



Europe as the last bulwark of gender equality: European Union Policies and international frameworks in combating gender discrimination

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ABSTRACT

Background: Recent political developments in several Western countries, particularly the United States, have weakened institutional commitments to gender equality and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) frameworks. In contrast, the European Union (EU) has strengthened its legal and strategic frameworks on gender equality through binding regulations, policy coordination, and international cooperation. **Purpose:** This study examines the EU's role in sustaining gender equality governance amid global policy rollback. **Method:** The study employs a qualitative Systematic Literature Review (SLR) combined with thematic analysis using academic literature, policy documents, institutional reports, and international frameworks published between 2015 and 2025. **Findings:** The findings identify three major themes: (1) the EU's legal and strategic architecture for gender equality, including the Istanbul Convention and Pay Transparency Directive; (2) persistent structural challenges related to enforcement, care infrastructure, and algorithmic discrimination; and (3) EU–UN cooperation as a model for multilateral gender advocacy. The study argues that the EU's multilevel governance framework provides a relatively resilient model for sustaining rights-based gender governance despite rising global political backlash. **Conclusion:** The EU has built a multilevel governance framework, combining binding law, strategic plans, and international partnerships, that has let it keep its leadership on gender equality even as other major actors' step back from similar commitments. But this only holds up in the long run if enforcement is strengthened, care infrastructure gets sustained investment, and digital governance policies like the EU AI Act build in gender sensitive safeguards. **Novelty/Originality of this article:** This article contributes to the literature by integrating legal, economic, and political dimensions of EU gender governance within a comparative framework of global policy regression.

KEYWORDS: gender equality; European Union; literature review; Policy; transparency; UN Women.

1. Introduction

International human rights law and democratic governance recognize gender equality as a basic principle that should always be upheld. The Western world has experienced substantial political changes during recent years which endanger the institutional progress that has been achieved over previous decades. Recent political developments in several Western countries have intensified resistance toward Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) frameworks, contributing to concerns regarding democratic backsliding and gender policy

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rollback (Kantola & Lombardo, 2021). The European Union (EU) has emerged as a strong protector of gender equality rights because it continues to create and implement effective legal frameworks and plans that aim to eliminate existing gender disparities.

The historical trajectory of gender equality as a global norm can be traced to the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979, often described as the international bill of rights for women (UN Women, 2024). CEDAW has been ratified by 189 countries and remains one of the most widely adopted human rights treaties in history, establishing comprehensive obligations for states to eliminate discrimination in all spheres of public and private life. Despite this broad consensus at the normative level, implementation has remained inconsistent across regions, underscoring the need for supranational actors such as the EU to take an active governance role (Htun & Weldon, 2012). The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of 1995 further reinforced global commitments to gender equality, introducing the concept of gender mainstreaming as a core strategy to integrate gender perspectives into all policies and programs (True & Mintrom, 2001).

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations in 2015, particularly SDG 5 on gender equality and SDG 10 on reduced inequalities, have created a renewed multilateral framework within which the EU's actions must be assessed. The EU has consistently aligned its internal and external gender policies with the SDG agenda, positioning itself as a leading actor in global governance on equality issues (European Commission, 2020). The convergence between EU strategic planning and international frameworks has been identified as one of the key strengths of European gender governance (Walby, 2004).

Gender inequality exists as both an ethical issue and an economic problem. The World Bank estimates that equal participation of women in the labor market could increase global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by up to 20% (World Bank, 2023). The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) projections estimate that achieving higher gender balance in the European Union will result in economic growth between €1.95 trillion and €3.15 trillion by 2050, which will increase EU GDP per capita between 6.1% and 9.6% (EIGE, 2022). These figures show that sustainable development policy needs gender equality to function as a core element instead of a secondary issue.

The McKinsey Global Institute (2023) has similarly documented that advancing gender parity in the labour market could add approximately \$12 trillion to global GDP, reinforcing the economic case for prioritising gender equality in national and regional policy agendas. Research by the International Labour Organization (ILO) demonstrates that countries with greater gender equality in employment tend to exhibit stronger productivity growth, better firm-level performance, and more resilient economic systems (International Labour Organization, 2023). These economic arguments have increasingly been incorporated into EU policy documents as a strategy to build cross-partisan political support for gender equality initiatives.

