³ However, the European Equality Law Network's second report on the transposition of the Work-Life Balance Directive shows that important implementation gaps persist.¹⁴ The Gender Equality Strategy must ensure the **effective implementation of the Work-life Balance Directive** and Member States must go beyond the standards of the directive and facilitate take-up of family leaves by providing adequate pay, non-transferable leaves and flexible take-up for women and men. These family policies must consider the realities of different types of families, including single-parent families, and especially single mothers, to prevent unintended consequences.¹⁵

The Strategy should also **expand access to high-quality affordable care services** and create synergies with the European Care strategy, recognising and supporting long-term caregivers (still mostly women), and the European Child Guarantee, as well as monitor the Barcelona 2030 targets on ECEC. ECEC should be flexible and take into account the realities of different types of families, such as lone-parent families or families with children with disabilities, as they might have additional needs.¹⁶ Family support services for parents and carers should also be developed and funded under the European Social Fund+ in a gender responsive and father-inclusive way, building on existing effective models such as Perepesa in Estonia or the House of the Child in Belgium.¹⁷ Such community-based services must be designed to create spaces for both mothers and fathers to interact with their peers and receive the support they need especially in the early

¹² See also: Eurofound, [Living conditions and quality of life: Unpaid care in the EU](#), 2025.

¹³ Share The Care and ZUS, [Mothers and fathers at home and at work Parental equality in Poland in a broader socio-economic context](#), 2025.

¹⁴ European network of legal experts in gender equality and non-discrimination, [The transposition of the Work-Life Balance Directive in EU Member States \(II\): Considerable work still to be done](#), 2023.

¹⁵ See also: Lovisa Backman, [Implications of an incomplete gender revolution for low-resourced single mothers in Sweden](#), 2025.

¹⁶ Mary Daly, Elizabeth Gosme, Holly Shorey and Merve Uzunalioglu, [Policy Priorities for Family Resilience](#), 2025.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Gosme, Holly Shorey, Rense Nieuwenhuis and Merve Uzunalioglu, [Roadmap for boosting the rights and resilience of families](#), 2025

years after the birth of a child, but also through other key life transitions such as adolescence and young adulthood.

5. Quality and inclusive education

Inclusive and democratic societies require a **strongly inclusive education system** to ensure all children get a fair start in life, as a basis to build fully inclusive societies respectful of families in all their diversity. Although an increasing number of women and men succeed in tertiary education, their educational and career choices are still strongly influenced by gender stereotypes, with women less likely to enrol in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) disciplines and men underrepresented in education, health and humanities.¹⁸ This segregation is specifically harmful for women, as STEM careers are often more highly paid while sectors in which women are overrepresented tend to be under-paid. EU initiatives like [Girls Go Circular](#) are welcome as we need to provide girls and women with more opportunities to develop critical digital and entrepreneurial competences.

6. Institutional mechanisms that deliver on women's rights

Advancing women's rights requires effective gender mainstreaming, financing and institutional infrastructure, as well as gender-sensitive research, data collection, design and planning that address women's needs with an intersectional approach.¹⁹

Women represent a diverse group, facing various forms of intersectional discrimination arising from multiple situations. For example, women with health-related limitations living in households with dependents face particular difficulties to participating in the labour market²⁰ and women with disabilities are increasingly at risk of poverty or social exclusion compared to men with disabilities and persons without disabilities.²¹ To effectively address these disparities, it is essential to **integrate intersectionality into the design of the strategy**, not only as a principle but with targeted actions, keeping family diversity in mind, and acknowledging realities of women at the intersection of situations which may cause vulnerabilities such as the birth of a child, poverty, disability, sexual orientation, racism, and discrimination.

Gender equality should be **mainstreamed across all EU policy areas**, including the Strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities, the European Pillar of Social Rights (Action Plan), the Anti-Poverty Strategy, as well as in **data collection and research**. Systematically monitoring gender differences in adult care as part of the EU-SILC survey, as proposed by the rEUsilience research

¹⁸ Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture Education and Training, [Working Group on Equality and Values in Education and Training - Issue paper on Gender Equality in and through Education](#), 2023.

¹⁹ European Commission, [Roadmap for Women's rights](#), 2025.

²⁰ Ona Valls, Arianna Vivoli, Robin Samuel and Elisabeth Ugreninov, [Mapping labour market attachment among vulnerable groups in European countries: health-related and intersectional barriers before and after COVID-19 pandemic](#), 2025.

²¹ Based on Eurostat data: [Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion by level of disability \(activity limitation\), sex and age](#).



project²², can inform the development and evaluation of policies that support and sustain family resilience in time of adult care needs.

Finally, the European Commission should **establish a Gender Equality Strategy Platform** that gathers Member State representatives and EU-level Civil Society Organisations working to advance gender equality in different fields (work, family, childhood, business, advertising, etc.) in the format of an enhanced formal dialogue to monitor progress made. The Platform should serve as a key channel for sharing information about the European monitoring and evaluating procedures regarding gender equality measures, cross-sectoral working with EU funding programmes, following investments in gender equality via the European Semester process and Economic Governance Reform, as well as to develop practical guidelines for the development of human rights-based and gender responsive service models at local level.

²² Alzbeta Bartova and Wim Van Lancker, Adult Care, [Work and Well-being in Europe. Ad Hoc Module for submission to ESS call for rotating modules](#), 2025.