



Funding the Future: Showing Solidarity on Gender Equality

Amy B. Sexton *

Abstract

The determination of Ursula von der Leyen's Commission to address gender inequality has brought the European Union's role in ensuring solidarity across genders into focus. Women are suffering disproportionately from the effects of the current pandemic, despite progress on measures such as the Gender Equality Strategy. This paper argues that the challenges of the pandemic highlight the necessity for addressing inequality between genders. Europe must fund the future towards gender equality. Women are part of the recovery, and a union of solidarity as envisioned by Simone Veil, the first female President of the European Parliament, must include tapping into everyone's potential, regardless of their gender.

"If the challenges facing Europe are to be met, we need a Europe capable of solidarity, of independence and of cooperation". (Simone Veil, European Parliament Speech, 1979)

'...the [European] Union is founded on the indivisible, universal values of human dignity, freedom, equality [,] and solidarity; it is based on the principles of democracy and the rule of law. It places the individual at the heart of its activities...' (Charter of Fundamental Rights, 2012).

For a young European female undergraduate, the appointment of Ursula Von der Leyen in 2019 as the first female president of the European Commission, signalled hope. It certainly brought the European Union's role in addressing gender equality into sharper focus. She has called for solidarity between Europeans, between men and women, not least in these times of pandemic-related crises. In her mission to advance women's rights, at the head of a key EU institution, she 'stands on the shoulders

* Amy B. Sexton is an Undergraduate Student from the University College Cork. All the opinions expressed in this essay are the sole view of the author, and do not represent the position of the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA).

of giants'. Ursula Hirschmann, part of the clandestine anti-fascist resistance, was a founder of the European Federalist Movement in 1943. She famously smuggled the Ventotene manifesto 'for a free and *united* Europe [italics added]' to mainland Italy and helped to circulate it. To advance solidarity between women – and gender equality – she set up *Association Femmes pour l'Europe* in 1975 (European Commission). Marga Klompé, another resistance activist and noted 'champion of the underprivileged', was the first female member of the ECSC Common Assembly (European Coal and Steel Community). Louise Weiss ardently defended women's rights and European solidarity, as evidenced in her passionate speech to the European Parliament in 1979. Her colleague, the inspirational Simone Veil, survived the Holocaust and became the first female President of the European Parliament. All these women fostered solidarity amongst women, solidarity amongst Europeans (regardless of gender) and proactively advanced women's rights. Standing in solidarity with one another is a key founding principle of the EU. Von der Leyen undoubtedly draws inspiration from these dynamic women. Her *Political Guidelines* (2019-2024) make it clear that she seeks to harness the EU's budget to realise a key objective:

"Gender equality is a core principle of the European Union, but it is not yet a reality. In business, politics, and society as a whole, we can only reach our full potential if we use all of our talent and diversity. Using only half of the population, half of the ideas or half of the energy is not good enough. With the Gender Equality Strategy, we are pushing for more and faster progress to promote equality between men and women." (Von der Leyen, European Commission, 2019)

The question of gender equality is clearly significant and permeates a wide variety of EU policies. The EU recognises its own role in fostering such solidarity to ensure a more equal society. The Charter of Fundamental Rights, which has been legally binding since 2009, highlights the importance of gender equality in Articles 23 and 33. Moreover, the 2019 'work-life balance' directive confirmed that 'equality between men and women is a fundamental principle of the Union'. The adverse economic impact of the pandemic threatens the defence of such solidarity. It has cast doubts on the extent to which EU funds will indeed be harnessed to promote gender equality. In the interests of European solidarity, it is crucial that this objective remains paramount. It should not be overshadowed by other concerns in the EU Recovery Plan.

With a background as Minister for Family and Children in Germany, Von der Leyen's emphasis on solidarity with – and amongst women – is not surprising. On a practical level, she called for full gender equality in the College of Commissioners:

'If we close the gaps between us, we can turn today's challenges into tomorrow's opportunities [...]. If Member States do not propose enough female Commissioners, I will not hesitate to ask for new names. Since 1958 there have been 183 Commissioners. Only 35 were women. That is less than 20 %. We represent half of our population. We want our fair share.' (Von der Leyen, European Commission, 2019).