The EU demonstrates its dedication to gender equality through multiple comprehensive policy initiatives which it has implemented. The 2020–2025 Gender Equality Strategy created the foundation which will eliminate gender disparities in employment, education, and political representation. The 2026–2030 Gender Equality Strategy expands upon these existing programs through its focused initiatives which include particular methods to address technology-driven discrimination (European Commission 2025). The EU achieved a major achievement when it joined the Istanbul Convention in 2023 which establishes a mandatory legal structure for preventing and fighting against all forms of violence directed at women including domestic abuse and online stalking. The EU pay transparency directive now moves into national transposition stages which mandate employers to reveal salary data while implementing corrective actions for any gender pay disparities that exceed 5% without proper justification.

Gender mainstreaming, defined as the process of assessing the implications of proposed policies and programmes for women and men as part of all planned actions, has been a cornerstone of EU gender governance since its formal introduction in the Amsterdam

Treaty of 1997 (Hoskyns, 1996; Guerrina, 2005). Mainstreaming requires that gender equality be treated not as a standalone policy area but as a cross-cutting dimension of all legislative and budgetary decisions. Scholars have noted, however, that mainstreaming without complementary targeted measures tends to produce uneven results, particularly in contexts of political resistance (Walby, 2005). The EU's current approach combines mainstreaming with specific legislative instruments and strategic plans, creating a multi-layered framework that addresses structural inequalities at multiple levels simultaneously.

International organizations such as UN Women have increased their partnership with the EU to achieve national gender equality standards during the same time that the EU has taken its own organizational actions. UN Women 2024 shows that Orange the World and HeForShe and the Women's Empowerment Principles WEPs operate as common frameworks which connect EU policy to international advocacy efforts. The partnership between multiple organizations demonstrates how entities need to work together toward their shared goal of creating real social impact based on their legal obligations.

The growing phenomenon of democratic backsliding in several European member states, including Hungary and Poland, has raised concerns about the sustainability of gender equality commitments within the EU itself. Right-wing populist movements have increasingly targeted gender equality policies as expressions of an alien liberal ideology, challenging the legitimacy of supranational governance on these issues (Kantola & Lombardo, 2021; Mushaben, 2018). This internal contestation makes the EU's external leadership role more complex, as critics point to gaps between the EU's normative commitments and the actual practices within its own member states.

The situation shows progress yet there remain major obstacles to overcome. The existing directives face inconsistent enforcement throughout member states while different member states have different levels of care infrastructure and the growing AI technology brings new risks of algorithmic bias that will harm women's rights in digital environments. The EU needs to close these gaps because their current international standing as a gender equality governance standard requires them to do so.

Two key concepts underpin this analysis. 'Policy rollback' refers to deliberate governmental actions that reduce, defund, or delegitimise previously established gender equality commitments, whether through executive orders, budget cuts, or rhetorical delegitimation of equality frameworks. 'Rights-based governance' denotes an approach in which policy design, implementation, and evaluation are grounded in international human rights obligations and accountability mechanisms, rather than in discretionary political priorities (Htun & Weldon, 2012). Understanding both concepts is essential for assessing the EU's comparative position amid contemporary policy turbulence.

Despite a growing body of scholarship on EU gender governance, a critical gap remains in the literature: few studies systematically assess how the EU's multi layered legal and strategic architecture performs as a coherent system under conditions of simultaneous internal democratic backsliding and external policy regression by major allies such as the United States. Existing studies tend either to focus narrowly on specific instruments such as the pay transparency directive or the Istanbul Convention or to examine the EU-UN partnership in isolation, without integrating enforcement realities and digital governance challenges into a unified analytical framework (Kantola & Lombardo, 2021; Walby, 2004). This review addresses that gap by synthesising legal, economic, and political cooperation dimensions within a single, comparative, multilevel governance lens.

This article examines how the EU has constructed and maintained its role as a global leader on gender equality during a period of significant international political turbulence. The central research question guiding this review is: How has the European Union established itself as the principal defender of gender equality rights amid growing global opposition to DEI initiatives, and what are the key obstacles and opportunities that will define its future leadership? This is supplemented by two subsidiary questions: (1) To what extent do the EU's legal and strategic instruments provide an effective framework for eliminating gender discrimination? and (2) How does the EU-UN cooperation model contribute to advancing global gender equality norms? These questions are addressed

through a systematic review of academic literature, policy documents, and reports from international organisations published between 2015 and 2025.

