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Women's rights in Europe – Progress and challenges

Report¹

Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination

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1. Reference to committee: Bureau decision, Reference 4890 of 23 June 2025. In accordance with Rule 50.4 of the Assembly's Rules of Procedure, the report of a committee shall not contain an explanatory memorandum if the report is prepared under the urgent procedure.



Draft resolution²

1. For decades, the advancement of women's rights has been a defining force in shaping more equitable societies, with growing female participation in economic, public, cultural and political life. Several Council of Europe member States have already had a woman head of State or government for the first time, while the increase in the number of women members of parliament has contributed to making those bodies more representative of the populations they serve. Discussions on gender equality have thus become a part of public discourse and legal standards have changed to reflect or inspire progress. The Parliamentary Assembly stresses that gender equality and the rights of women, in all their diversity, are cornerstones of democracy.
2. However, recent years have witnessed an erosion of women's rights worldwide, with growing challenges that may be viewed as resistance to change or a reaction to past and recent achievements. These obstacles arise against the backdrop of increasingly polarised societies, in a time of "cultural wars" and ideological tensions. This erosion is certainly a feature of the current threat of democratic backsliding. In some cases, external influences, including those from foreign powers, seem to contribute to this climate, complicating the efforts to consolidate and expand women's rights. [Resolution 2290 \(2019\)](#) "Towards an ambitious Council of Europe agenda for gender equality" denounces the fact that "certain government forces and non-State actors are targeting long-acquired rights and previously agreed language is being questioned". According to the 2021 report "Tip of the Iceberg", published by the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual & Reproductive Rights (EPF), between 2009 and 2018 over 700-million Euros originating from various actors in the United States, the Russian Federation and Europe funded anti-gender equality activity within the European Union. A 2024 report from the United Nations Working Group on discrimination against women and girls, "Escalating backlash against gender equality and urgency of reaffirming substantive equality and the human rights of women and girls", warns about this backlash, "which has reached extreme proportions in certain countries, including gender apartheid", and calls for a commitment to substantive gender equality and for co-ordinated efforts to counter the gender backlash globally.
3. Calls for a return to so-called traditional family values are questioning the benefits of the advancement of women's rights for society as a whole, or even portraying women's rights' defenders as a threat to families. Politicians promoting traditional roles for women are attracting attention in the media on this theme, which is gaining some traction in the public consciousness. The Assembly expresses concern with regard to the political instrumentalisation of family values to undermine women's rights and deplores the spread of gendered disinformation and the growing backlash against women's rights in Europe. For attacks against women's rights are attacks against democratic values.
4. The increasing popularity, particularly on social media, of "masculinists", advocating the submission of women to men, is a particular reason for concern, as is a growing climate of misogyny. Unchecked social media algorithms amplify these voices and tend to silence the more inclusive ones. The harmful impact of sexist propaganda on young people's mindsets, particularly among boys, has been observed by experts. Recently, the popular television series *Adolescence* has raised awareness and debate around this phenomenon. In its [Resolution 2480 \(2023\)](#) "The role and responsibility of men and boys in stopping gender-based violence against women and girls", the Assembly recognised the responsibility of men and boys to be proactive in combating this scourge.
5. With the exception of Andorra, parliaments in Europe remain male-dominated, including in leadership and decision-making positions, and such under-representation of women in parliamentary life undermines democratic institutions and processes. The Assembly welcomes General Recommendation No. 40 on the equal and inclusive representation of women in decision-making systems, adopted in October 2024 by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), as well as the Kigali Declaration, adopted at the 145th Assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) in October 2022, entitled "Gender equality and gender-sensitive parliaments as drivers of change for a more resilient and peaceful world". The Assembly calls for the full implementation of its Resolution ... (2025) "Promoting inclusive participation in parliamentary life: gender equality, accessibility and inclusive policies".
6. According to the latest survey by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, one in three women is a survivor of gender-based violence in Europe. The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (CETS No. 210, the "Istanbul Convention"), which entered into force on 1 August 2014, is recognised globally as a key text, and the Assembly welcomes the fact that countering violence against women and domestic violence is constantly recognised as a political priority within the Council of Europe. However, the withdrawal of Türkiye from the Istanbul Convention