Even this task proved to be more complex than first anticipated. She has, nonetheless, persevered with the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025. This strategy aims to achieve a gender-neutral Europe, equalising opportunities in the world of work, career

progression, work-life balance, and childcare provision. It also aims to fight gender-based violence, both online and in person. It contains a third Gender Action Plan, which involves working with Member States to ensure that 85 % of all new actions throughout external relations will contribute to gender equality and women's empowerment by 2025. All of this resonates with the fifth Sustainable 2030 Development Goal of the United Nations (European Commission, 2021).

The question of gender equality is clearly significant and permeates a wide variety of EU policies. The EU recognises its own role in fostering such solidarity to ensure a more equal society.

The Gender Equality strategy is not merely addressing the lack of female representation in some workforces, but also the laws around paternity leave, flexible arrangements for those with care responsibilities and non-discrimination in employment, regardless of gender or sexual orientation. The EU seeks to ensure equal pay for equal work and allow the opportunity for both parents to share care obligations. Von der Leyen's Commission picked up where Juncker left off. Between 2014 and 2019, the percentage of management positions in the Commission occupied by women increased from 30 % to 41 % (Martens Centre, 2021). By 2019, following the first two Gender Action Plans, 56.95 % of EU's aid was devoted to gender equality and women's empowerment (European Commission, 2021). It is gratifying to see this work

continue, although the road to gender equality, in the words of Frances Fitzgerald, is 'a marathon, not a sprint' (Martens Centre, 2021).

European women are arguably suffering disproportionately from the economic impact of the pandemic. The gender pay gap remains unacceptably wide in many Member States. For the economy as a whole, in 2019, women's gross hourly earnings were on average 14.1 % below those of men in the EU and 14.9 % in the euro area (Eurostat, 2021). In Ireland, for example, vulnerable frontline student nurses have expressed frustration about working during the pandemic for little to no pay. Job loss rates are 1.8 times higher among females than males, due to a greater number of women working in vulnerable sectors. Inadequate support vis-à-vis access to childcare has caused 'headaches' in Ireland, especially during the pandemic. The Irish Minister for Justice, Helen McEntee, was awarded paid maternity leave, just like any other civil servant (Department of Justice, 2021). Yet such support - or solidarity - is not necessarily available to all women in the Irish workplace.

Faced with pandemic-related challenges, it is more important than ever for the EU to fund the future towards gender equality. At the end of 2020, the EU Member States agreed the largest budget in the history of the Union, EUR 1.8 trillion, to fund European recovery. The budget allocated 30 % to gender equality, a portion shared with actions on Climate Change (European Commission, 2020). While it is gratifying to see gender equality sharing equal importance with tackling climate change, allocating a part of the budget in this way could lessen the impact of the funding on one or both areas. This money must be

spent wisely to achieve Von der Leyen's ambitions.

Von der Leyen highlighted the need to address gender-based violence in both her first speech and in the Gender Equality Strategy. Since the start of the pandemic, calls reporting domestic violence to European hotlines is up 60 % (Council of Europe, 2021). This is not just a 'women's problem'. Potential solutions reside in showing solidarity with victims, not turning a blind eye. For the Commission, abuse holds women back: 'women and girls represent half of the world's population and yet, their potential remains mainly untapped because they are too often still subject to sexual or physical abuse and exploitation, victims of harmful traditions and practices...' (European Commission, 2021). Von der Leyen called for violence against women to be added to the list of EU criminal offences. In February 2021, the Commission launched an open public consultation on a new legislative initiative to better support victims and prosecute perpetrators of gender-based violence. It also addressed the issue of online violence. The world is becoming increasingly digital, especially during the pandemic, and online violence must be tackled. The Digital Services Act, adopted in December 2020, for example, clarifies the responsibilities of online platforms (European Commission, 2021). This will, hopefully, make the internet safer for women. Tackling online violence against women is an important part of the EU's fight against misinformation and cybercrime.

The Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention aims to thwart and eradicate domestic violence. For Von der Leyen, this is the *'gold standard in international efforts to protect women and girls from the violence that they face every day in our societies'*.

When Turkey recently announced that it would abandon the Treaty, she argued that *'women deserve a strong legal framework to protect them'* (Parliament Magazine, 2021). This *'gender-sensitive Commission'* seeks to defend solidarity with women across the world, beyond the frontiers of the EU. Indeed, for Jutta Urpilainen, Commissioner in charge of International Partnerships:

'Stronger engagement on gender equality is key to a sustainable global recovery from the COVID-19 crisis and building fairer, more inclusive, more prosperous societies. Women and girls are in the frontline of the pandemic and must be put in the driving seat of the recovery. As a gender-sensitive and responsive geopolitical Commission, we want to work more closely with our Member States, as well as all partners, in building a truly gender-equal world' (Jutta Urpilainen, 2020).

