

THE EUROPEAN UNION AND GENDER EQUALITY

Agnès Hubert

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Free, Thrive, Lead: striving for a better future



FEPS
Primer Series



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Contents

Foreword	7
Preamble	12
Introduction	21
Part I: When inequalities meet gender	27
Inequalities, principles and realities from a feminist perspective	28
The meaning of gender	34
EU Legal foundations of gender equality and anti-discrimination	42
Part II: From equal pay to parity democracy, the EU gender equality policy	46
The 1960s: Equal pay enshrined in the Treaty of Rome	47
The 1970s: The European Court of Justice rules on equal pay	55
The 1980s: Inequalities on the labour market	61
The 1990s: Parity democracy and gender mainstreaming	66
2000: The new millennium, a new Europe	79
2010: A decade of austerity begins	86
2020: A fresh start	90
Part III: Making it happen with institutions, agents and tools	94
The EU Gender Equality Strategy: the overall framework	94
The velvet triangle: agents and networks	116
The scales of justice	130
The measure of gender inequalities: work, money, time, power, education and health	134
The double approach: positive action and gender mainstreaming	138
Communicate on what gender equality is doing for Europe and vice versa	144

Part IV : Issues at stake	147
Regression or rebirth	150
Shaping a caring economy	152
Parity Democracy in the EU and Member States	154
Towards a New Model for Growth in Europe	159
“Our bodies, ourselves”	162
Engendering democracy	164
Conclusion	168
Glossary	175
List of Abbreviations	198
List of some Feminist Figures	199
Timeline	206
Bibliography	211
Reviews	218
About the Author	220
Acknowledgements	221
About the Illustrator	222
The FEPS Primer Series	223

Foreword

“If you see inequality as a ‘them’ problem or ‘unfortunate other’ problem, that is a problem.”

– Kimberlé Crenshaw

Lawyer, civil rights activist and intersectional feminist

The feminist movement and its claims remain, more than ever, a cornerstone of ongoing struggles for social justice. Here lies precisely the central contribution of this FEPS primer *“Gender Equality and the European Union. Free, Thrive, Lead: striving for a better future”* by Agnès Hubert. By building on her first-hand experience within the European institutions and as a recognised European gender policy expert, she maps out the expanding field of gender and EU politics. She sets out with the task of depicting the gendered nature of European integration and gender relations in the EU as a political system under the impulse of feminist and progressive actors. This primer brilliantly illustrates how gender equality and the European project are two sides of the same coin.

By delving into the developments of gender equality policy of the EU from its historic pathways (Part II) up until today (Part III), Agnès Hubert’s primer is an invitation to navigate through the various milestones, obstacles and achievements along the road to equality giving an overview of the fundamentals and new directions. With every page, she embarks us on the incremental yet sustained developments that anchored the equality principle as one of the strongholds of the European project. The historic legal and policy tools are explored from the very first inscription of the equality principle in the 1957 Treaty of Rome to the influence of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 until the present-day EU Gender Equality policy and most notably the much-awaited Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025.

Beyond a mere chronological account, the reader will meet with some of the leading figures who each made the difference in their determined endeavour to bring the European project in line with active citizenship and inclusive democracy ideals. On this journey, Agnès Hubert namely (re-)introduces us to key feminist and progressive actors such as Eliane-Vogel Polsky, Vasso Papandreou, Yvette Roudy up until Helena Dalli giving these stories in the construction of Europe the visibility they deserve. More precisely, she illustrates how they have all, in their own singular ways, directly contributed to shaping advances for women's rights and gender equality in the EU. This story tells us how every success within this "velvet triangle" was bolstered by a unique community of feminist actors gathering academics, policymakers, activists, NGOs including the European Women's Lobby, and women's organisations such as PES Women to cite just a few, all driven by a deep commitment towards the crafting of a feminist Europe.

