

Accelerating progress on Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5)

Achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls

SUMMARY

Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) – 'achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls' – is one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations (UN) that is very likely to be missed by the target date of 2030. This undermines the rest of the goals.

The inclusion in the SDGs of a standalone goal on gender equality was seen as a spur to mobilise action and resources to tackle persistent barriers to women and girls' full enjoyment of their rights, which also undermine sustainable development. The targets in SDG 5 specify actions or outcomes that countries should aim for. These are to remove discriminatory legislation and social norms, eliminate gender-based violence, ensure the bodily autonomy of women and girls, value their unpaid care work and close gender gaps in access to resources and decision-making. At the mid-point to 2030, no country or region in the world has achieved all these targets. Already slow, global progress has stalled, prompting evaluation of which policy measures have been effective, where gaps exist and how to catalyse further action.

The European Union (EU) supported the inclusion of SDG 5 and has comprehensive policy frameworks in place to support non-EU countries to achieve the targets and to advance gender equality in the Union. In the EU itself, many of the targets are on track, but progress has been uneven, with significant disparities between Member States.

The European Parliament has taken a strong stance on putting gender equality at the heart of sustainable development policy and has called for concrete steps to accelerate progress towards SDG 5.



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Gender equality in the SDGs

[Gender equality](#) is an issue of [human rights](#) and justice. [Empowering women and girls](#) gives them greater [agency](#) to get their voices heard and orient development in ways that meet their needs. As well as benefiting individual women and [girls](#), closing gender gaps can benefit [men and boys](#), societies, [businesses](#) and [economies](#) as a whole. Conversely, there is ample [evidence](#) that gender inequalities have a negative impact on development outcomes, hampering poverty alleviation and restricting the potential to increase wellbeing. Investing in gender equality can therefore accelerate progress towards other development goals, such as [food security](#), and create a [virtuous circle](#) for sustainable development.

In September 2015, under the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, all UN Member States adopted 17 sustainable development goals ([SDGs](#)). The SDGs provide a [global policy framework](#) aimed at ending poverty, fighting inequalities and insecurity and tackling climate change. There was a [strong push](#) to [improve](#) on the narrow measures for achieving gender equality in the preceding [Millennium Development Goals](#). The 2030 Agenda [recognises](#) gender equality both as an aim in itself and as a cross-cutting principle to be '[mainstreamed](#)' across the SDGs. Accordingly, it includes both a **standalone goal, [SDG 5](#)**, which seeks to 'achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls', and **gender equality targets across other goals**.

The principle of '[leaving no one behind](#)', reflected in several SDG targets, provides a further lens to identify vulnerable groups of women and girls and address [intersections](#) between gender inequality and other forms of inequality and marginalisation.

How progress is measured

The main [mechanism](#) for monitoring progress towards the SDGs is a [global indicator framework](#) agreed by the UN General Assembly in 2017 to standardise data collection and reporting, help design effective strategies, allocate resources and ensure accountability.¹

The framework [recognises](#) gender equality as an important cross-cutting issue and includes [gender-specific indicators](#) for SDG 5 and other goals. Of the 248 indicators for monitoring the SDGs, 54 are gender-specific, meaning they refer to gender equality as the underlying objective or call explicitly for disaggregation by sex (**Box 1**).² The framework also stipulates that all indicators should be disaggregated, 'where relevant', by sex and other characteristics such as income, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability and geographic location.

[UN bodies and international organisations](#) manage the data for the gender-specific indicators, [collected](#) at national level. For SDG 5, 12 such 'custodian agencies' are responsible for monitoring and reporting.³

The UN makes the data publicly available through its [SDGs database](#) and UN Women's [SDG indicator dashboard](#), covering gender indicators across the goals.⁴ In addition, several of the custodian agencies and independent bodies have developed indexes to track progress towards SDG 5 and gender equality across the goals (**Box 2**).

Box 1 – Gender-specific indicators in the SDGs

Progress on the 9 targets in the gender equality goal SDG 5 is measured using **14 indicators** spanning commitments to end discrimination, eliminate gender-based violence, ensure access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, education, economic opportunities and leadership, and reduce the gender gap in unpaid work.

A further **40 gender-specific indicators** are spread across other goals addressing poverty, hunger, health, education, decent work, reducing inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, climate action and strong institutions (respectively SDGs 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 10, 11, 13 and 16). There are no gender specific indicators in SDGs [6](#), [9](#), [12](#), [14](#), [15](#) or [17](#).

Sources: UNDESA, [Goal 5](#), UNDESA and UN Women, [Gender Snapshot 2024](#).

Box 2 – Global gender equality indexes for the SDGs

The OECD's [Social Institutions and Gender Index](#) (SIGI), compares levels of discrimination across countries and serves as an official data source for SDG 5.