2. Draft resolution adopted by the committee on 24 June 2025.

constitutes a warning signal, not least because Turkish civil society organisations have reported that this decision was preceded by a growing backlash against the concept of gender and, consequently, of gender equality. Gravely concerned that violence against women and femicide are still an everyday occurrence within Europe and beyond, the Assembly calls for stronger financial support to transform commitment into tangible change.

7. Female politicians are especially targeted by hate speech and online and offline threats of violence or acts of violence. At the Assembly Conference of Speakers of Parliament held on 20 and 21 March 2025, the speakers stressed that attacks against women politicians aim at intimidating them, obstructing their participation, and pushing them out of the public sphere and back into the private domain. They called for systematic investigation and condemnation of any form of violence against politicians.

8. In its [Resolution 1860 \(2012\)](#) “Advancing women’s rights worldwide”, the Assembly called on member States to step up efforts to combat discrimination against women and to give more political weight to gender equality issues and women’s rights. This call remains necessary. The Assembly recognises that vulnerable groups are at a higher risk of cumulative forms of discrimination and calls for concrete measures to prevent intersectional discrimination. The Assembly is particularly concerned about attacks against women with a minority background, women with disabilities and LGBTI women and about significant levels of gendered discrimination in the fields of housing, employment and healthcare. In its [Resolution 2576 \(2024\)](#) “Preventing and combating violence and discrimination against lesbian, bisexual and queer women in Europe”, the Assembly stressed that they are especially targeted by anti-gender movements, which attack women’s rights and the rights of LGBTI persons and attempt to silence them or deny them their legitimate place in public spaces. Once again, the Assembly highlights that attacks against women’s rights and LGBTI rights weaken the fabric of our democratic societies.

9. Recalling its [Resolution 2554 \(2024\)](#) “Protecting women human rights defenders in Europe”, the Assembly reiterates its constant support for women’s human rights defenders in Council of Europe member States and beyond, and calls for their protection from undue pressure, intimidation and violence. In the present context, particular attention must be paid to online hate speech, which increasingly targets human rights defenders, making them also vulnerable to further attacks, including physical violence. The Assembly recalls that women human rights defenders in all their diversity play a crucial role in promoting and protecting human rights, including women’s rights and the rights of LGBTI persons, and in furthering gender equality.

10. Sexual and reproductive health and rights epitomise the conflict between progress and new challenges in women’s rights. Despite some significant advancements over the past few decades, with progress in access to education, healthcare, contraception, and medical innovations, they have also faced a growing number of obstacles in recent years. Referring to [Resolution 2331 \(2020\)](#) “Empowering women: promoting access to contraception in Europe”, the Assembly reiterates that access to modern contraception is crucial to women’s empowerment, by increasing their decision-making power and autonomy, individually and within the household, enabling them to plan employment and professional development more efficiently and leading to an improved balance between private and work life.

11. Comprehensive sexuality education has the potential to contribute significantly to advancing gender equality. It should cover issues including contraception and the prevention of sexually transmitted infections; gender equality, gender norms and stereotypes; prevention of and protection from sexual, gender-based and domestic violence; sexual orientation and gender identity and expression; self-determination and consent in relationships; and personal interaction. In [Resolution 2490 \(2023\)](#) “Innovative approaches to sexual and reproductive health and rights”, the Assembly states that comprehensive sexuality education should be both a mandatory part of all school curricula, and a right that is recognised for all.