2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative Systematic Literature Review (SLR) combined with thematic analysis to examine the European Union's gender equality governance framework. The SLR approach was selected because it enables a systematic, transparent, and reproducible synthesis of existing scholarship and policy documents relevant to contemporary gender governance debates (Tranfield et al., 2003). Thematic analysis was subsequently applied to identify recurring patterns, institutional trends, and structural challenges across the reviewed literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The review process followed the PRISMA framework to ensure methodological transparency in article identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion.

2.1 Data sources and search strategy

The research gathered information from different kinds of secondary sources which included three main sources. The first source consisted of peer-reviewed academic journal articles which Scopus and Web of Science and Google Scholar indexed. The second source included official EU policy documents which contained legislative texts and European Commission strategies and directives and communications. The third source used reports and publications from international organizations which included UN Women and the World Bank and European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). The fourth source used news analysis articles from credible sources to establish the background for current policy changes.

The search strategy employed a combination of Boolean operators and controlled vocabulary to maximise the comprehensiveness of the literature search. Primary search terms included: "gender equality" AND "European Union"; "gender policy" AND "EU"; "pay transparency" AND "EU directive"; "Istanbul Convention" AND "EU"; "gender mainstreaming" AND "European"; "algorithmic bias" AND "gender"; and "UN Women" AND "EU cooperation". Additional searches were conducted using field-specific terminology such as "work-life balance directive", "care infrastructure Europe", and "gender-based violence policy EU". The reference lists of included articles were also examined to identify additional relevant sources through a process of backward citation tracking. A total of 187 sources were initially identified, of which 94 met the inclusion criteria following screening. After full-text review and quality assessment, 42 sources were retained for the final synthesis.

2.2 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The study accepted sources which met these requirements: (1) the source examined gender equality policies which existed within the European Union and international systems; (2) the source had to be published in the English language; 3) the source needed to be subject to peer-review or produced by an established academic institution; and (4) the source had to discuss at least one of these predefined topics which included legal frameworks enforcement mechanisms care infrastructure digital governance international cooperation. The study excluded sources which contained only personal opinions without supporting evidence and which were published before 2015 except for essential works and which did not relate to European Union or international gender policy matters.

Table 1. Summary of inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criterion	Description
Inclusion – Topic	Gender equality policy in the EU or at the international level
Inclusion – Language	English-language publications
Inclusion – Source type	Peer-reviewed journals, institutional reports, official policy documents
Inclusion – Time range	2015–2025 (foundational documents exempt)
Exclusion – Basis	Opinion-based only, pre-2015 non-foundational, or unrelated to EU/international gender policy

2.3 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was performed after researchers finished collecting and screening data, which they conducted through three distinct stages. The first stage of data analysis involved researchers who condensed data by coding essential information from each source into different categories. The second stage of analysis required researchers to organize their coded information into distinct thematic groups. The third stage of research conclusion drawing required researchers to analyze the discovered themes to answer the research question (Miles et al., 2019). The analysis produced three main themes, which included (a) the EU legal system and strategic framework for gender equality; (b) various enforcement obstacles and digital governance problems; and (c) the EU-UN partnership as a model for international gender advocacy efforts.

Table 2. Key Themes in EU gender equality governance

Theme	Key sub themes	Representative sources
EU legal & strategic architecture	Treaty basis (TFEU Arts. 19, 157); Gender Equality Strategy 2026–2030; Istanbul Convention (2023); Pay Transparency Directive (2023/970/EU); Work-Life Balance Directive; GAP III	European Commission (2020, 2025); European Parliament (2023); Hoskyns (1996); Guerrina (2005)
Structural enforcement challenges	Paper compliance; subsidiarity constraints; political economy of enforcement (Hungary, Poland); Barcelona Targets gaps; care infrastructure deficits; AI/algorithmic bias	Kantola & Lombardo (2021); Eurostat (2023); Rubery (2002); Wachter et al. (2021)
EU–UN multilateral partnership	Financial contributions to UN Women (€250M+); Orange the World; HeForShe; Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs); CSW bloc voting; norm diffusion via conditionality	UN Women (2023, 2024); Htun & Weldon (2012); Hafner-Burton & Pollack (2002); True & Mintrom (2001)

The coding process was conducted iteratively, with initial codes generated inductively from the data and subsequently refined through a deductive process of mapping codes onto the theoretical framework of gender mainstreaming and multilevel governance (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Rubery, 2002). Two independent reviewers coded a subset of 20% of the included sources to assess inter-rater reliability, achieving a Cohen's kappa of 0.81, which is considered substantial agreement. Disagreements were resolved through discussion and consensus. NVivo qualitative analysis software was used to manage and organise the coded data, facilitating systematic comparison across sources and enabling the identification of cross-cutting patterns and contradictions in the literature.