The UN Development Programme (UNDP) has developed [two new indexes](#), the Global Gender Parity Index (GGPI) and the Women's Empowerment Index (WEI) to provide better evidence for SDG 5 and gender equality across the goals. Three quarters of the WEI and GGPI [indicators](#) are official SDG indicators.

The [Sustainable Development Solutions Network \(SDSN\)](#) works with UN agencies, multilateral financing institutions, the private sector, governments, academia, and civil society, to promote independent monitoring of the SDGs. Since 2016, it has issued its own [global sustainable development index](#). The latest [annual sustainable development report](#), published in June 2024, tracks [progress](#) towards SDG 5 in 167 countries based on 4 indicators on family planning, education, employment and seats in national parliaments, plus the gender pay gap for the OECD.

[Equal Measures 2030](#), a coalition of organisations from civil society and the development and private sectors, produces an [SDG Gender Index](#), with rankings for 139 [countries](#). Updated in September 2024, the index covers 14 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and includes 56 indicators capturing gender-related measures in SDG 5 and across the 2030 Agenda for 2015–2022.

Progress on SDG 5 worldwide

The latest assessments⁵ show the **world is far from the goal of achieving gender equality by 2030** and the **cost of inaction** is extremely high. The UN [estimates](#) that, without immediate, radical action to accelerate progress, it will take 286 years to close gaps in legal protection and remove legislation that discriminates against women and girls, 300 years to end child marriage, 140 years for women to be equally represented in managerial roles and 47 years to achieve equal representation in national parliaments. The [2024 UN global gender snapshot report](#) illustrates how slow progress on SDG 5 ricochets across the other goals, worsening outcomes for women and girls on poverty, health and food security and causing countries to miss out on billions in potential economic gains.

While progress has been made, [none](#) of the SDG 5 indicators are fully achieved. Only one is currently 'on track', while indicators for three targets show marginal progress, progress is stagnating for one target and data for assessment at global level is still unavailable for four targets (**Table 1**). The level and rate of progress towards the SDG 5 targets vary significantly [across regions](#) (**Table 2**) and within regions.⁶ According to the Equal Measures 2030 index, between [2015 and 2020](#), two-thirds of countries with comparable trend data made progress towards gender equality, while one-third showed no progress or became less gender-equal. Between [2019 and 2022](#), a third of countries were making fast progress, but 40 % were stagnating or regressing. Some low-income countries are making good progress in specific areas, such as [legal reforms](#) and increasing the [share of female managers](#), often from a low base. Conversely, the [Equal Measures 2030 index](#) and the [UNDP's new indexes](#) show that a high or very high level of human development does not automatically translate into gender equality and women's empowerment.

Table 1 – Progress on the SDG 5 targets

Target	Issue	Progress
5.1	Ending discrimination against women and girls and adopting and strengthening gender equality policies	Marginal
The indicators measure legal frameworks to end discrimination and advance gender equality in four areas: public life, gender based violence (GBV), employment and marriage and family. Data from 120 countries show 56 positive legal reforms between 2019 and 2023. However, none of the countries received a perfect score across all four areas. Fully 54 % of countries lack laws in all key areas of gender equality , including on equal rights to enter marriage and initiate a divorce. Where legislation exists, policies to implement or enforce it are often lacking . Globally, 40 % of women live in countries where gender-based discrimination is assessed as high or very high.		