12. Highlighting that most Council of Europe member States recognise the right to abortion, the Assembly stresses that once this right has been established, it is also necessary to guarantee access to free, legal, and safe abortion for all who seek it, ensuring legal certainty as a fundamental principle of the rule of law. As highlighted by [Resolution 2439 \(2022\)](#) “Access to abortion in Europe: stopping anti-choice harassment”, in many Council of Europe member States anti-choice activists conduct campaigns of harassment targeting women’s human rights defenders, healthcare professionals, politicians and people seeking abortion care. Such harassment is a violation of fundamental rights, including the right to respect for private and family life, freedom of expression and freedom of assembly and association. Attempts to control women’s bodies are nothing less than attacks against their human rights and a way to silence them.

13. The Assembly expresses concern at the low and/or decreasing level of funding for sexual and reproductive health programmes, gender studies and research on women's health throughout Europe. The advancement of women's rights – taking a feminist perspective – requires robust and constant investment in these fields.

14. The persisting gender pay gap and pension gap create long-lasting economic inequalities. As stressed by [Resolution 2589 \(2025\)](#) "Women in the economy: employment, entrepreneurship and gender-responsive budgeting", there is an urgent need to change mindsets with regard to the place of women in the economy. The Assembly reiterates that gender equality benefits society as a whole and that investing in women's participation in the economy has immediate but also long-term positive benefits.

15. The Assembly recognises the urgent need to eradicate poverty in all its forms, including extreme, multidimensional and intergenerational poverty, as well as the feminisation of poverty, and to address global economic inequality. Women and girls, particularly in rural areas and indigenous communities, remain disproportionately affected by poverty and exclusion. Addressing these issues should rank high among the priorities of the foreign policies of Council of Europe member States, particularly for those who pursue feminist diplomacy.

16. The Assembly expresses its solidarity with women fighting for their basic rights in totalitarian and theocratic regimes, in Europe and beyond, and supports the work of civil society organisations endeavouring to improve conditions for these women by providing education and other services. The Assembly reiterates its call to Council of Europe member States that are Parties to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court to consider proposing an amendment to the statute in order to include the crime of "gender apartheid", which is the institutionalisation of gender-based discrimination and exclusion of women and girls from all spheres of society. The Vigdís Prize for Women's Empowerment provides an opportunity to raise awareness about the work of women human rights defenders to empower women in their countries and fields of activity.

17. Current wars and conflicts across the world have a devastating effect on women and girls, who are moreover subject to sexual violence and rape as a weapon of war, as well as human trafficking.

18. In the light of all the above concerns, and referring to the political declaration on the 30th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women, adopted at the 69th edition of the Commission on the Status of Women, the Assembly considers that 2025 represents a pivotal opportunity to advance towards the full implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Noting the recognition in this declaration that no country has yet achieved full gender equality, with progress hindered by persistent structural barriers, discriminatory laws, gender stereotypes, and negative social norms, the Assembly considers that there is no room for complacency. The reduction of funding especially from the United States has also had a negative impact on programmes aimed at ensuring equal rights for women.

19. Seeing an urgent need for concerted and innovative efforts to provide a response to the false discourse of anti-gender movements, the Assembly welcomes the work currently being undertaken by the Council of Europe's Gender Equality Commission to develop positive narratives that will work to promote gender equality and prevent and combat violence against women. It looks forward to the outcome of this work, which is intended to be used by the Council of Europe and its member States in awareness-raising and communication activities.

20. In the light of these considerations, the Assembly calls on the member and observer States of the Council of Europe, and States whose parliament enjoys observer or partner for democracy status with the Assembly:

20.1. with regard to preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, and with the aim of tackling the current low reporting rates and the high levels of impunity, to:

20.1.1. take measures to prevent sexual violence in wars and conflict and ensure the perpetrators are brought to justice;

20.1.2. ratify and implement, if they have not yet done so, the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence;

20.1.3. invest in awareness-raising campaigns on preventing violence against women and domestic violence and on the services available for survivors of gender-based violence;

20.1.4. provide adequate funding for support services for survivors of gender-based violence;

20.1.5. provide training to police and the judiciary on preventing and combating gender-based violence;