In 2020, a EUR 20 billion contribution to EU partner countries formed part of an EU 'Team Europe' plan, seeking to counter the adverse effects of the pandemic for vulnerable groups, such as women and the LGBTQ community. This showed an early commitment to implement the rules of Gender Equality Strategy on external relations (EEAS, 2020).

International Women's Day took place in March 2021 - another year characterised by the pandemic. Yet the determination of Von der Leyen continues to signal hope - as did the appointment of Kamala Harris as Vice President of the United States, and Amanda Gorman's performance at that inauguration. The Commission President sang the praises of women, from all walks of life:

'This [International] Women's Day is for women on the frontline and for women in the back office. It is for health workers

who have been our guardian angels and it is for our sales assistants who have kept our supermarkets open and indeed let us never forget that almost 80 % of them are women. Women's day is also for all the mothers who have taken care of their children during the lockdowns, but this women's day is also for the women who lost their job during the crisis and Women's Day is for those who no longer want to settle for discrimination, insecurity, and unfairness' (Von der Leyen, 2021).

As nurses, teachers, scientists, or politicians, women have been part of the battle against the virus, and they are part of the recovery. This call for solidarity with women is noble, but resources must continue to be allocated for gender equality – and concrete actions to be taken on the ground. Female representation in leadership roles must become the norm rather than the exception. The EU must adequately fund the future of gender equality and this commitment must be reflected across all EU institutions. Europe has made great strides towards gender equality, with women such as Hirschmann, Klompé, Weiss and Veil, leading the way. Veil reminds us it is imperative, however, for the EU continues to do so: *'we need a Europe capable of solidarity'*.

Bibliography

Council of Europe. (2021). Istanbul Convention against Women and Domestic Violence. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/home>

CVCE. (2014). Speech by Simone Veil https://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/1999/1/1/174d384d-d5c7-4c02-ad78-b1f6efc9740a/publishable_en.pdf

Department of Justice. (2021). Statement by Minister for Justice Helen McEntee. <http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/PR21000051>

EEAS. (2020). Coronavirus: European Union launches “Team Europe” package to support partner countries with more than €20 billion. https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/77326/coronavirus-european-union-launches-%E2%80%9Cteam-europe%E2%80%9D-package-support-partner-countries-more-%E2%82%AC20_en

European Commission. (2020). EU’s Next Long-Term Budget & NextGenerationEU: Key Facts and Figures. https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/about_the_european_commission/eu_budget/mff_factsheet_agreement_en_web_20.11.pdf

European Commission. (2020). Gender Action Plan- putting women and girls’ rights at the heart of the global recovery for a gender-equal world. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_2184

European Commission. (2021) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nA7YdszDJ_0

European Commission. (2021). 2021 report on gender equality in the EU. https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/aid_development_cooperation_fundamental_rights/annual_report_ge_2021_en.pdf

European Commission. (2021). Gender Equality. https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/sdg/gender-equality_en

European Parliament and the Council of the European Union. (2019). Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU.

European Union. (2012). Charter of the Fundamental Rights of the European Union. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:12012P/TXT>

Eurostat. (2021). Gender Pay Gap Statistics. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Gender_pay_gap_statistics

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32019L1158#PP1Contents>

Martens Centre. (2021). Building a Gender Equality Legacy from the Von der Leyen Commission. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AmNRTYG4I4w>

Parliament Magazine. (2021). <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/eu-leaders-and-meps-condemn-turkeys-decision-to-withdraw-from-istanbul-convention>

Stoilova, R. (2021). Building a Gender Equality Legacy from the Von der Leyen Commission. <https://www.martenscentre.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Martens-Centre-Publication.pdf>



Trans European Policy Studies Association

Rue d'Egmont 11, B-1000

Brussels, Belgium

To know more about TEPSA visit: www.tepsa.eu

Follow TEPSA on:

 [@tepsaeu](https://twitter.com/tepsaeu)

 [@tepsa.eu](https://www.facebook.com/tepsa.eu)

 [TEPSA - Trans European Policy Studies Association](https://www.linkedin.com/company/tepsa-eu)

 [@tepsaeu](https://www.instagram.com/tepsaeu)



Co-funded by the
Europe for Citizens Programme
of the European Union

The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



Co-funded by the
Europe for Citizens Programme
of the European Union