Target	Issue	Progress
5.2	Ending violence against women and girls	Data gap
Global-level data is not available. The WHO estimates that across the world each year 245 million women and girls aged 15 and older are victims of physical and/or sexual violence perpetrated by an intimate partner.		
5.3	Eliminating harmful practices	Marginal
UNICEF estimates that in 2023 around 640 million girls and women had married before the age of 18 . India accounts for one third of that number, 10 countries for a further third, with the remaining third spread across the globe, including in Europe and the USA . The prevalence of child marriage has fallen. Today, 1 in 5 young women (19 %) is married before the age of 18 compared to one in four 10 years ago. However, the decline is not fast enough to meet the SDG target. At the current rate, 9 million girls under 18 will still marry in 2030. UNICEF estimates that over 230 million girls and women worldwide have undergone female genital mutilation , an increase of 30 million compared to the last estimate in 2016. Even in the countries making progress, the rate of decline needs to be 27 times faster than the pace seen in the last decade to meet the target by 2030.		
5.4	Valuing women's paid and unpaid care and domestic work	Data gap
Statistics for 93 countries show that, on average, women spend 2.5 times more hours on unpaid domestic and care work each day than men. The UN estimates that at the current rate of progress, the next generation of women will still spend on average 2.3 more hours per day on unpaid care and domestic work.		
5.5	Ensuring women's full and effective participation in decision-making	Stagnation
Progress remains slow. Data from IPU shows that, as of 1 June 2024, women held 26.9 % of seats in national parliaments worldwide, up from 22.3 % in 2015, a modest increase of 4.6 percentage points. In local governments , participation was higher, at 35.5 % as of 1 January 2023. In 2022, women only held 27.5 % of management positions , a significant decrease from 28.5 % in 2021, the same share of women managers as in 2016.		
5.6	Ensuring universal access to reproductive and sexual health and rights	Data gap
Data for 69 countries shows that progress has stagnated. Only 56 % of women aged 15–49 who are married or in a union can decide on their sexual and reproductive health and rights . Although 89 % of women can decide to use contraception, 1 in 4 cannot make their own healthcare decisions or say no to sex. Related SDG 3 data shows that the proportion of women of reproductive age who have their need for family planning met with modern methods increased from 76.5 % to 77.6 % between 2015 and 2024. That corresponds to an increase of 75 million women aged between 15 and 49 using modern methods of contraception since 2015.		
5.a.	Ensuring equal economic rights	Data gap
The target is to ensure that women have equal rights to economic resources, including ownership of land and property, access to natural resources, financial services and inheritance. The global indicators cover land rights , which matter since they give women control over income, more power in the family, a voice in decision-making and capacity to invest in climate resilient agriculture , thereby also boosting food security. Data from 49 countries shows that fewer than 50 % of women and men have ownership or secure rights over agricultural land, with women less likely than men to own it in most countries. Legal protection for women's land rights is low or inexistent in 58 % of 176 countries where data is available.		
5.b.	Using technology for women's empowerment	On track
The global indicator is the proportion of women who own a mobile phone. In 2023, more than three-quarters of the world's population owned one, but women were 8 % less likely to own a mobile phone than men, down from 10 % in 2020. Additional data shows that there is also a substantial gender gap in internet use. Globally, 244 million more men than women were using the internet in 2023.		
5.c.	Adopting and strengthening gender equality policies and tools	Marginal
Data from 105 countries for 2018–2021 show that only 26 % of countries have comprehensive systems to track and make public allocations for gender equality , 59 % have some features and 15 % have no minimum elements.		

Sources: [UN Global Statistics Database – SDG5](#), [UN Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024](#), [UNSD extended report for SDG5: 2024](#), [UN Secretary General's 2024 report on the SDGs](#).

Table 2 – 2024 SDG 5 dashboard by region and income group

Region	SDG 5 – Level	SDG5 – Trend
BRICS+	Significant challenges	Moderately increasing
East and South Asia	Significant challenges	Moderately increasing
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	Significant challenges	Stagnating
Latin America and the Caribbean	Challenges	Moderately increasing
Middle East and North Africa	Major challenges	Stagnating
Oceania	Major challenges	Stagnating
OECD members	Challenges	Moderately increasing
Small island developing states	Significant challenges	Stagnating
Sub-Saharan Africa	Major challenges	Stagnating
Income group	SDG 5 – Level	SDG 5 – Trend
Low-income countries	Major challenges	Stagnating
Lower-middle-income countries	Significant challenges	Stagnating
Upper-middle-income countries	Challenges	Moderately increasing
High-income countries	Challenges	Moderately increasing
World average	Significant challenges	Moderately increasing

Source: SDSN Network, [2024 Sustainable Development Report](#), based on four indicators on family planning, education, employment and seats in national parliaments, with trend data from 2015–2022 (2024 for political representation). For OECD countries, the indicators include 2015–2021 data on the gender pay gap).

Drivers to accelerate progress

SDG5 is far from the only sustainable development goal that is [lagging](#) behind. In 2021, the UN Secretary-General's '[Our Common Agenda](#)' report started a discussion on accelerating implementation across the goals and looking beyond Agenda 2030. The process led to the launch of a new phase of SDG implementation at the [SDG Summit in 2023](#) and will culminate, in September 2024, with a [Summit of the Future](#) to forge a consensus on the way forward. UN Member States are [negotiating](#) an outcome document, the 'Pact for the Future', which is expected to recognise the need to accelerate action to achieve gender equality. The gender snapshot report stresses the need for decisive action at the Summit of the Future to increase investment in gender equality. Stakeholders are also [calling](#) for the pact to include strong, concrete measures to advance the rights of women and [girls](#).

In 2024, the UN published an [evaluation of SDG 5](#), identifying obstacles standing in the way of progress, including setbacks due to multiple crises, weak political leadership and commitment, data gaps, insufficient investment and the rise of anti-rights movements. Together with other assessments it provides evidence on what is working and which measures and approaches policymakers and donors could use to catalyse advances.