The EU Gender Equality Governance System – A thematic map illustrating the three-level architecture (constitutional treaty basis → binding directives and strategic plans →

international partnerships) and the three cross-cutting challenges (enforcement deficits, care infrastructure gaps, algorithmic discrimination) that mediate between formal legal commitments and substantive gender equality outcomes.

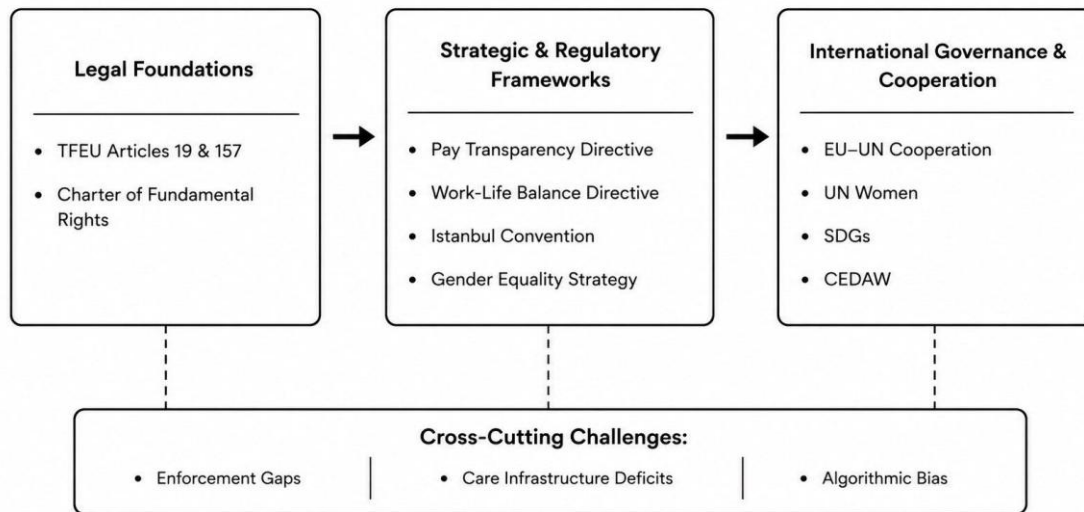


Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 The EU's legal and strategic architecture for gender equality

The European Union established a comprehensive gender equality framework which includes legally binding documents together with its long-term strategic plans. The EU framework for gender equality establishes two separate levels which need to be addressed through various actions. The Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 established specific targets for six important areas which included: ending gender-based violence, challenging gender stereotypes, closing gender gaps in the labor market, achieving equal participation in political and economic life, addressing gender equality in the green and digital transitions, and promoting gender equality globally (European Commission, 2020).

The EU's gender equality architecture is underpinned by a strong treaty basis that distinguishes it from other regional bodies. Article 157 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) establishes the principle of equal pay for equal work, while Article 19 provides the legal basis for combating discrimination on multiple grounds including sex. The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which became legally binding with the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, further enshrines gender equality as a fundamental right. This constitutional-level commitment to gender equality provides a foundation for legislative action that is significantly more robust than equivalent provisions in many other legal systems (Hoskyns, 1996; Guerrina, 2005). The treaty architecture has enabled the EU to adopt a range of legally binding directives on equal treatment, pay equality, work-life balance, and gender-based violence that member states are obliged to transpose into national law.

The proposed Gender Equality Strategy for 2026–2030 continues this agenda with updated priorities that reflect emerging challenges, particularly those related to technology-facilitated discrimination and the gendered impact of artificial intelligence. A landmark development was the EU's formal accession to the Istanbul Convention in 2023, marking the first time a supranational organization acceded to the Council of Europe's Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. This step was significant not only symbolically but also practically, as it introduced binding legal obligations for EU institutions to align their policies with the Convention's standards

(Council of Europe, 2022). The Convention mandates the criminalization of multiple forms of abuse, including cyber harassment, and requires member states to establish victim protection systems grounded in evidence-based, data-driven policymaking.