Despite significant advances in the area, it becomes however very quickly evident from this primer that women in Europe still face significant social, economic and political barriers in their everyday life. Amongst the rich amount of useful reference points and tools the reader will encounter throughout the different chapters, the European Gender Equality Index published annually by EIGE (European Institute for Gender Equality) is always a sobering reminder that the road to gender equality is still a long one. According to its last edition at the time of writing, the index still stood at 68 points out of 100 with barely noticeable improvements of just +4.9 points since 2010¹. Persisting gender gaps continue to prevent women to stand on an equal footing in the distribution of employment, decision-making,

1 EIGE, 'Gender Equality Index 2021 - Health' (Vilnius, 2021), <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2021-health>. "language": "en", "page": "196", "publisher-place": "Vilnius", "source": "Zotero", "title": "Gender Equality Index 2021 - Health", "URL": "https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2021-health", "author": [{"family": "EIGE", "given": ""}], "issued": {"date-parts": [[2021]]}, "schema": "https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"}

economic resources, time, and access to health (including sexual and reproductive health)². Admittedly, these imbalances are not without consequences on the many forms of violence women and girls are confronted with in various situations. Ranging from the everyday sexism to their most severe instances epitomised by the prevalence of femicides across Europe and beyond³, all these instances form part of a *continuum of violence*⁴ eventually building up a heavy climate of intimidation, fear, discrimination, exclusion and insecurity curtailing women's and girls' opportunities and freedoms. Trends of de-democratisation across Europe and its gendered aspects also raise serious concerns due to the backlash in women's rights and gender equality in the face of growing ultra-conservative and antifeminist mobilisations. That is not to mention how the COVID-19 crisis has unearthed deep cracks in the social order. Additionally, this pandemic has posed new short-term and long-term challenges for gender equality as widely evidenced in this primer. On the one hand, women have namely been at the forefront of the battle against the pandemic making up the majority of the health and care economy workforce whilst also representing the most severely undervalued sectors. On the other hand, there are serious concerns about the impact of the adverse effects of the pandemic on women's jobs and economic security as women tend to be overrepresented in many of the sectors most affected by the crisis. At the same time, the changing work patterns resulting from the widespread use of telework also deserve a close gender-impact assessment analysis, not least when it comes to the interplays with these newly emerging work dynamics and the impacts of women's (still) disproportionate care responsibilities in a long-run perspective.

2 Ibid.

3 EIGE, 'Gender-Based Violence - Measuring Femicide in the EU and Internationally: An Assessment' (Publications Ofce of the European Union, 2021), <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/measuring-femicide-eu-and-internationally-assessment>.

4 Liz Kelly, *Surviving Sexual Violence* (University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

As slow and fragile as progress towards gender equality may seem in light of the primer's introductory considerations, the importance of tireless feminist mobilisation and support has remained more timely than ever. In echo with the thinking of the eminent feminist theorist and social activist bell hooks⁵ (1952-2021), it is not so much about knowing when contemporary feminist movements started to emerge but rather how, almost everywhere across the globe, individual women progressively started speaking up against sexism and patriarchy⁶. In this light, the feminist movement does not aim to benefit just a group of women or to privilege women over men. It arises anytime and anywhere women and men oppose gender inequalities, and it truly comes to life when groups of people mobilise around a determined strategy to transform in a meaningful way all our lives by putting an end to sexist behaviours and structures. In light of this perspective, it can be argued that seizing the European Union to tackle gender inequalities has been one such promising strategy for women to see their own cause advance in a Europe that needed (and still needs) to be made *by* and *for* women.

All in all, it might still be open for discussion what a truly feminist society should look like in practice as there are as many definitions of feminism as there are people. However, what is clear is that building a fair, equal and sustainable society will require an inclusive approach capable of overcoming the one-size-fits-all formula to ensure everyone, regardless of their gender, finds their place. That is for instance why "*Part I: When inequalities meet gender*" seeks to equip the reader with the adequate lenses to better understand not only inequalities from a feminist standpoint but also the socially constructed nature of gender (roles) behind its corresponding inequalities. In the same way, inclusive feminism must go hand in hand with an inter-

5 Born Gloria Watkins, bell hooks always decapitalised her pen name as a way of keeping the public's focus on her work, not "who she is". See 'Why Bell Hooks Didn't Capitalize Her Name', *Washington Post*, accessed 1 March 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2021/12/15/bell-hooks-real-name/>.