Remedying adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and multiple crises

Progress on gender equality, already [slow and uneven](#), was compromised by the COVID-19 pandemic, which both [revealed and amplified](#) gender inequalities. The pandemic led to a surge in gender-based violence, including domestic violence, child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM). It also disrupted access to contraception and sexual and reproductive healthcare, widened the gender divide in unpaid care work that was already keeping many women out of the labour market, and led to significant [job losses](#) among women. Progress also stalled and in some cases reversed by [multiple crises](#), including [war and conflict](#), the [cost of living](#) crisis, and increasing vulnerability to [climate change](#). The UN [forecasts](#) that in a worst-case scenario, climate change could push 158 million more women and girls into poverty and 235 million more into food insecurity. The UN's [COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker](#) showed that few governments adopted comprehensive gender-sensitive responses to the pandemic. At the same time, [promising practices](#) emerged in areas such as combating gender-based violence and supporting women's economic security, which can be harnessed to [recover](#) from the pandemic and respond to other challenges.

Changing harmful social norms

The UN [identifies](#) social norms that legitimise violence against women and girls, perpetuate harmful practices, reduce access to health services, ascribe unpaid care and domestic to women and limit leadership opportunities as 'perhaps the greatest impediment across SDG 5 targets'. The [gender social norms index](#) shows that such norms persist in both high and low-income countries. The [2023 SIGI index report](#) finds that progress towards changing them has gone into reverse in some countries. [Legislation](#) has played a crucial role in advancing gender equality. However, the UN stresses that laws need to be implemented effectively and that, to bring sustainable change in attitudes and behaviours, they need to go hand in hand with education and active engagement with men and boys, communities, religious leaders and civil society.

Pushing back on the backlash against women's rights

The UN [warns](#) that active resistance to gender equality is contributing to slow progress on SDG 5 and reversing existing gains. In recent years, there has been a growing transnational backlash against the rights of women and girls. [Diverse](#) conservative and religious non-state and state actors, hostile to the establishment or expansion of women's rights, have coalesced to [push against the consensus](#) set out in SDG 5 and other international norms, targeting international commitments on [sexual and reproductive health and rights](#), [education](#), and the [language on gender equality](#) in particular. The UNFPA [stresses](#) that this 'relentless, well-organised effort' is having severe repercussions for women's health, particularly in the most marginalised communities. It has also hindered progress on [combating violence against women](#). Anti-gender rhetoric is fuelling [online misogyny](#) and attacks on [women's rights activists](#) and [women in politics](#). In a number of [countries](#), including [EU Member States](#), governments have watered down policies on gender equality, [sidelined or de-funded](#) women's organisations or [funded anti-gender actors](#). Analysts characterise SDG 5 as a '[wicked problem](#)'; as a 'systemic, ambiguous, complex, and conflictual' issue where 'politics can trump evidence'. They find that this can lead governments to 'cherry pick' gender equality targets and indicators to measure and report on, and argue for an explicit re-commitment to evidence-based policy-making for SDG 5.

Filling critical gaps in gender and intersectional data

By [2022](#), 51 % of the requisite [gender data](#) for the SDGs was available, up from 26 % in 2016. However, the production of gender statistics has [not kept pace](#) with the production of statistics in other areas and significant data gaps remain, making it difficult to monitor progress and develop effective policy. Reliable [trend data](#) and disaggregated data for the most marginalised groups are

particularly lacking. Initiatives such as the [Women Count](#) programme, [Data2X](#) and the [Gender Data Compass](#) have helped to improve the collection and use of gender and intersectional data. [Citizen generated data](#) is one way forward to help fill critical data gaps for marginalised groups and ensure that their experiences are reflected in statistics. The 2023 Gender Data Compass [report](#) makes further recommendations for collecting better data, making it accessible and ensuring that it feeds into national policies on gender equality. The [UN World Data Forum](#) in November 2024 will be an opportunity for the international community to make further [commitments](#) in this area.

Plugging the persistent funding gap for gender equality

One barrier to improving the gender data gap is the [low level of funding support](#) from national budgets and international donors, which is insufficient to build robust systems, particularly in the least developed countries. This is symptomatic of a [broader gap](#) in funding for SDG 5 and gender equality across the goals. The need for better investment in gender equality was [flagged](#) at the outset of the 2030 Agenda. Global initiatives such as '[Generation Equality](#)' with its [action coalitions](#) have [helped](#) to mobilise resources and develop new approaches. However, the UN estimates that there is still a US\$360 billion annual deficit in spending to achieve the gender equality targets by 2030. Only [4% of total bilateral aid](#) is dedicated to programmes where gender equality is the principal objective. There is a particular need to invest more in gender-sensitive [humanitarian](#) and emergency responses and programming for [adolescent girls](#). Investing in the [care-economy](#) could contribute to achieving SDG 5 and [other goals](#), in particular SDG 1 (poverty), [SDG3](#) (healthy lives and wellbeing), SDG 4 (inclusive and quality education), SDG 8 (decent employment and inclusive growth), and SDG 10 (reduction of inequalities).

