

EIGE-2021 Gender Equality Index 2021 Report: Health

Domain of power

In terms of progress on gender equality in key decision-making positions in major political, economic and social institutions, the EU is only halfway towards equality (European Commission, 2021a). Although the domain of power has seen the most improvement of all domains since 2010, progress has been slow and uneven. Women account for only one in three members of EU national parliaments. Women remain substantially under-represented in corporate boardrooms: 30 % in 2021. In large companies, less than 1 in 10 board presidents or CEOs are women. Despite women's growing involvement in research funding, media content and sports policies, their opportunities to influence decisions in these sectors remain limited.



There are many reasons for the systemic under-representation of women in decision-making positions. These include gender roles and stereotypes, the heavy burden of housework and care duties, which limits women's ability to be active in public life, discriminatory employment practices and gender-based violence. Concerns are also mounting over rampant online harassment of women in leadership, which further discourages women from engaging in public debate or running for office (EIGE, 2020a).

The glaring absence of women in COVID-19 emergency decision-making is having a direct impact on people's lives. Ensuring gender balance in decision-making on disease prevention and response in all countries can strengthen governments' responses (OECD, 2020a). The benefits of gender balance in crisis management extend beyond the immediate consequences of the pandemic to the longer-term ramifications of COVID-19 on gender equality (EIGE, 2021c).

Political representation and access to decision-making are now more frequently included among social determinants of health (SDH) (Bhui, 2018; Gerry McCartney et al., 2021), and are sometimes referred to as a political determinant of health (Ottersen et al., 2014). A 2020 WHO report found that the gap in life expectancy is correlated with the degree of political equity, and the benefit was greater for men (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2020). In addition, Van de Velde et al. (2013) found that a high degree of macro-level gender equality, especially with more women in political decision-making, is associated with lower levels of depression in both women and men.

EU institutions have increasingly turned their attention to women's representation in political and economic decision-making^[1]. The European Commission brought the issue to the political fore in 2012. It proposed a directive to improve the gender balance among non-executive directors of listed companies, with a minimum target of 40 % of the under-represented sex. Since then, the directive has been blocked in the Council.

Gender balance in decision-making is one of the three main pillars of the EU gender equality strategy 2020–2025. It underlines the importance of having women in leadership positions across political, economic and social spheres (European Commission, 2020b). The Commission has also adopted the European democracy action plan. It envisages actions to mainstream equality at every level to better enable democratic engagement, including gender balance in politics and decision-making (European Commission, 2020a).

Footnotes

[1] EIGE's Gender Statistics Database shows that, as of May 2021, the European Parliament comprises 39 % women and 61 % men. As regards the European Commission, 2019 was the best year to date in terms of gender-balanced appointments, with 12 women (44 %) and 15 men (56 %), as Member States responded to a call from President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen for gender parity in nominations. The replacement of the Irish Commissioner in October 2020 has improved the balance still further, to 13 women (48 %) and 14 men (52 %).

[2] The domain of power measures gender equality in the highest decision-making positions across the political, economic and social spheres. The subdomain of political power looks at the representation of women and men in national parliaments, government and regional/local assemblies. The subdomain of economic power examines the proportions of women and men on the corporate boards of the largest nationally registered companies and national central banks. The subdomain of social power includes data on the boards of research funding organisations, public broadcasters and the national sports federations of the sample of 10 most popular national sports in each country.