

EU membership matters for gender equality

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Opinion

The EU has long been a truly progressive institution in terms of women's rights and the fight for greater gender equality, says Mary Honeyball.



Mary Honeyball | *Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual*

As International Women's Day approaches it is a time for action and campaigning - not to mention an opportunity to educate. However, I also like to spend some time reflecting. I have been an active member of Parliament's women's rights and gender equality committee for many years and I know only too well that the fight for equality never ends.

This can be a source of huge disappointment. However, each year new campaigns and campaigners crop up that are truly inspirational, which is hugely reassuring. I like to think that the European Union reflects this approach.

The EU is not satisfied it has done enough on the issue of equality. For example, in 2015 it released its new framework for gender equality and women's empowerment, the gender action plan 2016-2020. This replaces its predecessor - 2010-2015 - which had faced criticism for not going far enough.

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The new framework has five key areas: Increasing female labour market participation, leading to their economic independence; reducing the gender pay earnings and pension gaps; promoting equality between men and women in terms of decision-making; combatting gender-based violence and protecting and supporting victims; promoting gender equality globally.

If these ambitions are all addressed and implemented fully, then the opportunities to improve women and girls' lives across the EU will be great.

There are specific areas within the gender action plan 2016-2020, which for the first time, address serious cases of violence against women. Such issues include the barbaric act of female genital mutilation (FGM), something we were only learning about as recently as four or five years ago. We should remember that it is only because of the brave actions of some victims that a light has been shone on this area.

The EU tackles the issue of FGM in several ways. It undertakes preventative measures as well as supporting those women who have undergone this painful, dangerous and unnecessary procedure.

Vera Jourová, the first commissioner to have the gender equality portfolio as part of her justice brief, dedicated 2017 as the year to combat violence against women. This included funding initiatives which fight FGM, awareness campaigns and the launch of an exclusive violence against women website.

Even before the #MeToo campaign took off, the EU was a truly progressive institution in terms of women's rights and the fight for greater gender equality and combatting violence against women. The EU website had its own hashtag which preceded the #MeToo campaign.

"The NON.NO.NEIN. campaign (see #SayNoStopVAW) aims to share information and showcase success stories about the important work that is being done in this field. More than an awareness-raising campaign, this initiative will "support, engage and connect all stakeholders in combatting this problem," the campaign website states. The work from this campaign will continue in 2018 with the full support of Commissioner Jourová.

FGM is a crime in all member states, but there are extra measures supported by the Istanbul convention, which includes further support and protection of victims. In June 2017 the Istanbul convention was co-signed by the Commission and Council presidency on behalf of the EU.

The role and function of the EU is critical in fighting all forms of gender inequality and as a progressive institution it could not be more important to be part of the EU than in these precarious #MeToo times.

About the author

Mary Honeyball (S&D, UK) is a Vice-Chair of Parliament's women's rights and gender equality committee

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[Employment and Social Affairs](#) [5]

[European Commission](#) [6]

[Foreign Affairs](#) [7]

[Justice and Rights](#) [8]

Categories

[Gender equality](#) [9]

[Employment](#) [10]

[International Relations](#) [11]

[Public order, justice and rights](#) [12]

[Society and welfare](#) [13]



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