Including a gender perspective in financing reforms for the SDGs

Countries could make better use of [fiscal policies](#) to tackle gender inequalities. However, overlapping crises and [debt burdens](#) are curtailing many developing countries' capacity to invest in sustainable development, including gender equality. The [UN Commissioner for Human Rights](#), the [Women's Major Group](#) at the UN, [academia](#), and the [EU](#), all call for a stronger gender perspective to be included in the proposed reform of the global financial architecture to be discussed at the Summit of the Future and the [Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development](#) in June 2025.

Linking SDG 5 and the other goals

Gender equality [matters for achieving all the SDGs](#). According to research by Equal Measures 2030, [almost three-quarters \(73%\)](#) of the SDG targets are directly or significantly reliant on gender equality. This is echoed in [academic analysis](#), which finds that gender equality should be particularly prioritised to achieve SDGs 1, 4, 11, 12, 14 and 16. [Research](#) also suggests that efforts to increase women's leadership have a particularly strong leveraging effect on health targets in SDG 3 and on 20 targets across other goals.

Applying gender equality accelerators

Addressing systemic barriers to women's participation in political decision-making is the first of [10 key gender equality accelerators](#) identified by UN Women after the SDG Summit in 2023. Promoting women's leadership is particularly important in humanitarian emergencies and disaster and climate risk reduction. The other levers include taking a gender perspective in climate action, supporting systematic use of gender data and gender budgeting, investing in the care economy, improving women's economic situation and ensuring their safety from violence. The UN stresses that women's organisations and feminist movements have a key role to play in accelerating progress, alongside the international community, governments and the private sector.

SDG 5 progress in the EU: Uneven results

During the [lead up](#) to Agenda 2030, the EU, [alongside](#) others, [advocated](#) a strong focus on gender equality.⁷ By committing to Agenda 2030 and the SDGs, the EU and the Member States recognised that investing in gender equality is a goal in itself and central to achieving development that is fairer, more sustainable and more resilient.

Main policy framework

The [2020–2025 EU gender equality strategy](#) sets a framework for EU action to achieve SDG 5 in all areas of internal and external policy.⁸ Action inside the EU focuses on three priorities: 1) freedom from gender based violence and gender stereotypes; 2) a gender equal economy; and 3) equal leadership throughout society. The framework includes a commitment to combine targeted measures to tackle gender and intersectional inequalities with gender mainstreaming across all EU policies and major initiatives, including the green and digital transitions and in EU funding.

Tracking SDG 5 in the EU

Regions and countries may set SDG indicators tailored to their situation and policy priorities. The EU Statistical Office ([Eurostat](#)) has developed a set of [102 EU SDG indicators](#).⁹ These include [eight indicators for SDG 5](#), which are aligned with the priority areas in the EU gender equality strategy. Twenty-one EU Member States have developed [national indicator sets](#), some with additional indicators for SDG 5.¹⁰ For example, [Austria's](#) indicators include the gender pension gap, while [France](#) links SDG 5 to gender equality indicators across other goals and [Germany](#) includes [a measure](#) of the effectiveness of its development cooperation. [Estonia's](#) indicators include its progress on the EU's Gender Equality Index (**Box 3**).

Box 3 – Indexes tracking gender equality and SDG 5 in the EU

The annual [EU Gender Equality Index](#) issued by the EU Institute for Gender Equality ([EIGE](#)) since 2013 provides a comprehensive measure of gender equality tailored to fit the EU's policy goals. It scores the EU and Member States from 1–100 (full equality) in six core domains (work, money, time, power, health, knowledge), and on violence and intersecting inequalities. In 2023, the overall **EU score was 70.2**, while scores for EU countries varied from 56.1 in Romania to 82.2 in Sweden.

SDSN Europe uses six gender equality indicators to score European countries on their progress towards [SDG 5](#), with [profiles](#) for the EU and 38 European countries. Their [Leave-No-One-Behind Index](#) encompasses indicators on gender inequalities, income, poverty, and access to services.

The EU presented the first [voluntary review](#) of its implementation of the 2030 Agenda to the UN HLPF in 2023. On [SDG 5](#), it highlights the [setbacks](#) experienced due to the COVID-19 pandemic and persistent challenges including violence against women, gender gaps in employment, pay and care and unbalanced representation in decision-making. It concludes that the EU has made 'considerable progress on measures to achieve SDG 5 since 2015', and that EU legislation and policies 'have the potential to become game changers for gender equality'. These include new EU directives on [Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence](#), [Pay Transparency](#), [Gender Balance on Corporate Boards](#) and [Work-life Balance for Parents and Carers](#) a [European care strategy](#), and EU 2030 targets for [childcare and early childhood education](#). Eurostat's [data for SDG 5](#) and [2024 annual report](#) provide further detail on the EU's SDG 5 indicators:

- On **violence against women**, pending the findings of a second [EU-wide survey](#) there is insufficient data to assess progress over time.¹¹ A 2012 EU-wide [survey](#) painted a stark picture of its nature and extent, finding that one woman in three had experienced some form of physical and/or sexual violence since the age of 15.
- The **gender employment gap** [narrowed](#) by 3.2 percentage points between 2009 and 2023, when 70 % of women were in the labour market, compared to 80 % of men.