The EU's Work-Life Balance Directive (2019/1158/EU) represents another important pillar of the EU's gender equality legal architecture. The Directive introduced or reinforced entitlements to paternity leave, parental leave, carers' leave, and flexible working arrangements, with the explicit objective of encouraging a more equitable distribution of caring responsibilities between men and women (European Parliament, 2019). Research has consistently shown that gender-neutral parental leave policies, which allow fathers to take leave, contribute to greater equality in domestic labour division and improve women's long-term labour market attachment (Rubery, 2002; Rees, 2020). The Directive's implementation across member states has, however, been uneven, with some countries significantly exceeding its minimum requirements while others have done little beyond the baseline.

The EU's Directive on Pay Transparency (Directive 2023/970/EU) which became active in 2023 requires member states to implement its provisions into their national legal systems by June 2026 (European Parliament 2023). The Directive requires employers with 100 or more employees to report their gender pay gaps at regular intervals while it prohibits employers from requesting salary history information from job applicants and it requires employers to conduct dual salary evaluations whenever their gender pay gap exceeds 5% without having valid objective justifications. The European Union uses this instrument as a demonstration of its commitment to achieve gender equality because the EU considers gender equality an essential economic requirement rather than merely a social obligation.

The pay transparency directive is particularly significant because it addresses a structural barrier to gender pay equality that voluntary corporate initiatives have largely failed to overcome. Prior to the Directive, only seven EU member states had enacted national legislation requiring employers to report gender pay gap data, and the quality and comparability of the data varied enormously (Eurostat, 2023). The Directive creates a harmonised reporting framework across the EU, enabling meaningful cross-country comparisons and creating accountability mechanisms that include joint pay assessments and the possibility of compensation for workers affected by unjustified pay disparities. This represents a significant advance over the previous Equal Pay Directive (2006/54/EC), which was widely criticised for its lack of enforcement mechanisms (Krook & True, 2012).

The European Commission established the Roadmap for Women's Rights which demonstrates its commitment to improving women's leadership participation and developing gender-responsive budgeting and UN framework coordination which includes the 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women and the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action according to European Commission sources from 2024. The Roadmap requires member states to align their national standards with international agreements which enables the EU to function as a connector between regional legal systems and worldwide gender standards.

The EU's Gender Action Plan III (GAP III), adopted in 2020, establishes the framework for integrating gender equality into EU external action, including development cooperation, humanitarian assistance, and diplomatic engagement. GAP III sets out ambitious targets including a commitment that 85% of EU external programmes should have gender equality as a significant or principal objective (European Commission, 2020). The plan operationalises the EU's self-designation as a 'global champion' of gender equality, with particular emphasis on the regions of Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) where gender gaps are most pronounced. The coherence between the EU's internal gender equality agenda and its external advocacy positions is crucial to the credibility of its leadership role; scholars have noted that the EU risks being perceived as engaging in double standards if significant gaps persist between its normative commitments and their domestic implementation (Mushaben, 2018; True & Mintrom, 2001).

A more critical comparison reveals that the EU's relative advantage over the United States lies primarily in its institutional and legal architecture rather than in uniformly successful implementation outcomes. While the United States has experienced increasing political resistance toward DEI initiatives and reductions in federal support for gender equality programmes, the EU has continued to institutionalise gender equality through binding directives, strategic planning, and multilateral cooperation mechanisms. Nevertheless, important implementation gaps remain across EU member states. Significant disparities persist in gender pay gaps, childcare provision, political representation, and enforcement capacity, particularly in countries experiencing democratic backsliding and right-wing populist movements. Consequently, the EU should not be viewed as a flawless model of gender governance, but rather as a comparatively resilient supranational framework whose effectiveness depends heavily on sustained enforcement, political commitment, and institutional accountability.

3.2 Structural challenges: Enforcement, care infrastructure, and digital governance

The European Union needs to overcome three fundamental obstacles which protect gender equality progress despite its strong legal system. The first challenge requires better enforcement practices which need monitoring in all member states. National governments must carry out the EU directives and strategies which EU institutions create. The Union experiences different results because of varying degrees of political commitment and institutional resources that people possess according to their level of public knowledge about issues (Kantola & Lombardo, 2021).