- 20.1.6. take measures to prevent and combat online forms of gender-based violence against women;
- 20.1.7. provide comprehensive sexuality education in schools, including on consent;
- 20.2. with regard to ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, to:
 - 20.2.1. ensure that obstructing a person's access to legal abortion care or to relevant information is prohibited and criminally or otherwise sanctioned; the prohibited conduct should include online activities and prevent anti-choice organisations from misrepresenting themselves as neutral or pro-choice organisations;
 - 20.2.2. introduce buffer zones near reproductive healthcare facilities and any organisation providing relevant information, so as to avoid disruption of the activities of medical institutions providing abortion care and ensure the safety of people seeking such care, including post-abortion care;
 - 20.2.3. provide reliable information on reproductive rights and services, including abortion care, and take the necessary measures to counteract misinformation and disinformation on abortion; these measures should include specific monitoring to detect the possible spread of misinformation and disinformation, openly or covertly, by anti-choice organisations;
 - 20.2.4. take steps to prevent and counter networks of individuals and organisations created with the aim of harassing pro-choice activists and politicians as well as those seeking an abortion;
 - 20.2.5. ensure effective access to legal abortion care, when provided for by national legislation, and relevant and objective counselling by qualified healthcare professionals; conscientious objection by professionals – where permitted by law – should never constitute a barrier to genuine and timely access to legal abortion care;
 - 20.2.6. effectively investigate and prosecute online and offline hate speech – including coordinated attacks – targeting human rights defenders;
 - 20.2.7. provide information and training to law-enforcement officers and members of the judiciary to ensure that they have knowledge of the extent and impact of anti-choice activities;
- 20.3. with regard to increasing women's political participation, to:
 - 20.3.1. ensure through legislative and/or other means the balanced participation of women and men in all areas of parliamentary life, and especially in decision-making roles;
 - 20.3.2. set up a gender parity goal for political representation in national parliaments, conduct a national assessment of the situation, and develop a strategic plan to reach this goal through specific measures;
 - 20.3.3. promote and support networks for women parliamentarians, including women's caucuses in national parliaments;
 - 20.3.4. develop specific programmes to engage with male politicians as partners and champions, working together with female leaders to achieve gender equality in politics;
- 20.4. with regard to preventing and combating sexism, gender-based discrimination and gender stereotypes, to:
 - 20.4.1. adopt and implement ambitious gender equality strategies, including gender budgeting;
 - 20.4.2. promote gender mainstreaming in public administrations, in political parties and in the private sector;
 - 20.4.3. launch educational programmes on preventing and combating gender stereotypes in school, from the earliest years;
 - 20.4.4. work with media outlets on awareness-raising campaigns on preventing and combating gender stereotypes;
 - 20.4.5. promote the development of critical thinking to counter sexism and violence in the content, language and illustrations of toys, comics, books, television, video and other games, online content and films, including pornography, which shape the attitudes, behaviour and identity of girls and boys;

20.4.6. ensure that the development and regulation of artificial intelligence is carried out in a way which does not infringe on women's rights;

20.4.7. raise awareness of countering gendered disinformation, online and offline, and guarantee full access to information on women's rights;

20.4.8. support civil society organisations working in this field;

20.4.9. impose pay transparency in order to expose gender pay gaps and legislate on pay equality;

20.4.10. invest in gender studies and in medical research on women's health to reduce gender inequalities and improve access to treatments.

21. Referring to its [Resolution 2274 \(2019\)](#) "Promoting parliaments free of sexism and sexual harassment" and the #NotInMyParliament initiative led by the former President of the Assembly, Liliane Maury Pasquier, the Assembly calls on national parliaments to step up their efforts to prevent and combat violence against women members of parliament and parliamentary staff.

22. The Assembly also calls on national parliaments to hold regular debates on the protection of women's rights and on the issues raised in this resolution, and to focus on securing and mainstreaming women's rights both in national legislation and in policies throughout all fields of life.