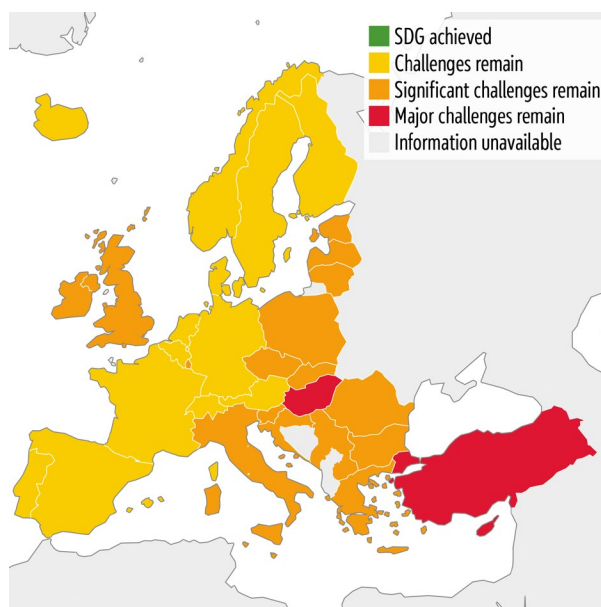
However, at the current rate of progress, the EU **will not meet its 2030 target** of reducing the gender gap from 10.2 to 5.6 percentage points or less.

- The **gender gap on exclusion from the labour market due to caring responsibilities** has narrowed by 0.3 percentage points since 2018. Nevertheless, in [2023](#), nine times more women than men who wanted to engage in paid work were unable to do so [for this reason](#). A '[childcare gap](#)' between leave and a guaranteed place in pre-school care or education is one obstacle in most Member States. Closing it would have a [significant impact](#) on the gender employment gap.
- The **gender pay gap** is narrowing, although women's gross hourly earnings in the EU are still on average 12.7 % below those of men.
- The share of **women in leadership positions** is increasing. In 2023, women held 33.3 % of seats in [national parliaments](#), up from 21.1 % in 2003. The situation varied markedly between Member States, from 46.6 % seats in Sweden to 14.1 % in Hungary. In 2023, women made up more than a third of [board members](#) of the largest listed companies and the **EU was on track to meet its 2026 target of 40 %**. Four countries (France, Italy, Denmark and the Netherlands) had already exceeded this target, but others were lagging behind, notably Cyprus at 8.2 %.
- On **education**, boys are falling behind girls and women on early school leaving and tertiary education and the **gender gap is increasing in favour of women**. In 2023, 11.3 % of men and 7.7 % of women aged 18 to 24 had left education and training early, a gender gap of 3.6 percentage points, up 0.2 percentage points since 2018.

The EU's SDG indicators do not cover SDG 5 targets on harmful practices, unpaid domestic and care work, reproductive and sexual health and rights, economic resources, gender equality tools or technology. These aspects are partially addressed in the Commission's [annual report](#) on the EU gender equality strategy, the '[time](#)' and '[money](#)' domains of EIGE's gender equality index and its [research](#) into issues including [FGM](#), [financial independence](#) and [gender-mainstreaming tools](#). [Indexes](#) on sexual and reproductive health and rights show uneven access to modern contraception, fertility treatment and abortion ([challenged](#) in some EU countries). SDSN's indicators include the share of women among ICT specialists. Their data confirms that **no EU country has achieved the SDG 5 targets and progress is uneven (Figure1)**.

A [civil society report](#) for the 2023 HLPF urged EU voluntary reviews to go into more depth by analysing the 'structural and systematic obstacles, trade-offs and gaps' in achieving the SDGs. On SDG 5, it called for better intersectional gender disaggregated data, gender budgeting and investment in care and social policies, a paradigm shift away from GDP to a wellbeing economy and further implementation of gender mainstreaming in EU policy making. The EU Joint Research Centre (JRC) [finds](#) that SDG 5 is not receiving sufficient consideration across EU policies, notably in initiatives under the European Green Deal.

Figure 1 – SDG 5 progress in Europe



Source: SDSN Europe, [Europe Sustainable Development Report 2023-2024 - SDG5](#).

Box 4 – Enhancing EU policy in response to the pandemic and future challenges

Following the [COVID-19 pandemic](#), experts and stakeholders [identified](#) ways to enhance EU gender equality policy, including better enforcement of existing EU legislation, new legislation and other measures such as better data collection, systematic use of [gender-mainstreaming tools](#), awareness raising and support for grassroots organisations. There were calls for the EU to be more ambitious in tackling the structural roots of inequality, such as gender stereotyping, gender-based violence and uneven access to reproductive health and rights, and to pay more attention to the specific situation of different groups of women and girls and 'intersecting' forms of discrimination. EIGE [considers](#) that over the next 15 years, the major trends affecting progress on gender equality in the EU will be digitalisation and the green transition, changes in the world of work, diversifying inequalities and shifting values linked to populism, anti-gender movements and a tech-enabled backlash against women's rights.