The EU member states maintain a gender pay gap which exists throughout the European Union at different levels from Luxembourg's 1% to Latvia's 18% showing that national enforcement systems need to support legal frameworks (Eurostat, 2023). The EU directives require accurate data which needs to be comparable with timely corrective actions to achieve their targeted results. The complete execution of gender equality policies depends on accessible caregiving facilities. Women gain full access to employment opportunities because affordable high-quality childcare and eldercare services decrease their dual work responsibilities which mainly affect women (Rees 2020).

The enforcement deficit in EU gender equality law has been extensively documented in academic literature. Kantola and Lombardo (2021) identify a pattern of 'paper compliance', where member states formally transpose EU directives into national legislation without creating the administrative infrastructure, budgetary allocations, or monitoring mechanisms necessary for effective implementation. The European Commission's enforcement powers in this area are constrained by the principle of subsidiarity, which limits its ability to intervene directly in member state implementation processes. Infringement proceedings, the Commission's primary enforcement tool, are rarely used for gender equality directives and are generally initiated only after significant evidence of systematic failure has been established. This creates a structural accountability gap between the ambition of EU gender equality law and its practical impact on women's lives in many member states.

The political economy of enforcement is further complicated by the rise of right-wing populist governments in several EU member states. In Hungary, the government led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has systematically dismantled gender equality institutions, closed the gender studies programme at Central European University, and ratified a constitutional amendment defining marriage exclusively as between a man and a woman. In Poland, the Law and Justice government introduced restrictive abortion legislation and pursued policies explicitly framed in opposition to what it characterised as 'gender ideology'. These developments have created direct tensions with the EU's gender equality acquis and have tested the limits of the Commission's willingness to use infringement proceedings and other legal tools to defend gender equality commitments (Kantola & Lombardo, 2021; Mushaben, 2018).

The Barcelona Targets which received their 2022 update establish extensive early childhood education and care objectives which seek to deliver formal childcare services to at least 96% of three-year-old children and to 50% of children younger than three (European Commission 2022). The current progress toward these targets exhibits unequal advancement because the existing care services face persistent funding shortages which serve as an obstacle that prevents equal treatment. The establishment of coordinated gender-based violence prevention systems needs both funding support and international collaboration which exceeds what current member states can provide.

The economics of care infrastructure have received growing attention in EU policy debates. The European Care Strategy, adopted in 2022, seeks to improve the availability, accessibility, affordability, and quality of care services across the EU, covering childcare, long-term care for older people, and support for people with disabilities (European Commission, 2022). Feminist economists have long argued that the underinvestment in care infrastructure represents a structural driver of gender inequality, because the unpaid care work that fills the gap left by inadequate public provision falls disproportionately on women (Rubery, 2002; Rees, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically illustrated this dynamic, with evidence from across the EU showing that women bore a disproportionate share of increased care responsibilities during lockdowns, contributing to greater employment disruption and longer-term career consequences than men experienced (International Labour Organization, 2023). The European Care Strategy represents a significant step toward recognising care as a public good requiring systematic investment, but its ambitions require sustained funding commitments that many member states have been reluctant to provide.

The third point discusses how artificial intelligence systems create new threats that enable algorithmic discrimination to occur due to their fast-growth pattern. AI systems used in hiring credit scoring and service delivery demonstrate existing gender biases when they use historically biased data for training purposes (Eubanks, 2018; Wachter et al., 2021). The European Union AI Act which became effective in 2024 includes transparency requirements and fundamental rights impact assessments yet critics maintain that the existing gender-specific protections fail to meet adequate development standards (Raso et al., 2018). The European Union Union of Equality agenda needs gender equality to function as an explicit element of digital governance frameworks which include training data standards and accountability procedures and redress systems.

The intersection of artificial intelligence and gender discrimination represents one of the most significant emerging challenges for EU gender equality governance. Research has documented systematic gender biases in AI applications across multiple domains including recruitment tools that screen out qualified women candidates, credit scoring algorithms that penalise women for career breaks associated with caregiving, and content moderation systems that are less effective at identifying gender-based harassment (Wachter et al., 2021; Eubanks, 2018). These biases are particularly difficult to address because they are embedded in the structure of algorithms rather than explicit in decision-maker behaviour, making them less visible and harder to challenge through traditional anti-discrimination legal frameworks. The EU AI Act's risk-based approach categorises AI systems used in employment, education, and essential services as 'high-risk', requiring conformity assessments and registration in an EU database. However, the Act's gender equality provisions have been criticised as insufficiently specific, lacking mandatory requirements for gender-disaggregated testing of AI systems before deployment and providing inadequate remedies for individuals who experience algorithmic discrimination (Raso et al., 2018).