6 bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984).

sectional approach rooted in the understanding that various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other. By drawing on a selection of key feminist literature, Part I, therefore, encourages not only to think *about* but also *beyond* gender as a category for analysis. Raising important questions about post-covid outlooks, Agnès Hubert's account demonstrates that the EU of tomorrow cannot content itself with a "return to normal". In order to shape the future of Europe in gender-just terms, her conclusion encourages us to consider a comprehensive epistemological review of the place of gender equality in the European economy and society.

Providing the reader with the essential ins and outs of the field at EU level, the great value of this primer is to offer every progressive actor the right tools to be able to envision all spheres of European politics and beyond through the prism of gender equality. This primer is a must-read for students, practitioners, activists, and policymakers at a time when the European Union stands at a defining crossroads between remaining a mere bystander of the tangible risks of seeing the rollback of gender equality or, instead, profiling itself at the vanguard of the defence of women's and human rights. Beyond merely recognising it as one of the EU's core values, this timely contribution is a fantastic intervention setting gender equality an essential precondition for the achievement of any aspiration of a social Europe that wants itself a fair, inclusive place full of opportunity for everyone.

Laeticia Thissen

FEPS Policy Analyst for Gender Equality

Preamble

When everything goes wrong, we turn to women. This joke made in the aftermath of the bursting of the financial bubble in 2008 is again valid in times of covid-19 when the leadership of women in fighting the virus was celebrated and nurses and caregivers applauded. This expression of acknowledgment is however fraught with ambivalent meanings, given how slow our European societies are in challenging the standards of a patriarchy that is still felt as comfortable by some, and reassuring by others. Meanwhile, women's breakthrough in education still fails to be mirrored by their situation on the labour market, and women's rights are being questioned by anti-gender movements, demonstrating that the emancipation movements' victory is an unfinished and fragile one indeed.

“A decision made in Brussels”, these few words are still enough to stigmatise institutions unloved by citizens, often disqualified as ‘undemocratic’. The “nons” and “nees” to the 2005 French and Dutch referendums rejecting the proposed Constitution for the EU, and the fallout from the financial crisis of 2008 have revived a sense of rampant right-wing radicalism, whetting the appetite of political scavengers that feed on ego-minded nationalism and fear. Both right-wing radicalism and nationalism oppose European integration and love patriarchy.

Just over half a century earlier, there was no such confusion: By the end of the Second World War, women had distinguished themselves among nurses but also as pilots, in the Resistance movement and by taking on the jobs of men who had gone to the front, thus playing the pivotal role of keeping society afloat. In the aftermath of the war, the new French, German and Italian constitutions gave women equal rights in the wake of a general fight against totalitarianism. This was the period when new international human rights instruments were created and those states which had not yet done so granted women voting rights. In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir wrote

Le Deuxième Sexe (The Second Sex), denouncing the ‘otherness’ of women as a cultural construct imposed on them by society to justify their confinement to the family sphere. This foundational book, widely known for one of its central statements “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman”, has constituted a springboard for the ‘second wave’ feminist movements in the 1960s and 70s. In parallel, Churchill, Monnet, Schuman, and Adenauer passionately defended a peace-loving Europe which would unite in solidarity and prosperity in the aftermath of the war. The attempt to create a defence community having been rejected in August 1954 in bellicose debates in the French parliament, the strategic coal and steel industries went on to form the heart of the first pooling of interests between former enemies. Before long, supra-national mechanisms emerged with the birth of the European Economic Community in 1957. The rest would follow naturally.

The parallels between women’s liberation movements and the European unification process can easily be drawn. These two movements were both in full effervescence following the devastating consequences of the war. Women’s right to equality and the patient building of a European power seemed to go naturally hand in hand.

More than half a century later, these two trends have solidly established themselves as alive and sustainable, although with a chronic disease of “stop and go”. They are however beyond their “lite” versions and the simplifying logics of essentialism for the women’s lib movement, or federalism for European unification. Over time, their scope has expanded to new members for the EU and new understandings of gender for feminist movements, but also to new issues (through the deepening and widening of EU policies and through intersectional approaches of feminist policy). They have become more complex, dense, and entangled. Even now, despite the challenges posed by right-wing radicalism, Brexit¹ and the hardship created

1 See, for instance, Mary Honeyball and Hannah Manzur, “Women & Brexit: Assessing the impact of Brexit on Women and Gender Equality in the UK” (2019), <http://womenandbrexit.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Women-Brexit-Report.pdf>