EU action contributing to SDG 5 in the world

Main policy frameworks

In the 2015 [Council Conclusions](#) on Gender in Development, the EU backed the 'twin-track approach' to the SDGs of combining a stand-alone goal on gender equality and empowering women and girls with comprehensive gender mainstreaming. It highlighted the need to align commitments with financing. In 2017, the [New Consensus on Development](#) committed the EU and its Member States to align their development cooperation frameworks with the 2030 Agenda and SDGs. The policy document stresses gender equality is vital to achieving the SDGs and cuts across the 2030 Agenda, and that the EU and its Member States 'will promote women's and girls' rights, gender equality, the empowerment of women and girls and their protection as a priority across all areas of action'. It also commits the EU and the Member States to adhere to the 'leave no one behind' principle by addressing the multiple forms of discrimination faced by vulnerable people and marginalised groups.

The main framework for the EU's external policy on gender equality and women's empowerment is its third multiannual [EU Gender Action Plan \(GAP\) III](#). GAP III aims to ensure that by 2025, 85 % of all new EU external actions contribute to SDG 5, up from 65 % in 2019. At least 5 % of these actions should have gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment as a principal objective and the EU is to support at least one such action in each region and country. Under GAP III, EU action focuses on six key thematic areas: 1) gender-based violence; 2) sexual and reproductive health and rights; 3) economic and social rights and empowerment; 4) equal participation and leadership; 5) the women, peace and security agenda; and 6) the green transition and digital transformation. The action plan follows a 'three-pronged approach' of promoting gender equality through gender mainstreaming, dedicated action and political dialogue. It espouses the principles of transforming gender norms that discriminate against or disadvantage women and girls, addressing intersectional disadvantages, centring on human rights and working in partnership with local communities and civil society, including women's rights organisations.

Implementation of GAP III

GAP III is measured against a set of [objectives and indicators](#), including progress towards SDG 5. A final evaluation is due at the end of the implementation period, now [extended from 2025 to 2027](#) to align the plan with the EU's multiannual financial framework. This was one of the recommendations put forward in the [mid-term evaluation](#) in May 2023, alongside calls for more systematic gender analysis to inform country programming, more gender equality initiatives for the digital and green transitions and an expansion of human resources. Overall, the mid-term evaluation found that GAP III has helped to put gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls onto the political agenda in the EU's political dialogues with third countries, despite the backlash against women's rights. It also concludes that it has significantly increased the depth of programming and the level and targeting of funding.

The main **funding instrument for EU external action** is [NDICI Global Europe](#). Like GAP III, it requires that by 2025 at least 85 % of new initiatives should have gender equality as a principal or significant objective. [Budgetary reporting](#) shows that the share of initiatives has increased, rising to 77 % in 2022. From 2021–2023, the instrument's overall contribution to gender equality was €31 million. [OECD data](#) on official development assistance (ODA) shows the EU institutions and Member States to be among the top providers of ODA for gender equality. The EU has also made efforts to make its humanitarian aid more gender sensitive by using a [gender-age marker](#). According to the [EU voluntary review](#) on external aspects of SDG 5, in 2021, 96 % of humanitarian funding took gender and age considerations into account to some or a large extent.

Box 5 – Working with multilateral partners

The UN is one of the EU's [key multilateral partners](#) for external action on gender equality. The 2023 SDG Summit showcased the joint [EU-UN Spotlight Initiative](#) on combating gender-based violence as one of 12 [high-impact initiatives](#) that have helped to catalyse and accelerate progress towards the SDGs. The [projects](#) have [helped to combat](#) different manifestations of gender-based violence, including [FGM](#), [trafficking](#) and [femicide](#). In 2023, the EU launched a follow-up [Spotlight 2.0 programme for violence elimination by 2030](#) (€16.5 million), to build on the results. In 2023, new programmes were [launched](#) in [Bangladesh](#), [Bolivia](#), [Colombia](#), [Paraguay](#) and [El Salvador](#).

Twelve of the 33 [regional Team Europe Initiatives](#) (TEIs) implemented under the EU's [Global Gateway](#) strategy are linked explicitly with the achievement of SDG 5. In Sub-Saharan Africa the focus is on [sexual and reproductive health and rights](#) and [climate change](#), among other things. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the TEIs include [inclusive and equal societies](#), while the TEI in the Middle East, Asia and the Pacific addresses [green issues](#). [Research](#) by ECPDM cites a country TEI on [decent work](#) in Bangladesh, tackling gender-based violence, as a good example of how TEIs can support innovative approaches to mainstreaming women's empowerment. Concord, the European Confederation of sustainable development NGOs, urges the EU to [rethink](#) the Global Gateway to make reducing inequalities a central objective and to direct more funding to gender equality.