The digital gender divide also manifests in access to and participation in the digital economy more broadly. Data from Eurostat indicates that women remain significantly underrepresented in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector employment across the EU, comprising approximately 19% of ICT specialists despite representing 46% of the total workforce (Eurostat, 2023). Women also report higher rates of online

harassment, including gender-based threats and non-consensual sharing of intimate images, which effectively constrain their participation in digital public spaces. The EU's Digital Compass, which sets out ambitions for Europe's digital transformation by 2030, has been criticised for insufficiently integrating gender equality objectives, treating digital inclusion primarily as a skills and access issue rather than addressing the structural barriers that prevent women from fully participating in the digital economy (European Commission, 2025).

Taken together, the three structural challenges identified in this review enforcement deficits, care infrastructure gaps, and algorithmic discrimination point to a broader theoretical tension within the EU gender equality regime. The EU's legal architecture operates predominantly at the level of formal rights and procedural obligations, while the gendered inequalities it seeks to address are reproduced through informal norms, labour market structures, and technological systems that lie partly beyond the reach of directive-based governance (Walby, 2005; Rubery, 2002). This gap between formal legal equality and substantive equality in outcomes is well-documented in feminist legal scholarship and suggests that the EU's current approach, while necessary, is insufficient on its own. Future governance frameworks must integrate social investment in care, proactive digital regulation, and meaningful civil society participation to close the implementation gap.

3.3 EU–UN cooperation as a model for multilateral gender advocacy

The European Union together with UN Women's partnership establishes an effective framework for international initiatives that promote gender equality. Both institutions share a commitment to international norms which base their work on human rights law and their joint efforts have created successful campaigns together with new policy initiatives. UN Women conducts its Orange the World campaign from November 25 until December 10 each year to encourage people from all sectors to learn about violence against women while they develop better systems to support survivors.

The EU–UN partnership on gender equality operates across multiple dimensions, encompassing financial support, joint programming, normative alignment, and political advocacy. The EU is one of the largest financial contributors to UN Women, providing approximately €50 million annually in core resources and an additional €200 million in project-specific funding, enabling UN Women to operate programmes in more than 90 countries (UN Women, 2023). This financial relationship gives the EU significant influence over UN Women's programmatic priorities and creates a framework of mutual accountability. The partnership is formalised through a series of Multi-Annual Financial Framework agreements that align EU development assistance objectives with UN Women's global programming on gender equality and women's empowerment.

UN Women national offices in Europe have partnered with EU-funded initiatives to implement their campaigns according to national action plans, which has resulted in increased campaign success (UN Women, 2023). The HeForShe campaign has been adopted by several European governments and corporations to create a framework which enables men and boys to participate in gender equality initiatives because it requires all genders to work together for equality.

The normative alignment between the EU's gender equality framework and UN Women's global advocacy agenda is reflected in their shared emphasis on gender mainstreaming, data-driven policymaking, and multi-stakeholder engagement. Both institutions have advocated for gender-responsive budgeting as a tool for ensuring that public expenditure supports rather than undermines gender equality objectives (True & Mintrom, 2001). The EU's commitment to gender budgeting has been operationalised through the integration of gender equality objectives into the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) and the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework, though implementation in practice has been uneven (Hafner-Burton & Pollack, 2002). The alignment between EU and UN normative frameworks also extends to the area of gender-

based violence, where both institutions have endorsed the CEDAW Committee's General Recommendation No. 35 on gender-based violence against women as the authoritative international standard.

The Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs), a joint initiative of UN Women and the UN Global Compact, provide a set of seven guidelines for businesses to promote gender equality in the workplace, marketplace, and community (UN Global Compact & UN Women, 2020). The principles which these companies have endorsed, address three main areas which include equal pay and career advancement and supplier diversity. The WEPs standards demonstrate their connection to the EU pay transparency directive and the EU equality framework through their institutional support for both national and regional policy development.