GAP III stresses that the EU will pursue gender equality objectives through its **trade policy**, by including strong gender provisions in new trade agreements and considering gender issues in impact assessments and evaluations. Nevertheless, since the impacts of trade on gender equality can be diverse and contradictory, this is one area where there is a [risk](#) of EU policy having unintended negative impacts on aspects of SDG 5. SDG Watch has [called](#) for systematic 'spill-over analyses' to identify the impacts of EU policies on trade, debt, tax, and finance on gender equality.

European Parliament position

The European Parliament is a strong proponent of advancing gender equality in the EU and making gender equality a focus of EU development cooperation. During the preparation of Agenda 2030, Parliament [called](#) for a stand-alone goal on gender equality and the integration of a gender perspective across all the goals. It stressed the importance of areas that became key targets under SDG 5, including eliminating discriminatory legislation, improving women's participation in decision-making, equal access to employment, and universal access to family planning and sexual and reproductive health and rights, identifying the eradication of all forms of gender-based violence and harmful practices as a top priority. It also called for a gender perspective in environmental and climate change policies and stressed the importance of other areas, such as water and sanitation, to achieving gender equality. Parliament's [position](#) was that all development finance should be gender-sensitive. It called for increased resources for promoting gender equality, targeted investments in key sectors and effective tracking through gender budgeting and better data.

After the adoption of Agenda 2030, Parliament has reiterated many of these recommendations, most recently in its [2023 annual resolution](#) on the implementation and delivery of the SDGs, which recommended ways to accelerate progress towards SDG 5. Identifying gender equality as one of the key remaining challenges for sustainable development, Parliament stressed the gender dimension

of obstacles such as the data and financing gaps. On data, it called for disaggregation by gender and other characteristics, support for capacity building in developing countries and better use of the gender marker and [equality marker](#) in EU monitoring tools. On financing, Parliament welcomed the Commission's ODA targets and efforts to [track EU budget expenditure](#) on gender equality. Parliament has also [called](#) to prioritise sexual and reproductive health and rights in EU and joint programming and for substantive implementation of gender mainstreaming in the EU's environment action programme to 2030. On internal policy, Parliament was a [key player](#) in recent legislative developments on gender-based violence, pay, and gender balance on corporate boards. In light of the [backlash](#) against women's rights, [uneven access](#) to sexual and reproductive health services including [abortion](#), the [pandemic](#) and the [cost of living and energy crises](#), Parliament has proposed ways to strengthen EU gender equality policy.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The UN Statistics Commission reviewed the framework in March 2020 and will review it again in 2025.
- ² Two of the 54 gender-specific indicators are used for more than one goal.
- ³ For SDG 5, the data for the global indicators is managed by UNDESA-UNSD, UN Women, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNODC, UNDP, FAO, WHO, the World Bank, ILO, ITU and OECD.
- ⁴ The UN database contains global, regional, and country data and metadata on the official SDG indicators. It uses information from the custodian agencies for each SDG indicator and specifies whether the national data were adjusted, estimated, modelled, or are the result of global monitoring. It can be searched by goal (see [SDG 5](#)) and by [country](#).
- ⁵ Annual assessments for the UN High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development ([UN HLPF](#)), including [reports](#) by the UN Secretary General and the UN Statistics Division and a dedicated '[gender snapshot](#)' report, encompass global progress towards SDG 5. SDG 5 was also under thematic review at the UN HLPF in [2017](#) and [2022](#). In addition, [reporting](#) for the SDG Summit in 2023, held at the critical mid-point in the implementation of 2030 Agenda, prioritised gender equality.
- ⁶ The [statistical annex](#) to the UN Secretary General's 2024 report on the SDGs sets out regional data tables for SDG 5.
- ⁷ Including EU Member States: Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Spain and Sweden.
- ⁸ The EU does not have an overall strategy for implementing Agenda 2030 and the SDGs, but the European Parliament, among others, has called for one to be adopted.
- ⁹ The set of EU SDG indicators is reviewed annually in line with EU policy priorities. The updated indicators are included in the [annual EU SDG monitoring report](#), usually published together with the European Semester spring package in May or June.
- ¹⁰ As of 2023, UNECE [listed](#) the Member States as: [Austria](#), [Belgium](#), [Czechia](#), [Denmark](#), [Estonia](#), [Finland](#), [France](#), [Germany](#), [Greece](#), [Hungary](#), [Ireland](#), [Italy](#), [Lithuania](#), [Luxembourg](#), [Netherlands](#), [Poland](#), [Romania](#), [Slovakia](#), [Slovenia](#), [Spain](#), and [Sweden](#).
- ¹¹ Survey results will be highlighted in the 2024 EIGE Gender Equality Index, released at [EIGE's Gender Equality Forum](#).

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