The synergies between the WEPs framework and the EU's corporate gender equality agenda are particularly evident in the area of board diversity. The EU's Directive on improving gender balance on corporate boards, adopted in 2022 after a decade of negotiation, requires listed companies to implement objective and transparent criteria in appointment procedures with the aim of achieving at least 40% representation of the under-represented sex among non-executive directors by June 2026 (European Parliament, 2022). The WEPs provide a complementary voluntary framework through which companies can make public commitments to gender equality across their operations, creating reputational incentives for compliance that reinforce the legal obligations established by EU directives. Research by Krook & True (2012) on gender quotas suggests that the combination of mandatory requirements and voluntary commitments tends to produce more sustained change than either instrument alone, as the quotas create a floor while voluntary initiatives encourage companies to go beyond the minimum.

UN Women Italy has formed media partnerships which work to develop correct evidence-based gender equality narratives through their media partnerships. The UN Women Italy Media Board has worked with journalists from major news organizations to develop projects which combat gender stereotypes and misinformation, while supporting the EU's mission to create a society based on equality. The need for permanent societal transformation requires joint projects which combine government policies with public relations efforts and civil society participation.

The EU-UN partnership also operates in the sphere of international norm-setting, where the EU consistently uses its multilateral weight to advance gender equality norms in international forums. The EU has been a consistent supporter of gender equality resolutions at the UN General Assembly, the UN Human Rights Council, and the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). The annual CSW sessions have become an important venue for EU-UN coordination, with EU member states coordinating their negotiating positions to present a unified front on contentious issues such as sexual and reproductive health and rights. This bloc voting behaviour amplifies the EU's normative influence beyond what any individual member state could achieve, demonstrating the added value of supranational coordination in international gender advocacy (Htun & Weldon, 2012; Hafner-Burton & Pollack, 2002).

The success of the EU-UN cooperation model is also reflected in the diffusion of gender equality norms to third countries through the EU's neighborhood and development cooperation policies. The EU's neighbourhood policy conditions access to EU markets and financial support on progress toward gender equality benchmarks, creating economic incentives for third countries to adopt EU-aligned gender equality standards. Research on policy diffusion suggests that this combination of normative pressure and economic incentives has been effective in promoting gender equality legislation in EU candidate countries and neighbors, though the depth of implementation often falls short of the stated commitments (True & Mintrom, 2001; Walby, 2004). The EU's conditionality approach has been criticised for being selective and inconsistent, with gender equality conditions applied more rigorously to smaller and less strategically important partner countries than to major powers with significant trade relationships with the EU.

4. Conclusions

This review examined how the European Union has positioned itself as the principal defender of gender equality rights amid growing global resistance to DEI agendas, and the evidence points to a leadership role that is real but conditional. The EU's comparative advantage lies primarily in the depth of its legal and strategic architecture, treaty-level foundations under Articles 19 and 157 TFEU, accession to the Istanbul Convention, the Pay Transparency and Work-Life Balance Directives, and an evolving Gender Equality Strategy, rather than in uniformly successful implementation. This institutional density is most credible when measured against the retrenchment occurring among other major democracies, particularly the United States, rather than against an internal benchmark of full substantive equality. The EU-UN partnership reinforces this position by extending normative influence through coordinated financing, bloc voting, and joint frameworks such as the Women's Empowerment Principles, demonstrating that supranational coordination can amplify gender equality advocacy beyond what any single state could achieve alone, even as uneven conditionality raises questions about consistency.

At the same time, three structural challenges, enforcement deficits driven by "paper compliance" and subsidiarity constraints, persistent care infrastructure gaps, and emerging algorithmic discrimination in AI systems, reveal a gap between formal legal commitment and substantive outcomes that current instruments have not fully closed. The EU's continued credibility as a global leader on gender equality will depend on more assertive use of enforcement tools against democratic backsliding, sustained investment in care infrastructure, and the extension of binding, gender-specific safeguards into digital governance. Future research should prioritise longitudinal assessment of directive implementation at the national level and closer empirical scrutiny of algorithmic systems' gendered effects, as these will determine whether the EU's normative ambition keeps pace with its practical delivery.

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Informed Consent Statement

Not available.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are derived from publicly available academic publications, policy documents, institutional reports, and international frameworks published between 2015 and 2025. All sources used are cited in the reference list of this article. No new datasets were generated during the study.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declare no conflict of interest.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

The author declares that generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used only to support language refinement and improve the readability of the manuscript. All conceptual development, literature selection, thematic analysis, interpretation of findings, and final conclusions were conducted by the author, who assumes full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the content.

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